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978-0-521-00363-6 - Measuring Minds: Henry Herbert Goddard and the Origins of  
American Intelligence Testing

Leila Zenderland

Excerpt

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## Introduction: Motives, Meanings, and Contexts

“I have been asked to write my autobiography,” psychologist Henry Herbert Goddard, America’s first intelligence tester, told a colleague in 1947. Such a task would be difficult, he knew, for by then Goddard was over eighty years old. “I have no intention of doing it,” he continued, “but if I were to write it, I should call it: ‘As Luck Would Have It.’ Not one single thing of importance in my career,” Goddard confessed, “was the result of my planning, foresight or wisdom.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether true or not, such a confession serves as a chastening reminder to historians tempted to interpret the past largely as the product of conscious actions, intentions, or motives. It is especially ironic coming from a psychologist who became world famous for his belief that an individual’s future is determined by his intelligence. A few years later, however, Goddard repeated these sentiments. Answering some poignant questions posed by a former student, psychologist Robert Fischer, Goddard again reflected on his life – and reached the same conclusion.

“So many of us,” Fischer had written him in 1950, lived lives with “almost no discernible pattern or purpose.” Disparaging those with “no thought of the future,” Fischer begged Goddard to “tell us of your experiences” and thereby “point the way that we may escape the frustrations that came to you because you were a pioneer in our field.” “*What would you do,*” this psychologist asked his mentor, “*if you could relive your professional life?*” Of course, answering such a question required caution, Fischer warned, for the “temptation to retrospectively assign motives to our lives is always with us.”<sup>2</sup>

Goddard, however, felt no such temptation. Instead, his reply suggested the opposite: he wished to disavow all motives. “I have not *Made* my life,” he responded emphatically. “I have taken things as they came and tried to make the best of them.” Goddard conceded that he had been writing up some of his reminiscences for family and friends; these memories, however, had only confirmed his deeper feeling that his life had lacked direction. “Do you know what I have decided to call this composition that the folks refer to as my autobiography?” he asked. “I was not a bit interested to write it until I thought of this TITLE . . . AS LUCK WOULD HAVE IT.” The title was

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appropriate, for “everything of importance in my life,” he explained, “has been LUCK and NOT the result of thought and planning.” On this point, Goddard was adamant. “I never planned to be a teacher, psychologist or loafer,” he concluded. “It just happened.”<sup>3</sup>

Such a claim is intriguing, for Henry Herbert Goddard had indeed been a pioneer in his field, and what happened during his lifetime had profoundly altered American social science. In 1908, Goddard became the first American to recognize the potential of the new “intelligence tests” invented three years earlier by French psychologist Alfred Binet. Over the next decade, he became world famous as the leading spokesman of a movement which introduced these new mental measuring devices into the basic institutions of American life.

In less than ten years, Goddard had won legitimacy for intelligence testing in ways only dreamed of by Binet himself. By 1910, he had convinced American physicians to try intelligence testing. By 1911, he had used the same tests in public schools. By 1913, he had tried out his tests at Ellis Island. By 1914, he had become the first psychologist to present evidence from Binet tests in a court of law. By 1918, he had even helped to introduce intelligence testing into the United States Army. Although the leadership of the testing movement had by this time passed to his younger successor, psychologist Lewis Terman, Goddard’s place in history was secure, for his actions had led to the institutionalization of intelligence testing, thus transforming both his profession and his society. Intelligence tests, one of his contemporaries bragged, had finally “put psychology on the map of the United States.”<sup>4</sup> They had also instigated what would become one of the most intense, long-lasting, and bitterly contested scientific and social controversies of the twentieth century.

The very idea that any single psychologist could introduce so many controversial innovations into so many different American institutions is in itself surprising. Far more surprising is the fact that this psychologist was Henry Herbert Goddard. A former Quaker schoolteacher who had earned a psychology degree from Clark University in 1899, Goddard was hardly a prominent star in his field. To the contrary, his early career had been rather undistinguished, for following his graduation he taught pedagogy at the State Normal School in West Chester, Pennsylvania, before moving in 1906 to the Training School for Feeble-Minded Girls and Boys, an obscure little institution in Vineland, New Jersey. A genial New Englander with a personal passion for mountain climbing, he hardly seemed the sort of scientist capable of transforming American psychology. Yet in introducing intelligence testing into American society, Goddard did just that.

Nearly nine decades later, Binet’s approach toward mental measurement and Goddard’s actions in institutionalizing it remain both extremely controversial and extraordinarily influential. Intelligence tests have played, and still

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continue to play, highly publicized roles in numerous American political controversies, from debates over immigration restriction in the 1920s through clashes concerning antipoverty programs in the 1960s to battles over affirmative action in the 1990s. At the same time, they have also served as a model for thousands of other types of mental tests quietly adopted by physicians, educators, and psychologists with far less controversy. “The general mental test,” psychologist Lee Cronbach argued in the 1960s, was “the most important single contribution of psychology to the practical guidance of human affairs.” And while such a claim is itself controversial, it again highlights Goddard’s historical importance, for it was he who first showed his contemporaries how to move psychological testing out of the laboratory and into society.<sup>5</sup>

Henry Herbert Goddard’s life and the early American intelligence testing movement he led form the subjects of this book. Both subjects have generated much polemical writing in recent decades but relatively little social history. Most histories of testing mention Goddard; yet while several studies examine the life and work of Lewis Terman, Goddard’s life has yet to inspire a biography. There are no studies tracing all of Goddard’s efforts to institutionalize intelligence testing in the decade before World War I. As a result, much of the early history of this very public controversy remains surprisingly unknown.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, most historical attention has focused on the broader controversy within which intelligence testing ultimately became inextricably enmeshed: the heredity–environment controversy. Binet’s ideas about intelligence were soon absorbed into an older, wider, and still ongoing debate – a debate over the origins of human differences, their responsiveness to environmental improvement, and their significance for social change. In its most polarized form, this debate pitted those who blamed most of humanity’s failings on poor “nature,” or biological inheritance, against those blaming poor “nurture,” or social environment. The role played by Goddard’s writings within this broader debate is by now well documented, for his most famous works stressed the power of heredity and strongly supported the emerging eugenics movement. Even in an age when social scientists often made bold claims and sweeping generalizations, his statements are striking, for as Stephen Jay Gould concluded in *The Mismeasure of Man*, Goddard “may have been the most unsubtle hereditarian of all.”<sup>7</sup>

Ironically, Goddard’s writings about heredity have received increasing attention in recent years – not because they merit support, but because they have been so thoroughly and resoundingly rejected. Few works by any American scientist have suffered as dramatic a rise and fall as Goddard’s once famous and now notorious 1912 monograph, *The Kallikak Family*. To Goddard, this family study offered convincing proof of the devastating social consequences caused by a feeble inheritance. Its publication led contemporaries to praise his research as a major scientific accomplishment. Yet in the

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decades that followed, this book was subjected not only to criticism but also to ridicule. By 1940, psychologist Knight Dunlap wrote in *Scientific Monthly*, Goddard's Kallikak study had been "laughed out of psychology."<sup>8</sup>

In the decades since, scholars have continued to expose the deeply flawed nature of this once respected work of science. Yet exposing this book's errors has proven to be a far easier task than explaining its earlier scientific acceptance. By 1969, Goddard's research shortcomings had become "so obvious," psychologists Seymour Sarason and John Doris conceded, "that pointing them out by themselves is without much interest. It only becomes of interest," they emphasized, "when we ask why these studies . . . were so widely accepted . . . not just by unsophisticated and gullible segments of the public but by professionally trained individuals of outstanding intellect."<sup>9</sup>

Even during Goddard's lifetime, a number of critics had begun to ask precisely the same question. Their answers usually focused on the matter of motives – which might in part account for Goddard's insistent denial of *any* intentions in his life or work. This theory received its most elaborate expression in a 1948 dissertation written by educational psychologist Nicholas Pastore. For his thesis, Pastore examined the writings of twenty-four English and American scientists involved in the heredity–environment debate. Published a year later as *The Nature–Nurture Controversy*, it too focused explicitly on motives.

According to Pastore, the stances taken by these scientists were closely linked to their political predispositions – predispositions he classified as either "liberal" or "conservative." Hereditarians, Goddard among them, were political conservatives, he argued, while environmentalists were political liberals. "The philosophy underlying social reform is environmentalism," Pastore explained, whereas "the position of the hereditarian would be to favor the *status quo*." Pastore's conclusion was clear: in this instance, scientific conflict was really political conflict, thinly disguised.<sup>10</sup>

This thesis has largely shaped most subsequent research into the history of testing. It has proven especially useful in explaining the blind spots, lapses in logic, and overheated rhetoric which often pervade these polemical writings. In the decades since, numerous studies have added supporting evidence to this argument linking science to politics by exposing the nativist, racist, and class-biased assumptions of many testers, and by showing how psychologists used the lower scores earned by the poor, immigrants, and nonwhites to justify the growing gap between capital and labor, to argue for immigration restriction, or to defend racial segregation. They have also shown how these cultural biases were frequently built into the tests themselves, thus invalidating their ability to tell us anything definitive about the relative influence of nature or nurture.<sup>11</sup>

Yet in 1948, Pastore's hypothesis about the political ideas motivating hereditarians drew bitter protest from the two American scientists most active in

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the early American intelligence testing movement – Henry Herbert Goddard and Lewis Terman. After reading Pastore’s summaries of their scientific and political beliefs, Goddard expressed anxiety and alarm, and Terman, anger.

Writing in reply, Terman attacked Pastore’s portrayal – not for distorting his science but for misrepresenting his politics. Above all, this psychologist bristled at being called “conservative,” and responded with a detailed political statement. Though a Republican, he conceded, he had voted for Woodrow Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt, and among 1948 contenders, he liked the conservative Robert Taft least. “As for political ideology,” he added, “I hate every form of national totalitarianism, whether of the Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Peron, or Japanese variety.” Although “not a socialist,” Terman explained, “I am not afraid of the partial socialization now operating in Britain or Sweden, or Norway.” After all, the United States had “socialized education,” he argued, “and for 35 years I have believed that every argument for socialized education is valid also for socialized medicine.” In sum, Terman believed in “stiff inheritance taxes, old-age pensions, social security measures, unemployment insurance, minimum wage laws,” and “the necessity of labor unions.” “Most of all,” he added, “I believe in civil liberties. . . .” America’s “widespread racial and religious discrimination” was disgraceful, while the “witch-hunting and character-smearing activities” of groups like the Dies Committee were “the most un-American thing in the USA. I feel so strongly about such threats,” Terman claimed, that “if called . . . I would go to jail rather than answer any questions about my political beliefs. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

Terman’s protest was so vehement that Pastore had to recategorize him as an exception to his argument. His earlier writings notwithstanding, Pastore concluded, intelligence tester Lewis Terman was a liberal; more precisely, as Terman defined himself, he was a “New Dealer.”<sup>13</sup>

While Terman focused on Pastore’s political classification, Goddard challenged his scientific dichotomy. “I think perhaps you have been misled,” Goddard noted in drafting a response to Pastore, “having the answer, before you had the problem.” His scientific ideas, Goddard maintained, were being taken out of context. “You forget that this work was done about 40 years ago,” he reminded the younger scholar, “when the problem of ‘nature-nurture’ had not been formulated. Accordingly you read into the language that I used in 1912 and 1914, meanings and thoughts that you have acquired in the nineteen-forties.” While Goddard’s reply was tactful, it also focused on motives. “I do not mean that you have *intentionally* done this,” he went on. “Not at all. It is perfectly natural that you should interpret my language in terms of to-day’s experiences; but that does not state the facts,” he added, “as much as it states what you judge were the facts, or even what you *wish* the facts were.” After all, Goddard concluded self-consciously, we all “do a lot of wishful thinking.”<sup>14</sup>

These protests have usually been overlooked or dismissed as the defensive

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reactions of persons whose views, while once popular, were rapidly losing favor in the post-World War II world. To a historian, however, both are provocative. Terman's retort is intriguing, for it suggests that his many nativist, elitist, or racist statements of the 1910s should not be used to predict his politics in the 1940s, by which time the terms "liberal" and "conservative" had acquired very different political meanings. Goddard's reply is more problematic, for it argues that the scientific meaning of the "problem of 'nature-nurture'" had also changed since 1912. For anyone interested in understanding the origins of the American intelligence testing movement, both claims are important, for each implies a protest against presentism and a plea for more complex explanations – explanations which would allow for a wider range of motives, and which would pay much closer attention to changes in meanings and contexts.<sup>15</sup>

The question of meanings is especially difficult in assessing the early history of this controversy, for during the pre-World War I decade in which Goddard's writings proved most influential, both the scientific and the popular connotations of the words most commonly invoked in this debate – words such as "heredity," "environment," and "intelligence" – were themselves undergoing a process of redefinition. Also in flux were the meanings of many other crucial terms used by Goddard and his contemporaries. As a consequence, historians must be especially cautious, for the same words or phrases might connote something subtly different from one decade to the next.

These linguistic problems will be most obvious if we examine the words used to identify the subject that Goddard was studying – the condition then called "feble-mindedness," later called "mental retardation," and more recently called "developmental disability." When Goddard began his research in 1906, the word "feble-mindedness" had itself replaced an older generic term which had since developed a much harsher connotation: "idiocy." Goddard was especially proud of his own semantic contribution in inventing the word "moron" in 1910 as a technical term that as yet carried no popular connotation. Within a decade, this word would be widely used by the public. "In the clever talk of the twenties," one psychologist has observed, "'moron' claimed as large a place as 'Babbitt.'" Scientists soon had to abandon this term, for its popular meaning had come to suggest derision. In the following decades, the terminology used by practitioners in this field has continued to change, leaving each generation to invent its own labels and to criticize the stigmatization evident in the labels used by its predecessors.<sup>16</sup>

The writings of sociologist Stanley Davies illustrate this process especially starkly. In 1923, Davies published his dissertation under the title *Social Control of the Feble-minded*. Reissuing this book in 1930, he changed its name to *Social Control of the Mentally Deficient*; the word "feble-minded" was no longer acceptable. By 1959, the phrase "social control" had been equally

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stigmatized, and Davies named his next book on the same topic *The Mentally Retarded in Society*. Were it being reissued today, its name would probably change again. “Under no circumstances,” states the current editorial policy of the American Association on Mental Retardation (an organization whose own name has changed four times since 1876), “should *retarded* be used as a noun,” for such usage suggests an entire identity rather than a characteristic. (Today’s title might instead be *People with Mental Retardation in Society*). In none of these works did Davies intend his language to be pejorative. Such changes in terminology may signify an increasing refinement of ideas in this field, as well as a growing self-consciousness concerning the power of words; even so, they still complicate the problem of recapturing past meanings.<sup>17</sup>

Other words pose even more problems. Perhaps none has acquired as negative a connotation as “eugenics,” a term coined in 1883 by Francis Galton from a Greek root meaning “good in birth” or “wellborn.” To late-twentieth-century readers, this word usually brings to mind the biological policies put into practice in Nazi Germany. Recent historical studies, however, suggest that “eugenics,” too, is a term requiring precise historical contextualization, for a wide variety of eugenic ideas proved influential in at least thirty countries during the first four decades of the twentieth century. The broad array of persons who considered themselves eugenicists shared a belief that scientific control over the processes governing human heredity would provide benefits to society. What such advocates meant when they spoke of “control,” or of “benefits,” however, differed markedly from decade to decade, from country to country, and often from individual to individual.<sup>18</sup>

The pronouncements of its leaders notwithstanding, eugenics in the pre-World War I era was hardly a unified movement with a single objective; instead, it was a broad coalition of persons or groups promoting overlapping yet diverse scientific, social, or political agendas. Thus, while its most prominent American leader, Charles Davenport, might have used his eugenic science to express, as historian Daniel Kevles put it, “the native white Protestant’s hostility to immigrants and the conservative’s bile over taxes and welfare,” the same movement also attracted socialists like Karl Pearson, Fabians like George Bernard Shaw, sexual reformers like Havelock Ellis, and a few immigrant radicals like Emma Goldman, as well as a diverse group of physicians, agriculturalists, researchers, and popularizers. Simply labeling any individual a “eugenicist” thus tells us little in itself, and might even be misleading.<sup>19</sup>

It is not only the scientific vocabulary of this era that requires contextualization; equally troublesome is the political vocabulary. Perhaps no word has proven more slippery to American historians than the most commonly invoked political adjective of Goddard’s day, “progressive.” In the first two decades of the twentieth century, both Republican reformers who followed

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Theodore Roosevelt and Democratic admirers of Woodrow Wilson often used this label to describe their own activities. The reforms they advocated ranged from antitrust laws to women's suffrage, from the city manager movement to the formation of regulatory agencies, from prohibition to segregation. Such a movement defies easy translation into today's political vocabulary, for "progressivism" was neither "liberalism" nor "conservatism."<sup>20</sup>

In recent decades, historians seeking to understand the common currents of this movement have focused less on specific reforms and more on broader changes in the very processes of reform. These included the formation of new issue-oriented lobbying groups, new means of molding public opinion, new strategies to empower the middle class. Especially important was the connection between progressive political reform and the reforming of professions. The process now called "professionalization" brought new political and social power not only to older occupational groups like doctors or engineers but also to newer "social scientists," including psychologists. In this sense, progressivism constituted an organizational revolution, a revolution aimed at restructuring the bureaucratic foundations of American government.<sup>21</sup>

Progressives, too, used language in their own ways. During these decades, activists all along the political spectrum pleaded their cases in metaphors suggesting engineering skill, scientific control, and managerial expertise. Perhaps nothing expresses the progressive ethos better than the many positive connotations these reformers attached to their favorite adjective, "efficient." "Efficient and good came closer to meaning the same thing in these years," historian Samuel Haber has concluded, "than in any other period of American history." Yet interpreting this language also requires contextualization. Most progressive educators, for instance, repeatedly touted the need for increased "school efficiency"; such a phrase, however, might mean extending the school's outreach or curtailing its funding, expecting more from students or resigning oneself to expect less.<sup>22</sup>

Even if one could fully explain the ideological contours of the "eugenics" movement or the "progressive" movement or the "school efficiency" movement in all their complexity, these movements in themselves would not do justice to the range of motives shaping the life of a social scientist such as Henry Herbert Goddard. After all, Goddard's lifetime spanned nearly a century of American social, intellectual, and scientific transformation. He was born in 1866, one year after the end of the Civil War, in a New England village deeply influenced by the reformist, temperance, and abolitionist movements of the previous half-century. At the time of his death nearly ninety-one years later, in 1957, he was living a quiet life in Santa Barbara, California, having completed his last book, *How to Rear Children in the Atomic Age*. Such a life defies all easy assumptions about the influence of any single explanatory "zeitgeist." Instead, both Goddard and the movement he



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led need to be explained within a framework emphasizing diverse and overlapping contexts – contexts which themselves changed over time.

The main purpose of this study is to provide such a framework. To explore more fully the range of motives influencing the earliest American intelligence testers, this book is really two studies intertwined – the first a biography of Henry Herbert Goddard, and the second an examination of institutional responses to testing in the years between 1908 and 1918. I also pay special attention to what “intelligence” meant within a variety of different contexts – medical, educational, biological, social, and political – and to the ways in which its meaning changed. To find answers to these questions concerning motives, meanings, and contexts, I have approached this study with three broad objectives in mind.

The first of these has been the most crucial: to expand the paradigm within which the history of testing is usually discussed – that is, the heredity-environment controversy. While emphasis on the nature–nurture debate has shed much-needed light on the deeper connections between science and politics, it has also overshadowed other controversies provoked by Binet’s innovation. Most obscured by these broader accounts are the more subtle scientific and social debates of the day. To understand the multiple ways in which intelligence tests first entered into American society, we need to examine a wider range of controversies.

This is especially true concerning the years between 1908 and 1918, for during this decade, the testing debate had yet to crystallize fully. By the 1920s, the most vocal participants in this controversy had taken their stances as either “hereditarians” or “environmentalists”; such self-conscious polarization, however, is not nearly so evident a decade earlier. Despite Goddard’s own hereditarian pronouncements, his earliest defenders and attackers did not fall neatly along the sides of a single heredity-environment divide. Instead, participants debated a wide range of issues, many of which are still being debated at the end of the century. In order to connect testing’s past with its present, historians need to examine not only the controversies that captured the most publicity, but also those that more quietly reshaped professional practices.

For instance, whereas the debate over the causes of mental subnormality has received a great deal of historical attention, an even older medical debate – the debate over how to diagnose just what it was that one either inherited or acquired – has been largely overlooked. Yet this debate was crucial, for Binet’s invention offered doctors something they had been seeking for nearly a century: a set of uniform criteria for diagnosing different degrees of mental impairment. It was testing’s role in this debate, far more than any concern with heredity, that best explains its medical acceptance. Almost immediately, institutional physicians began to use intelligence tests to help diag-

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nose and classify cases, whatever their cause – a practice that has continued, albeit with many modifications, from Goddard’s day to our own.<sup>23</sup>

Testing also entered the schools within multiple contexts. Historians of education have shown how intelligence tests were eventually used to stratify students into different school “tracks,” thus delimiting both their academic and their social mobility – a process that paralleled the broader class stratification then under way in the surrounding society. Yet many early testers were also avid participants in the public health movement and promoted efforts to offer free medical care to all schoolchildren, a fact that again challenges any simple dichotomy pitting “hereditarian” against “environmental” reform in this decade. Even more important was testing’s close connection to the special education movement. Without exploring this context, it would be difficult to explain why it was Goddard who in 1911 helped to draft this nation’s first law requiring a state to provide special education for blind and deaf as well as “feebleminded” children within public schools.<sup>24</sup>

Our understanding of the role played by intelligence testing in shaping social policies also needs to be broadened. Much attention has focused on Goddard’s now discredited theory positing hereditary feeble-mindedness as a major cause of crime. Far more controversial in his own day, however, were his ideas about criminal responsibility, for Goddard also argued that murderers diagnosed as having subnormal intelligence be spared the death penalty. More than seventy years later, this issue was still being hotly contested in a death penalty case which finally reached the United States Supreme Court – a case in which evidence from intelligence testing once again played a key role.<sup>25</sup>

To understand the range of roles that psychological testing came to play within American society for the rest of the century, we need to regain more of the questions being asked and answered in this crucial first decade. For while Goddard and his contemporaries did indeed debate the relative influence of nature and nurture, so too did they debate other issues. And among these were issues concerning the mind of the child, the mission of the school, the role of the state, and the interrelationships among all three.

The second objective of this study is more specific: to trace the social processes that actually permitted the dissemination of intelligence tests into American institutions. To do this, I have tried to eschew the easy assumption, too often made in histories of testing, that these mental measuring devices were automatically accepted simply because they “fit” well with the larger forces reshaping American society. These forces are usually described in broad terms – the bureaucratic tendencies overtaking public schools, for instance, or the desire to stratify the labor market to meet the needs of industrial capitalism, or the growing hostility toward immigrants and nonwhites. All of these forces did indeed play important roles in both shaping and dis-