

# TERMAN, LEWIS MADISON

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December 4, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

Mohammed looti (2025). *TERMAN, LEWIS MADISON*. Encyclopedia of psychology.  
Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.arabpsychology.com/?p=4694>

## Introduction and Early Academic Career

Lewis Madison Terman (1877-1956) stands as one of the most influential figures in the history of American psychology, primarily responsible for institutionalizing the practice of intelligence testing and establishing the methodology for the systematic study of giftedness. Born in rural Indiana, Terman's early life experiences and rigorous academic training prepared him for a career focused on the quantitative assessment of human differences. His educational journey culminated in a Ph.D. from **Clark University** in 1905, where he studied under the prominent psychologist **G. Stanley Hall**. This period marked a crucial shift in psychological inquiry from purely philosophical speculation to empirical measurement, a movement Terman enthusiastically embraced. His doctoral research, which contrasted the intellectual and physical characteristics of "bright" and "dull" boys, foreshadowed his lifelong commitment to understanding the nature and distribution of high intellectual capacity, setting the stage for his subsequent work at Stanford University, where he spent the majority of his distinguished career.

Terman's early professional appointments included teaching positions at Los Angeles State Normal School before he joined the faculty at Stanford University in 1910. It was during his tenure at Stanford that he began the work that would define his legacy: the adaptation and standardization of intelligence scales for the American population. Recognizing the limitations of existing psychological measures and inspired by European pioneers, Terman was determined to create a robust, culturally relevant instrument that could reliably classify children for educational purposes. His meticulous approach to test construction and standardization contrasted sharply with the more informal methods previously employed, establishing a new benchmark for psychometric rigor in the United States and securing his position as a leading authority in educational psychology.

The core motivation driving Terman's early career was a belief in the practical utility of psychology to address societal problems, particularly those concerning education and social stratification. He was deeply influenced by the burgeoning field of individual differences, championed by figures such as James McKeen Cattell, and saw intellectual assessment as the key mechanism for optimizing educational resources. By identifying children who were either exceptionally talented or intellectually deficient, Terman argued that schools could tailor instruction to meet specific needs, thereby maximizing human potential and societal efficiency. This goal, while seemingly benign, was inextricably linked to the socio-political currents of the era, which often sought scientific justification for existing social hierarchies, a tension that would characterize Terman's entire body of work.

## The Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales

Terman's most enduring and immediately impactful contribution was his extensive revision of the **Binet-Simon scale**, originally developed in France by **Alfred Binet** and **Théodore Simon**. While

the Binet scale was revolutionary in its time, Terman recognized that its content and standardization needed significant modification to be reliably administered within the diverse American educational system. The result was the 1916 publication of the **Stanford Revision of the Binet-Simon Scale**, universally known as the **Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale**. This revision was not merely a translation; Terman meticulously added new test items, expanded the age range the test covered, and, most importantly, subjected the entire instrument to rigorous standardization procedures involving thousands of American children. This careful empirical work ensured that the scores derived from the Stanford-Binet were interpreted against a large, representative national norm, lending the test unprecedented credibility and validity in clinical and educational settings.

The immediate success of the 1916 Stanford-Binet was immense, quickly displacing other intelligence tests and becoming the primary instrument used across the United States for the classification and placement of students. Educators embraced the tool because it provided a clear, quantifiable measure of a child's intellectual standing relative to their peers. The test's structure, which utilized a wide variety of tasks designed to assess reasoning, memory, and comprehension rather than rote learning, was seen as a significant improvement over earlier, cruder psychophysical measurements. Terman ensured that the test was practical, easy to administer, and yielded results that could be easily communicated, thereby integrating psychometric assessment directly into the infrastructure of American public schooling.

Subsequent revisions of the Stanford-Binet, particularly the major overhaul in 1937 conducted with his colleague Maud Merrill, further cemented its dominance. The 1937 version corrected many of the standardization issues present in the original scale and extended the range of measurable intelligence, allowing for more accurate assessment of both preschool children and adults. Terman's continuous refinement demonstrated his dedication to perfecting the instrument. The scale remained the predominant measure of intelligence for decades, profoundly influencing diagnostic practices for intellectual disability and the identification of gifted students. The legacy of the Stanford-Binet extends to modern psychological practice, where its fundamental structure and underlying principles continue to inform the development of contemporary IQ tests.

## Institutionalizing the Intelligence Quotient (IQ)

While Terman did not invent the concept of the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), he was singularly responsible for its widespread popularization and adoption within the English-speaking world. The IQ score, a mathematical representation of cognitive ability, was originally proposed by German psychologist **William Stern**. Terman incorporated Stern's ratio formula into the 1916 Stanford-Binet scale, defining IQ as the ratio of an individual's **Mental Age (MA)**--the age level at which they performed on the test--divided by their **Chronological Age (CA)**, multiplied by 100 to eliminate decimals ( $IQ = MA/CA * 100$ ). This simple, yet powerful, numerical representation provided a

standardized metric for comparing individuals across different age groups and became the definitive shorthand for intellectual capacity.

The IQ score had profound implications because Terman and his contemporaries believed it measured a relatively fixed, innate characteristic: general intelligence, or '**g**', as theorized by Charles Spearman. This belief underpinned the use of the IQ score as a powerful predictor of future educational attainment and occupational success. By assigning a single, seemingly objective number to a complex trait, Terman provided a tool that resonated deeply with the American desire for meritocracy and efficiency. The IQ score was used to justify tracking in schools, directing students into vocational or academic pathways based on their tested potential, solidifying the idea that intellectual destiny could be predetermined early in life.

However, the ratio IQ model, while groundbreaking, had inherent mathematical limitations, particularly when applied to adults, as mental age tends to plateau while chronological age continues to increase. Recognizing this, later revisions of intelligence scales moved toward the concept of the Deviation IQ, a measure introduced by David Wechsler. The Deviation IQ calculates intelligence based on an individual's performance relative to the average performance of their age group, standardized to a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15. Although Terman's ratio IQ was eventually superseded by the Deviation IQ, his work established the norm of using 100 as the average score and institutionalized the concept of a standardized, numerical intelligence measure, setting the foundation for all subsequent psychometric testing.

## The World War I Testing Program

The outbreak of **World War I** provided an unprecedented opportunity for Terman and his colleagues to apply psychometric principles on a truly massive scale, extending the use of intelligence testing far beyond the classroom. Terman played a critical role on the committee, chaired by **Robert Yerkes**, which was tasked by the U.S. Army to develop standardized psychological tests for the classification and assignment of millions of incoming recruits. The objective was to efficiently screen recruits for intellectual capability, identify potential officers, and detect individuals whose low mental capacity might render them unfit for service, thereby streamlining the mobilization effort.

This effort resulted in the creation of two principal tests: the **Army Alpha** and the **Army Beta**. The Army Alpha was a written examination designed for literate recruits, adapting many concepts and item types derived from the Stanford-Binet. The **Army Beta** was a non-verbal, performance-based test designed specifically for illiterate or non-English-speaking recruits, using pictures and symbols to measure cognitive ability. This mobilization marked the first large-scale group administration of intelligence tests in history, demonstrating the logistical feasibility of mass testing. Over 1.7 million men were tested, providing psychologists with an immense dataset and demonstrating the

practical utility of their field to military and government institutions.

While the Army testing program was a triumph of logistical organization, the interpretation of the results became highly controversial. The resulting data suggested significant differences in average scores based on national origin and race, differences that Terman and others often interpreted through a lens of innate, hereditary intellectual superiority or deficiency. Although modern analysis largely attributes these disparities to differences in education, socioeconomic status, and cultural familiarity with the test content, the initial, widely publicized conclusions reinforced existing prejudices and provided fodder for eugenicist arguments regarding immigration and racial segregation, demonstrating the profound social consequences of psychological data interpretation.

### The Genetic Studies of Genius ("Terman's Termites")

Terman's most ambitious and lasting research project was the **Genetic Studies of Genius**, launched in 1921. This was the first major longitudinal study in psychology, designed to track the intellectual, social, and physical development of a cohort of highly gifted children throughout their entire lifespans. Terman aimed to definitively challenge the prevailing cultural stereotype that intellectually gifted children were often sickly, socially inept, or prone to mental instability--the notion that "early ripe, early rot." He sought to demonstrate, through empirical data, that high intelligence correlated positively with overall well-being.

The cohort, affectionately dubbed "**Terman's Termites**," consisted of over 1,500 children, primarily selected based on having an IQ score of 140 or above, derived from the Stanford-Binet scale. Terman and his research team meticulously collected data on every aspect of their subjects' lives, including physical health, social adjustment, parental background, interests, and professional achievements. The initial findings strongly supported Terman's hypothesis: the gifted cohort generally exhibited better physical health, were superior in moral character, were better adjusted socially, and demonstrated far greater academic and professional success than their peers in the general population. This massive study provided a powerful, data-driven counter-argument to the myth of the eccentric genius, cementing the understanding that high intelligence is generally associated with positive life outcomes.

The study continued long after Terman's death in 1956, carried on by his colleagues and students. The project yielded volumes of data published across five major monographs, detailing the cohort's progress into middle and old age. While the study's initial selection methods have been criticized for potential sampling bias--particularly the overrepresentation of white, middle-class subjects--the Genetic Studies of Genius remains a landmark achievement in psychological research. It pioneered the methodology of longitudinal tracking and provided unparalleled insights into the long-term developmental trajectories of intellectually superior individuals, influencing how gifted

education programs are structured globally.

## The Intersection with Eugenics

Lewis Terman's professional career was deeply intertwined with the early 20th-century eugenics movement, a social philosophy advocating for the improvement of the human race through controlled breeding. Terman was a vocal proponent of eugenic principles, firmly believing that intelligence was a highly heritable trait and that psychometric testing provided the objective data necessary to inform social policy aimed at preventing the propagation of those deemed intellectually inferior. He explicitly linked low scores on the Stanford-Binet scale among certain ethnic and racial groups to inherited mental deficiency, arguing that these groups posed a societal burden and should be discouraged from reproduction.

Terman's eugenic views significantly influenced his interpretation and application of IQ scores. He argued for the segregation of intellectually deficient individuals, and his research was often cited by proponents of forced sterilization laws and highly restrictive immigration quotas designed to limit the entry of groups identified as having low average intelligence. For instance, based on the findings from the Army Alpha and Beta tests, Terman openly expressed concern about the intellectual caliber of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, advocating for policies that favored Northern European stock. This willingness to use scientific data to justify social engineering based on racial and class prejudices highlights the controversial ethical landscape of early psychometrics.

While Terman's scientific contributions to measurement remain influential, his ideological alignment with eugenics casts a long shadow over his legacy. His work serves as a powerful historical example of how scientific tools, even those designed with rigorous methodology, can be utilized to reinforce existing social biases and discriminatory practices. Modern psychology has largely rejected the biological determinism central to the eugenics movement, emphasizing the complex interplay of genetics and environment in shaping intelligence. However, Terman's advocacy demonstrates the historical responsibility of scientists to critically assess the social and ethical implications of their findings, particularly when those findings are used to shape public policy and define human worth.

## Enduring Criticism and Legacy

Despite his profound influence, Terman's work has been subject to rigorous and necessary criticism, particularly concerning issues of cultural bias and methodological limitations. The primary critique leveled against the Stanford-Binet and Terman's interpretation of its results is the inherent **cultural loading** of the test items. Critics argue that the test was heavily normed and biased toward the experiences, language, and knowledge base of white, middle-class Americans,

rendering it an inaccurate and discriminatory measure when applied to diverse ethnic, racial, or lower socioeconomic groups. The resulting lower scores among marginalized populations were often erroneously attributed to innate biological inferiority by Terman, rather than to disparities in educational opportunity or cultural familiarity.

A second major criticism centers on the methodological purity of the Genetic Studies of Genius. While groundbreaking, the selection process was not entirely unbiased; initial subjects were often nominated by teachers who were aware of the study's goals, potentially introducing a selection bias that favored well-behaved, socially conformist children who happened to be highly intelligent. Furthermore, Terman's strong commitment to the idea that intelligence was fixed and hereditary led him to downplay or ignore evidence, even within his own data, that suggested the significant impact of environmental factors on success and achievement. This interpretive bias occasionally compromised the objectivity of the study's conclusions, favoring a deterministic view of giftedness.

Nevertheless, Terman's legacy is complex and undeniably foundational to modern psychological practice. He successfully professionalized psychometrics, creating the gold standard for intelligence testing that would shape clinical and educational assessment for most of the 20th century. His pioneering work in longitudinal research established a methodology that is still considered the benchmark for studying human development over extended periods. Terman's efforts irrevocably altered educational practices by providing the first systematic tools for identifying and catering to the needs of both the gifted and the intellectually disabled. While contemporary psychology has moved far beyond his eugenic framework and adopted more nuanced, environmentally aware models of intelligence, Lewis Terman remains a monumental, if controversial, figure whose innovations fundamentally transformed the measurement of the human mind.