

“FORTUNATE DEVIATES”: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF GIFTED CHILDREN,
1916-1965

by

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DEDICATION

To Becky, Maddy, and Samantha

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ABSTRACT

“FORTUNATE DEVIATES”: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF GIFTED CHILDREN,
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While the origins of the “gifted child” are firmly rooted in the early twentieth century, the person imagined— that a youth from any background may rise through innate ability – echoes a longer history. This history of “self-made men” and the popular stories of Horatio Alger were similarly premised on the notion that an exceptional few exist among the many and through timely personal assistance and their own hard work could achieve far above their original station. I argue that the idea of the “gifted child” that emerged in the early twentieth century was a continuation of this Algeresque project of identifying and developing children – replacing the discerning wealthy benefactor with a systematic, “scientific” process that could claim to identify these innately intelligent children in an objective and efficient manner for the good of the nation. This new model mirrored in many aspects Frederick Taylor’s scientific management. While scholars have traditionally depicted the IQ test as a means to give scientific authority to racial and class hierarches, I maintain that the aura of objectivity – its criteria initially a neutral number

on a test developed by scientific experts – had the effect of opening the door for gender- and race-blind claims to giftedness. The idea of the gifted child, then, promised to reconcile notions of democracy and hierarchy by developing the rare talented individual using an efficient and systematic method promoted by psychologist-experts. At the same time, the creation of a “gifted” group at the top of a mental hierarchy necessitated that individuals exist at the bottom – variously and historically classified as the “intellectually disabled,” “mentally retarded,” or the “feeble-minded.” At the same time, advocates frequently looked for ways to temper the cold Taylorite logic inherent in giftedness through sentimental, even Algeresque gestures toward their subjects – while at the same time proclaiming the necessity of efficiently developing the gifted for the national good.

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be a “gifted” child? Psychologist Guy Whipple first coined the term in 1919 to describe children who scored in the top percentile of Stanford-Binet intelligence test, the first IQ test.¹ Interestingly, Lewis Terman, who not only developed the Stanford-Binet test but who arguably did the most to encourage popular and academic interest in these high IQ children, did not initially favor the term “gifted” instead preferring “superior.”² This change in language is worth spending a moment to consider. “Gifted” seems to be a something of a retreat from “superior” – a slight shift in expectations from “definitely better” to “potentially better.” Additionally “gifted” implies – according to the anthropological literature on “the gift” – some sort of reciprocal

¹ See Jennifer L. Jolly, "Guy M. Whipple." *Gifted Child Today* 30, no. 1, 2007, 55-57. James Borland, “The Construct of Giftedness,” *The Peabody Journal of Education* 72, no. 3 &4, 1997, 7; Guy Whipple, *Classes for gifted children* (Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company, 1919).

² For example, in two works published in 1919 and 1920 Terman used “gifted” a total of fifteen times and “superior” 197 times. Beginning with a 1921 work, *Suggestions for the Education And Training of Gifted Children*, Terman used “gifted” fourteen times and “superior” only four. Thereafter Terman used primarily used gifted including in his 1926 longitudinal study of over one thousand high IQ children.. See Lewis. M. Terman, *The Intelligence of School Children: How Children Differ in Ability, the use of Mental Tests in School Grading and the Proper Education of Exceptional Children*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1919); Terman, "The Use of Intelligence Tests in the Grading of School Children," *The Journal of Educational Research* 1, no. 1 (1920): 20-32; Terman, *Suggestions for the Education And Training of Gifted Children*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1921).

relationship.³ Gift recipients are typically expected to give something in return at some later date. The word “gifted” had been used throughout the nineteenth century but not paired with “children.” An informal survey of nineteenth-century newspapers finds references to “gifted speakers,” “gifted singers,” and “gifted writers.” Women might be said to be “gifted” with grace or beauty. From these examples it is clear that “gifted” referred to an ability or quality that was already apparent or recognizable. Gifted speakers, singers, and writers were (and are) so called because they could speak, sing, and write well. By contrast, what the “gifted” child has been gifted with is a sort of general mental excellence or intelligence and with it the potential to achieve something noteworthy in adulthood.⁴ Whipple’s choice (and Terman’s eventual embrace) of “gifted” connected innately able and intelligent children to talents shared and expressed in public and enjoyed by others. Where “superior” implied hierarchy and exclusion; “gifted” implied obligation and mutual benefit.

This newer meaning of “gifted” denoted not only potential mental excellence, but also where that excellence might be found. The Stanford-Binet test promised to locate this quality in any individual regardless of their background. The idea that exceptional individuals might emerge from humble beginnings already had a strong resonance in American culture as seen in the oft-told biographies of “self-made men” such as

³ See: Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1925. Translated by Ian Cunnison, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 2011 ed.); David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn, (NY: Melville House, 2014 ed.).

⁴ As gifted scholar and advocate Leta Stetter Hollingworth told the *New York Times*, “We have proved . . . that children who create in the top 1 percent of the juvenile population in respect to ‘judgment,’ as Binet called it, are also much more frequently than others the possessors of those additional qualities which thinkers have most frequently named as desired in leaders.” “Fund Urged to Aid Brightest Pupils,” *New York Times*, Nov 12, 1938.

Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, and Abraham Lincoln, as well as those of Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington; who rose through a combination of exceptional talent and hard work. A test that could locate these exceptional individuals in their humble childhood would be immensely appealing.⁵

In the nineteenth century, too, well before the invention of the intelligence test, calls were made to identify and develop exceptional individuals as children. For example, English art critic John Ruskin's widely read 1856 essay, "The Political Economy of Art," addressed how to potentially discover and train artistic geniuses. Ruskin asserted that artistic ability only belonged to an innately talented natural elite, that geniuses were born and not made. "You always have to find your artist, not make him; you can't manufacture him any more than you can manufacture gold," Ruskin proclaimed.⁶ Like gold, Ruskin stressed, artistic ability existed in a limited and fixed amount, "A certain quality of art-intellect is born annual in every nation, greater or less according to the nature and cultivation of the nation, or race or men; but a perfectly fixed quantity annually, not increasable by one grain."⁷ Ruskin also believed that this natural artistic elite might emerge from a variety of backgrounds – future artists were not limited to children of the upper classes. Accordingly, Ruskin recommended searching among "those idle farmers' lads whom their masters never can keep out of mischief, and those stupid tailors'

⁵ Charles C. B. Seymour, *Self-Made Men* (New York: Harper, 1858); Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Lives and Deeds of Our Self-Made Men* (Hartford: Worthington, Dustin, 1872). Frederick Douglass, "Self-Made Men," first delivered in 1859, published 1872; James D. McCabe, *Great Fortunes, and How They Were Made: or, The Struggles and Triumphs of Our Self-Made Men*, 1871.

⁶ John Ruskin, "The Political Economy of Art: Being the Substance (with Additions) of Two Lectures," Delivered at Manchester, July 10th and 13th, 1857. (New York: Wiley and Halstead, 1858) 24.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24-5.

‘prentices who are always stitching up the sleeves in wrong way upwards.’⁸ Ruskin’s writings were widely available in the United States and likely were encountered by the first advocates for gifted children.⁹

The idea of identifying in childhood individuals of rare talent and ability was not limited to essays by elite intellectuals but also found expression in nineteenth-century popular literature – most notably the fiction of Horatio Alger. Alger’s stories, mostly written between 1868 and 1899, are best known for celebrating how hard work could raise individuals from poverty to prosperity, but Alger’s boy-heroes are more properly understood as individuals of rare and exceptional ability. The primary takeaway from Alger’s stories was that a natural elite existed among the poor and it was the duty of those in the upper middle class to find them and provide the opportunities they needed to rise. Alger made clear in each story that his protagonist was naturally superior. In arguably his most famous story, *Ragged Dick*, the young bootblack’s superiority is apparent from looks alone, as Alger narrates, “in spite of his dirt and rags there was something about Dick that was attractive. It was easy to see that if he had been clean and well dressed he would have been decidedly good-looking. Some of his companions were sly, and their faces inspired distrust; but Dick had a frank, straightforward manner that made him a favorite.”¹⁰ Other boys lack Dick’s “natural sharpness.”¹¹ In another story, a poor boy is

⁸ Ibid., 25-6.

⁹ Lewis Terman for example specifically mentions reading Ruskin while studying at Central Normal College in Danville, Indiana. See Lewis Terman, “Autobiography of Lewis M. Terman,” first published in Carl Murchison, (Ed.) (1930). *History of Psychology in Autobiography*, 308.

¹⁰ Horatio Alger, *Ragged Dick: Or, Street Life in New York with Boot Blacks*, 2014 ed. (New York: Signet, 1868) 4-5.

¹¹ Ibid, 168.

recognized for his “sterling qualities” that distinguish him from his peers.¹² Importantly these quotes reveal both that superior boys existed among the poor bootblacks, stable boys, peddlers, and fiddlers and that their superiority could be perceived by discerning would-be benefactors.

The plot of Alger’s stories invariably involve a benefactor who recognizes the worth of the young hero and provides the opportunities in the form of schooling, jobs, and money for the boy to begin his rise. Once provided these opportunities, the Alger hero works hard, but also his innate abilities become readily apparent. These boys are quick-witted and rapidly learn their schoolwork and their new work duties. As Alger writes, “But if Dick was ignorant, he was quick, and had an excellent capacity.”¹³ Like all Alger’s heroes, Dick is a “naturally a smart boy” who amazingly goes from an illiterate fourteen year old to knowing as much as his tutor in nine months time while only studying part-time – this rapid academic process being just what gifted children might be expected to achieve.¹⁴

Crucially Alger’s model of benefactors who intercede on behalf of exceptional boys implies a world where these individuals would come into regular contact – a face-to-face, urban world of small shops that, as scholars have noted, had already disappeared when Alger was writing in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵ Indeed there is little evidence of

¹² Horatio Alger, *Cast Upon the Breakers* in *The Collected Works of Horatio Alger: 57 Novels Complete in One Volume*, Kindle Edition, (Houston, TX: Halcyon Press Ltd., 2009) Kindle Locations 12963-12964.

¹³ Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 103.

¹⁴ Alger, *Ragged Dick*, 131-2.

¹⁵ Jim Cullen, "Problems and promises of the self-made myth," *The Hedgehog Review* 15, no. 2, 2013, 14.

industrialization in Alger's stories – the boys do not work in factories or mining, but as street peddlers or bootblacks. Alger's model of social fluidity for the exceptional poor boy depended on this regular contact between wealthy and poor, and as such his books represented more of a hope that the United States could return to such a world – an idea that had strong appeal in late nineteenth century America that was rapidly industrializing and urbanizing.¹⁶

I argue that the idea of the “gifted child” that emerged in the early twentieth century was a continuation of this Algeresque project of identifying and developing children – replacing the discerning wealthy benefactor with a systematic, “scientific” process that could claim to identify these innately intelligent children in an objective and efficient manner. As will be discussed, the change in scale brought about by massive immigration, urbanization, and industrialization that only intensified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century created the conditions for the acceptance of the idea of gifted children and “objectively” measured intelligence on which giftedness of initially based. The idea of the gifted child, I will show, promised to reconcile notions of democracy and hierarchy by developing the rare talented individual using an efficient and systematic method promoted by psychologist-experts.

This turn to the systematic development of innately intelligent children mirrored in many ways the program of “scientific management” devised by Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylor's system of empirically tested methods for industrial production

¹⁶ See: Richard Weiss, *The American Myth of Success: From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988) chapter 2; Richard M. Huber, *The American Idea of Success* (Wainscott, NY: Pushcart, 1987) 43-50; Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrializing America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 140-42.

originated, fittingly, from Taylor's own quest to identify and preserve exceptional abilities. Taylor's 1911 *Principles of Scientific Management* begins by laying out the difficulty of identifying the superior individual, "The search for better, for more competent men, from the presidents of our great companies down to our household servants, was never more vigorous than it is now. And more than ever before is the demand for competent men in excess of the supply."¹⁷ Taylor's goal was to identify through systematic, "scientific" study, the methods of the most able man at any task and use him as a model for all workers. As Taylor wrote, "It is only when we fully realize that our duty, as well as our opportunity, lies in systematically cooperating to train and to make this competent man, instead of in hunting for a man whom some one else has trained, that we shall be on the road to national efficiency."¹⁸ To Taylor individual ability was a limited resource that could only be developed efficiently through expert empirical study.

Historian of technology Robert Kanigel has shown how Taylor's system was shaped by his own fascination and enthusiasm for exceptionally skilled individuals. While Taylor was born to a wealthy Philadelphia family he declined to enroll at an elite university after graduating from the prestigious Philips Exeter Academy and instead chose to apprentice with highly skilled industrial workers – a group, Kanigel argues, Taylor would identify with throughout his career.¹⁹ Taylor apprenticed under

¹⁷ Frederick Winslow Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, (Neeland Media LLC.) Kindle Edition, 7-8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁹ Robert Kanigel, "Frederick Taylor's Apprenticeship," *The Wilson Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Summer, 1996), 48.

patternmakers at the Enterprise Hydraulic Works in Philadelphia and Kanigel eloquently relates the creativity and abstract thinking that the job demanded and Taylor would have witnessed first hand. Patternmakers made the wood patterns that were then pressed into sand that would then be used as molds for iron and brass castings. Kanigel writes, “Some of what he made corresponded to the final shape, some to the negative of the final shape. And he had always to journey, in his mind’s eye, between those abstract realms, to imagine dark recesses that twisted and curled in space and through which white-hot metal would ultimately flow.”²⁰ A magazine for machinists at the time even went so far as to describe the patternmaker as a “genius in overalls.”²¹

Taylor’s scientific management envisioned using time and motion studies to identify and replicate the methods of the most able workers. In doing so, Taylor saw himself as the ultimate advocate for the highly skilled worker. As Kanigel explains, “All through his correspondence, as well as his published writings and public testimony, we see an abiding respect for skilled workmen and for knowledge gleaned not from books, but, rather, amid the heat of the foundry and the clatter of the machine shop.”²² While workers would bitterly complain about the constraints imposed by scientific management, Taylor himself believed that by implementing the most efficient system all stakeholders and the nation itself would see the benefit.

For Taylor, the best way to honor and respect the elite individual worker was to treat his ability as a valuable resource and subject it to scientific study. Taylor bemoaned

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Robert Kanigel, *The One Best Way: Frederick Winslow Taylor and the Enigma of Efficiency*, 2005 ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997) 116.

²² Ibid., 141.

the losses due to inefficiency as a waste of a national resource as real as mineral deposits or forests of potential lumber:

We can see our forests vanishing, our water-powers going to waste, our soil being carried by floods into the sea; and the end of our coal and our iron is in sight. But our larger wastes of human effort, which go on every day through such of our acts as are blundering, ill-directed, or inefficient, and which Mr. Roosevelt refers to as a, lack of "national efficiency," are less visible, less tangible, and are but vaguely appreciated.²³

Taylor argued that a system was necessary to determine the “one best way” and that the time when the best individuals could be allowed to develop in an informal manner – the world Alger envisioned in his stories – was past. “In the past the man has been first; in the future the system must be first” Taylor asserted.²⁴ Through scientific management, Taylor intended to optimize national efficiency by conserving these “larger wastes of human effort” and not rely on the unstructured emergence of superior individuals. Where Alger’s vision depended upon chance encounters to bring benevolent patrons into contact with gifted urchins, Taylor called for systematic study paired with extensive record keeping.

The gifted child can be seen as a Horatio Alger story Taylorized for the twentieth century. In place of Alger’s amateur upper class benefactors, psychologists advocated for Taylor-like objective and systematic diagnosis of superior intelligence based on their authority as scientific experts and using the IQ test as their diagnostic technology. While scholars have typically focused on IQ testing and the measurement of intelligence as scientific justification for the social position of upper-middle class whites, I maintain that

²³ Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*, 7.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

the neutral “objective” criteria for gifted status allowed for individuals who did not fit a particular gender, racial, or class type to claim the mantle of superior mental ability.²⁵ So while Alger’s heroes were always white boys, the high IQ score was a neutral number that had no explicit race, class, or gender. In place of these social hierarchies, the idea of giftedness adheres to a hierarchy of “pure” mental ability.

The gifted exist at the top because another group variously and historically labeled the “intellectually disabled,” “mentally retarded,” or the “feeble-minded” were first established to exist at the bottom. Indeed, as scholars of disability such as James Trent and Steven Noll have shown, the IQ test derived its scientific authority from its ability to identify the feeble-minded – especially borderline cases, individuals that might “pass” among the normal but could still be lured into lives of crime or promiscuity if left undetected.²⁶ The gifted can be understood as “twins” of these “feeble-minded” in many respects – hidden among the normal and unidentified by amateurs such as teachers and even parents. Gifted advocates asserted the need for systematic identification and development of these children even going as far as to claim that the gifted would be “disabled,” “retarded,” or “handicapped” without the appropriate expert intervention. At the same time, gifted advocates demanded more resources to be allocated to identify and develop the gifted by pointing to the resources “wasted” on those at the bottom of the

²⁵ See Stephen Jay Gould, *Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996); Leon J. Kamin, *The Science and Politics of IQ*, Psychology Press, 1974; Leslie Margolin, “Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children,” *Social Problems* 40, no. 4., 1993.

²⁶ James W. Trent Jr., *Inventing the feeble mind: A history of mental retardation in the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994); Steven Noll, *Feeble-minded in our midst: Institutions for the mentally retarded in the South, 1900-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 1995).

same hierarchy. Because “gifted” as a category required the existence of the intellectually disabled, consigned by fate and nature to the bottom rung, advocates of gifted education continually adopted measures to compensate for and mitigate the cruel logic of giftedness.

In addition, like any Taylorite system, giftedness has confronted the contradiction of both treating human ability as a collective resource to be developed and applying this systematic management on actual individuals. Taylor, for his part, sought to end what he called “soldiering” – workers who conspired to reduce their individual output to prevent the boss’s exploitation of the group and who in doing so undermined his system.²⁷ Like these soldiering workers, gifted children were in danger of seeing their abilities go to waste if the program of identification and development was not rigorously adhered to. Gifted children were capable of completing the work of an average student in a much faster time, but if they decided to collectively slow down – whether out of an unwillingness to be subjected to extra work or a fear of standing out and “wreaking the curve” for their peers – their “gifts” would go to waste. As Lewis Terman wrote, “Unless they are given the grade of work which calls forth their best efforts, they run the risk of falling into lifelong habits of submaximum efficiency.”²⁸ The very real possibility that children deemed gifted would not realize their potential, that they might reject the

²⁷ Taylor, *The Principles of Scientific Management*, 13-15.

²⁸ Lewis M. Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916) 16.

additional work and pressure that came with being gifted and by extension opt out of the development process threatened to undermine the whole system.

For my purposes, three main assumptions underpin the idea of giftedness. The first is that there are in fact individuals who are gifted. These gifted individuals possess a superior quantity of talents and abilities enough to constitute a distinct type. The gifted type also assumes that talent is distributed in a hierarchical fashion -- the gifted are on top and those variously labeled “feeble minded,” “mentally retarded,” “defective,” and “cognitively disabled” are on the bottom. This hierarchy is the result of the close association between giftedness and intelligence testing although, as we will see, this faith in hierarchy was present before intelligence tests were developed and persisted after these tests had been deemphasized. Gifted assumes the existence of top 1 (or .5 or .1) percent of innate human ability and intelligence tests readily produce it. The gifted therefore represent a limited quantity — they are born but cannot be made. In this way, the gifted are analogous to a precious metal like gold or silver.

Second, in addition to real type that exists only in a limited quantity, the gifted are also like gold and silver in that they are assumed to be hidden and must be actively identified. “Contrary to popular myth, talent does not automatically rise to the top, like cream in milk,” began a 1985 New York Times editorial expressing this sentiment.²⁹ The gifted child may be performing well at school or they may not. Inexpert development can leave gifts dormant and unseen. Giftedness assumes that these abilities are nonetheless there even if hidden and can be identified using the appropriate techniques.

²⁹ Fred M. Hechinger, “How Talent Can Be Nurtured,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1985.

Finally, the third assumption of giftedness is that it represents a resource that must be developed for the good of the nation. The gifts received imply a reciprocal obligation to the general good. This assumption seems in opposition to the previous assumptions as it implies that these gifts are not “natural” and must be made through training. The gifted exist and are often hidden but the giftedness may not manifest unless properly developed. The development of the gifted is seen as vital to the nation, as well. To not develop the gifted is to lose future intelligent leadership and future scientific gains. As we will see, the notion of giftedness, and the need to develop the gifted, has always been central to nationalist projections.

Previous scholarly treatments of giftedness and IQ-intelligence have emphasized how these concepts reified existing racial and class hierarchies. Leslie Margolin’s work on the gifted examines the social construction of the “gifted” category in the 1920s and 1930s. Margolin “explores the methods used to display gifted children as objects of nature rather than of human imagination, as something discovered rather than created” and argues that the gifted category served to reinforce the idea that the upper middle classes owed their positions to inherited intelligence.³⁰ The scholarship of intelligence testing is much more extensive but follows a similar outline as Margolin. Scholars’ treatment of IQ has tended to focus on the Progressive-Era psychologists who promoted and established testing as a means to legitimize their profession and has typically addressed the ways in which these tests reinforced racial and class hierarchies. Leon Kamin criticized the inventors of the IQ test as believing that “those on the bottom are

³⁰ Leslie Margolin, “Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children,” *Social Problems* 40, no. 4., 1993, 510.

genetically inferior victims of their own immutable defects.”³¹ The most prominent example of this scholarship of IQ testing, biologist Stephen Jay Gould’s widely read *Mismeasure of Man*, framed intelligence testing against a larger history of racist science, such as Samuel Morton’s research on skull size and race and Cesare Lombroso’s theories on the innate physical traits of criminals. Gould argues that this research worked from preconceived notions of white supremacy to produce results that only confirmed a priori racialized thinking.³²

This dissertation will trace the development of the idea of gifted children from its origins in 1916 to 1965 when the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) officially established the systematic development of children’s abilities as a national priority. In five chapters that follow a loose chronology, I will primarily use the words of gifted child advocates to show the dual and often contradictory nature of giftedness – namely the need to develop potential abilities as a national resource and the attempt to craft this program around individuals. While these advocates emerged from a variety of intellectual backgrounds and historical contexts, what is striking is their unreserved embrace of the idea of gifted children – a commonality reflective of the way “giftedness” could reconcile deeply held notions of democracy and hierarchy.

Chapter One traces the origins of the gifted child as a response to the massive increase scale due to immigration, urbanization, and industrialization which led to the development of the IQ test – a Taylorite technology that promised to efficiently sort individuals of the basis of innate intelligence. The developer of the IQ test, Lewis

³¹ Leon J. Kamin, *The Science and Politics of IQ*, Psychology Press, 1974, 2.

³² Stephen Jay Gould, *Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996).

Terman, asserted that the test could locate future leaders and geniuses so that their abilities might be developed for the national good. Terman's own life and career will serve as a lens to understand the Algeresque character of the gifted child idea. While Terman was a eugenics sympathizer who believed whites to be superior in intelligence, I will show how Terman's impulses were more conflicted as giftedness was a distinct project more concerned with identifying gifted individuals from any background rather than reinforcing existing racial hierarchies.

Chapter Two will follow another pioneer in the research and advocacy for gifted children, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, who provides an example of how the objective, scientific definition of gifted could provide space for women to be recognized for their intelligence. As a Progressive Era female scholar, Hollingworth had much in common with the "New Woman" of her time – her career in academic research began with challenging sexist notions of women's mental ability and capability widely accepted by male psychologists. Hollingworth's enthusiastic embrace of the study of giftedness, I argue, is properly seen as a continuation of her fundamental argument about the intellectual equality of women. In this case, the IQ test and the idea of "gifted children" was a tool that could prove equality and sidestep gender bias.

Chapter Three will examine the debate over the reliability and innate nature of measured intelligence that occurred in the 1930s. In particular, I will analyze the debate over the research conducted by the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station that showed that IQ could be raised or lowered according to a child's environment. Terman's vociferous objection to the Iowa findings demonstrates his investment in the idea of intelligence as

innate and IQ as its objective, scientific measure. I will then shift to the career of Paul Witty, a psychologist who supported a more malleable view of mental testing, but who also embraced the idea of gifted children over a fifty-year career. Witty's example demonstrates the enduring appeal of giftedness as it shows that giftedness could persist even as the initial sole criteria for determining gifted status, the IQ test, was no longer seen as authoritative.

Chapter Four follows Witty's advisee, Martin Jenkins, an African American psychologist, who from 1934 to 1942 conducted the first comprehensive research into black gifted children. Jenkins argued that gifted black children shared the same characteristics and gifted children generally and that more resources should be devoted to their identification and development. Jenkins also argued that the very existence of these black children with IQs in the very top percentiles indicated that notions about racial differences in intelligence were unfounded. Jenkins career demonstrates how the objective and racially neutral definition of giftedness could provide space for black Americans to be recognized for their intelligence.

Finally, in **Chapter Five** I will explore how gifted children became a national priority and important object of federal investment after World War II. The idea of the gifted child fit especially well with the Cold War emphasis on maintaining "social fluidity" to preempt critiques of capitalism in the United States. Special attention will be paid to James Bryant Conant whose status as a former president of Harvard University, key administrator of the Manhattan Project, and Ambassador to West Germany made him a prominent and credible advocate for investing in U.S. public schools to identify and

develop “reservoirs of talent” as a response to internal and external Cold War threats. The policy goals favored by Conant and like-minded officials became federal policy in 1965 with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

CHAPTER 1. PRECIOUS RESOURCES: LEWIS TERMAN AND THE INVENTION OF THE GIFTED CHILD

In 1921, Lewis Terman began a study that would outlive him by over fifty years. The study would identify one thousand gifted children and follow them into adulthood gathering copious data to better understand the “nature of genius.”¹ It was a problem of vast importance, Terman explained, involving the nation’s most valuable resource, “It should go without saying that a nation’s resources of intellectual talent are among the most precious it will ever have. The origin of genius, the natural laws of its development, and the environmental influences by which it may be affected for good or ill, are scientific problems almost unequal importance for human welfare.”² Terman first published on his gifted cohort in 1926 and continued gathering data on them for the rest of his life —publishing the results in 1930 and 1947. When he died in 1956 his work was continued and a 1959 study was completed posthumously. The study continued at Stanford University well after his death as approximately once every five years the original subjects were asked to complete new questionnaires — the most recent update, *The Gifted Group in Later Maturity*, was published in 1995 by psychologists Carole Holahan and Robert Sears, and the study will remain active as long as there are living subjects. Terman’s study is likely the longest running longitudinal study in history.³

¹ Lewis Madison Terman, *Genetic studies of genius. Vol. 1, Mental and physical traits of a thousand gifted children*, Stanford University Press, 1926, viii.

² *Ibid.*, vii.

³ It may be impossible to ascertain for certain the longest running longitudinal study, but the two other contenders, the Grant study at Harvard and the Baltimore longitudinal study on aging which

The subjects of Terman's study were selected by their scores on the Stanford-Binet intelligence test – the first IQ test which was developed by Terman and his team in 1915. This technology allowed Terman's research team to discover one thousand gifted children among 168,000 California school children – efficiently locating the resource Terman characterized as the most precious the nation had. Despite framing his study as a “scientific problem” driven by an “objective” technology, over the course of Terman's study the psychologist repeatedly engaged with his subjects in a manner more befitting a benefactor from a Horatio Alger story. Terman on numerous occasions intervened to offer a hand up to young people he deemed worthy of help. He did so in spite of the fact that any extra assistance to his gifted research subjects essentially invalidated the scientific nature of his study. It seems that he just could not help himself. According to journalist Joel Shurkin's 1992 book, *Terman's Kids: The Groundbreaking Study of How the Gifted Grew Up*, Terman wrote numerous letters of recommendation for his subjects applying to universities – frequently to Stanford University where he had considerable influence. He recommended his subjects for jobs. He even wrote to parole officers for leniency and to immigration officials to help prevent to internment of several Japanese-American subjects.⁴ The help that Terman provided to his “Termites” could take other

began in 1938 and 1958 respectively. See George E. Vaillant, *Triumphs of experience*, Harvard University Press, 2012; Alice Ghent, "The happiness effect," *World Health Organization Bulletin* April 1; 89(4) (2011): 246-247; Nathan W. Shock, "Normal Human Aging: The Baltimore Longitudinal Study of Aging." National Institute of Health. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1984.

⁴ Mitchell Leslie, “The Vexing Legacy of Lewis Terman,” *Stanford Magazine*, July/August 2000; Joel N. Shurkin, *Terman's Kids: The Groundbreaking Study of How the Gifted Grew Up*, (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1992) 206.

forms as well including simple advice, formal career counseling, and direct monetary assistance.

Terman's interventions on behalf of his gifted subjects can be seen as an expression of faith that the gifted category existed regardless of evidence. Like an Algeresque character, Terman knew there existed a rare group of children with "sterling qualities." He believed in them, believed in their innate ability, and believed in their potential to achieve so much that he did not wait and see whether they would sink or swim on their own. In many ways this was indicative of the entire gifted project: a select group of innately superior individuals who require special help to realize their superiority. A key difference from the Algeresque myth was in the systematic way these children were initially identified.

No single person did more to draw attention to gifted children than Lewis Madison Terman. His development of the Stanford-Binet intelligence test in 1915 would become the means to identify children supposedly in possession of innate superior mental ability. During World War I, he worked with the U.S. Army to test nearly two million recruits thereby legitimizing the test as an efficient sorting technology that could serve the national interest. After the war, Terman worked to popularize the test for use in schools to efficiently sort the growing mass of students, many of whom were immigrants, that public schools were charged with educating and Americanizing. From 1921 on, Terman would use his IQ test to identify over one thousand children with superior scores as part of his famous study. Terman gathered massive amounts of data about their physical health, their interests, their personalities, and much more. In the process, Terman

established the gifted as a type, a category of individuals that would be acknowledged both within education and by the general public.

The invention of the gifted child built on nineteenth century ideas such as those expressed in Horatio Alger stories but used the IQ test to systematically identify these “diamonds in the rough.” Industrialization provided both the means and the impulse to systematically pursue these goals. The technology that made this identification possible, the intelligence test, began as a diagnostic tool to discover the mentally “defective” among the anonymous masses. Intelligence tests presented ability as a fixed and differentiated ranked hierarchy that could identify the “feeble-minded.” By this same reasoning, psychologists, Lewis Terman the most prominent among them, asserted that the IQ exam also could identify the otherwise hidden mentally “superior” individual.

Growing Up Gifted

Lewis Terman himself rose from inauspicious origins to a prominent career, and his personal narrative was in many respects similar to an Algeresque story complete with the timely intervention of older male benefactors. His career as a nationally known professor of psychology certainly had no precedent in his own family. Born in 1877 in rural Indiana, the twelfth of fourteen children, Terman, surveying his own background in 1930 noted, “I know of nothing in my ancestry that would have led anyone to predict for me an intellectual career. A statistical study of my forebears would have suggested rather that I was destined to spend my life on a farm or as the manager of a small business, and

that my education would probably stop with high school graduation or earlier.”⁵ In the manner of a eugenicist, Terman took stock of his ancestry including his paternal and maternal lineage, but genetics in his case did not determine his destiny.⁶ Terman, in other words, ascribed his own rise to innate qualities within himself that were not the direct result of heredity.

If Terman’s family background did not anticipate a career as a prominent psychologist neither did his early education. Terman attended a one-room "little red schoolhouse" that did not even possess a library. Although, he praised his teachers’ “natural ability,” he also noted that they had little education themselves.⁷ As Terman would later relate, he excelled in this environment nonetheless, advancing to the third grade in his first year at school as a six year old — implying that he too possessed a considerable degree of “natural ability.”⁸ According to Terman, most of his classmates did not share this ability and association with them did not contribute to his development, “The majority of my neighborhood playmates, far from providing any stimulus to intellectual development, were of the type that rarely completes the eighth grade.”⁹ Terman imagined himself a diamond in the rough in terms of intellectual ability, not unlike one of Horatio Alger’s boy-heroes. Terman’s experiences seemed to predispose him to embrace the notion of an innate intellectual hierarchy. In addition, his early life

⁵ Lewis Terman, “Autobiography of Lewis M. Terman,” in *History of Psychology in Autobiography*, Carl Murchison, ed., 1930, 298. Republished by the permission of Clark University Press, Worcester, MA. <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Terman/murchison.htm>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 300.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 301.

provided an example of how the rare highly intelligent individual might be found not just among those of superior “stock,” as eugenicists believed, but also “hidden” among those from less prominent backgrounds.

According to Terman, he did not seriously consider an academic career until he was unexpectedly accepted into a doctoral program in psychology at Clark University in 1903.¹⁰ Further, by his own account he would not have reached the position he did without timely assistance on a number of occasions – again reminiscent of the “face-to-face” world of benefactors and talented boys Alger envisioned. Terman began college at the age of fifteen attending a local teachers college, Central Normal College in Danville, Indiana. He explained that he had no particular interest in teaching, but “teaching was about the only avenue of escape for the youth who aspired to anything beyond farm life.”¹¹ Terman spent next seven years alternately attending classes in Danville and teaching at rural schools similar to the one he attended as a child.¹² A career as a teacher or a principal in rural school was one of the few alternatives to farm labor for those like Terman who were academically inclined.

Terman seemed to consider the normal school as filling a similar role for “gifted” youth in the nineteenth century that gifted programs would later provide in the twentieth. Terman believed that these schools enrolled “raw country boys fresh from the grammar school” and educated them to become teachers. In rural Indiana, Terman maintained, academically able students who lacked the funds to attend regular universities would be

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 300.

¹² Ibid., 305.

“educationally stranded but for the opportunities such schools offered.”¹³ Terman viewed his classmates at Central Normal College as “gifted” individuals who realized their potential through the opportunity afforded by the rural college:

Danville in that day attracted a surprisingly large number of gifted young men and women. My first roommate was Logan Esarey, now Professor of American History at Indiana University and a recognized scholar in his field. The others were Arthur M. Banta (already mentioned), Oren S. Hack (now a prominent attorney in Indiana), and Elmer Thomas (now United States Senator from Oklahoma). Some of my very closest friends were Frederick N. Duncan, who later took his doctor's degree in biology and taught in various southern colleges; P. C. Emmons, now Superintendent of Schools at Mishawaka, Indiana; H. S. Simmons, now director of a teachers agency; and Bert D. Beck, who entered the ministry and became a doctor of divinity from Boston University.¹⁴

Here again, by implication, Terman included himself among the gifted and part of a gifted cohort who rose to prominence from humble childhoods in rural Indiana. In addition, by listing the accomplishments of these normal school classmates, Terman reinforced the idea that in general gifted individuals were to be found in unlikely populations.

Finally, Terman was clear that his own path to prominent and nationally known expert on intelligence and gifted children was by no means inevitable and was in some ways a matter of chance. After seven years at the normal school Terman earned three degrees, but not level of “A. B. degree from a standard university.”¹⁵ To complete, this higher status degree Indiana University, Terman had to borrow twelve hundred dollars

¹³ Ibid., 306

¹⁴ Ibid., 308.

¹⁵ Ibid., 309.

from his father.¹⁶ At this point, Terman claimed he still had no ambitions to pursue a PhD, but hoped to pursue his master's degree in psychology and teach at a normal school or college. In addition to these greater ambitions, Terman had greater responsibilities having gotten married and fathered a child in the two years between schools.¹⁷ Growing increasingly interested in the study of psychology and reluctant to return to the kinds of teaching positions that he had already held, Terman received word that he had been accepted as a PhD student at Clark University, to which he had been recommended by a colleague. In order to attend, Terman had to borrow another twelve hundred dollars from his father and brother.¹⁸ The purpose of recounting Terman's tortuous rise to academia is to simply note how much it hinged on the timely assistance of his relatives. Like an Algeresque hero, Terman, in his own telling, could not simply rely on his talents and hard work, but he required the appearance of benefactors at key moments to realize his potential. The notion that the gifted, while superior, also required additional assistance or development for their talents to manifest was central to the idea of giftedness and one that Terman would apply in his own dealing with gifted children later in his career.

Terman Finds Psychology

Terman's narrative of his early life model the notion that innate abilities might be found in children from unlikely backgrounds. In his study of psychology Terman from also early on evinced an interest in discovering "hidden" abilities in children. At the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 311-12.

University of Indiana, Terman conducted research for his master's degree that attempted to discover future leadership qualities in children. His study questioned a group of black and white children to determine which children influenced their peers the most and what qualities children cited as being important to leadership (intelligence, he found ranked at the top).¹⁹ At Indiana, Terman discovered the work of Francis Galton and Alfred Binet, and read extensively on the psychology of genius and mental deficiency. He also prepared seminar reports on the topics of mental degeneracy and "The Great Man Theory" for his advisor and mentor Ernest Lindley.²⁰

Even before Terman began formally studying psychology at Indiana, a series of college readers known as Reading-Circle books, fostered in him an early interest in the subject. Part of the curriculum at Central Normal College, these readings included *Philosophy of Teaching* by Arnold Tompkins, *Psychological Foundations* by W. T. Harris, *Dickens as an Educator* by James Hughes, *Plato the Teacher* by William Lowe Bryan, and *Talks to Teachers* by William James.²¹ According to Terman, the Reading-Circle books also featured essays by John Ruskin whose *Political Economy of Art*, discussed in the introduction, called for the systematic development of young people with innate potential for artistic talent – talent that he likened to gold in terms of its scarcity and innate value. Ruskin's assumptions about talent mirror twentieth-century ideas about giftedness for which Terman would later gain prominence. Although Terman mentioned the work of William Lowe Bryan and William James as being particularly influential, he

¹⁹ Henry L. Minton, *Lewis M. Terman* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 20.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 19-20.

²¹ Lewis Terman, "Autobiography of Lewis M. Terman," 308-9.

also said of the entire series, “I am inclined to think that the influence of the Reading-Circle books was real and lasting, for they helped to give me both a philosophical and a psychological interest in education.”²² At the very least it is compelling that at the beginning of Terman’s intellectual interest in psychology he was exposed to ideas about innate ability that must be identified for the national good.

At Clark University, Terman studied under renowned psychologist G. Stanley Hall whom Terman greatly admired, but who also actively discouraged Terman’s research into identifying individual differences through mental testing. Hall, a hereditarian strongly influenced by Darwin’s theory of evolution and its implications for psychology, was far more interested in group differences. Building on his masters’ research at Indiana, Terman pursued his study of precocious children initially through a Hallian lens. In Hall’s framework that meant, according to Terman’s biographer, that to Hall:

The minds of children and primitive races were considered to be the same, and it would be dangerous to impose mature civilization upon such minds. According to Hall, adolescence was the period of life to begin the acculturation process for members of advanced races. In surveying permutation, in such areas as the education of school children, religious teaching, and the acquisition of sexual interests, Terman pointed to the dangers of providing instruction or training at too early a period of development.²³

With Hall as an advisor, Terman first completed a literature survey of research on precocity. Next, Hall had Terman create a questionnaire on leadership among children,

²² Ibid.

²³ Henry L. Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 25.

but this approach left Terman unsatisfied – Terman would characterize the latter product as something he “inflicted upon the world.”²⁴

Terman, however much he admired Hall’s intellect, nevertheless became increasingly interested in the possibilities mental testing offered despite the misgivings of his mentor. As Terman wrote later:

By the spring of 1904 I had determined to take as my thesis an experimental study of mental tests. Hall had been so kind to me and I owed him such a debt of gratitude that it cost me a heavy soul-struggle to desert him in favor of Sanford as my mentor. When I announced to him my decision he expressed very emphatically his disapproval of mental tests, but, finding that my mind was made up, he finally gave me his blessing and some advice on the danger of being misled by the quasi-exactness of quantitative methods.²⁵

Hall was a towering figure in the early history of psychology and a major influence on Terman so his split from his advisor on the issue of mental testing seems significant.²⁶

While Hall shared Terman’s interest in a hierarchy of ability, Hall’s emphasis on evolutionary biology and racial differences seems distinct from Terman’s focus on individual differences, which drove the latter to pursue research via quantitative testing. Even though Terman did indeed hold similar views to Hall and used testing data to support eugenics, his interest in individual differences points to a related, but distinct project.

²⁴ Lewis Terman, “Autobiography of Lewis M. Terman,” 318.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hall remained an important influence on Terman. When Hall died in 1924, Terman wrote to a friend, “I can truthfully say that to no one else have I been as greatly indebted for the inspiration which has led to any little measure of success I have had. His influence has been with me through all the years since I left Clark.” qtd. in Henry L. Minton, *Lewis M. Terman* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 28.

Terman's PhD research under experimental psychologist Edmund C. Sanford in 1904 involved seven "bright" boys and seven "stupid" boys (as selected by their teachers and principals) from ten to thirteen years of age from a school in the nearby industrial town of Worcester. In an effort to determine what tests best revealed the difference between the groups Terman gave each of his subjects eight ability tests.²⁷ Terman's "Bright" students scored better on all the mental tests on average and to approximately the same degree. To Terman this indicated that ability was innate rather than learned. He concluded, "While offering little positive data on the subject, the study has strengthened my impression of the relatively greater importance of *endowment* over *training*, as a determinant on an individual's intellectual rank over his fellows."²⁸ Terman's interest in testing seems to be motivated, then, by an interest in producing a ranking of mental ability, a hierarchy he assumed from having teachers pre-select "bright" and "stupid" boys. It also seems significant that Terman chose to conduct his experiment in Worcester, a working class community of ethnic white immigrants – an extension perhaps of the Algeresque search for the "diamond in the rough."

Developing The IQ Test

After earning his PhD from Clark in 1905, Terman entered what he would later term his "fallow period." Health problems forced Terman to seek employment outside the rigors of academia and prioritize job offers in more temperate climates. Terman thus accepted a position as a school principal in southern California and then as an instructor

²⁷ Henry L. Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

at the Los Angeles State Normal School. In 1910, his health improved, Terman was recommended for a position as professor of education at Stanford University by his former Clark classmate, E.B. Huey who had first been offered the position but declined.²⁹ This position, and the resources it made available to Terman, would prove key to the invention of the first intelligence test and its subsequent use as tool to identify gifted children. Thus, Terman gained it through the timely intercession of personal contacts.

At Stanford, Terman would turn his attention again to mental testing. The test he would develop, known as the Stanford-Binet, was a revision and translation of French psychologist Alfred Binet's 1905 test — an exam Binet designed to diagnose the mentally disabled so that they might receive special instruction in public education. Binet's approach used a variety of mental tests on a sample and found an average “age norm” for each test. With these norms he could determine the “mental age” of a student based on their test scores.³⁰ For comparison mentally disabled children were given the same tests to determine how far below the average child they scored. Binet's goal was not to create an intelligence test that could rank children according to innate mental ability – in fact, Binet viewed mental ability as malleable and viewed the test as a tool to help children receive appropriate training.³¹

The development of the IQ test from the Binet test was never a foregone conclusion — it was a massive effort without which the use of the exam to identify “gifted” children would not have been possible. Terman was one of several psychologists

²⁹ Ibid, 36-7.

³⁰ Ibid., 47.

³¹ Robert S. Siegler, "The Other Alfred Binet," *Developmental psychology* 28, no. 2, 1992, 179.

in the United States interested in translating and revising the Binet test — his competitors included Henry Goddard and Terman’s former PhD classmates E. B. Huey and Fred Kuhlmann. Terman’s version, the Stanford-Binet, succeeded largely because of the resources he was able to devote to the effort.³²

Gathering the data to revise the Binet test was a project on a truly industrial scale and Terman’s advantage over his competitors lay in his access to the necessary resources. As a professor of education at Stanford, Terman had graduate students to administer tests and process the testing data, as well as a cooperative network of public schools with students to serve as test subjects.³³ In all, 2,300 subjects were tested including 1,700 “normal” children, 200 “defective and superior” children and 400 adults from nearby urban areas including Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Reno, Nevada.³⁴ Terman’s graduate students used ninety different mental tests in all — testing students individually or in small groups as this was before the advent of the multiple choice exam. The project took five years to complete and in 1915 Terman published his “Stanford Revision” later known as the Stanford-Binet.

Collecting data on this scale allowed Terman to standardize his test so that the median “mental age” of the children at each age group would equal their median actual or chronological age.³⁵ Terman’s mass of data also allowed him to plot all scores on a normal or bell curve distribution. In this way, Terman’s exam went beyond Binet’s in that

³² Henry L. Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 47.

³³ *Ibid.*, 48

³⁴ Lewis M. Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence: An Explanation of and a Complete Guide for the use of the Stanford Revision and Extension of the Binet-Simon Intelligence Scale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1916), 51-2.

³⁵ Henry L. Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 50.

it could not only diagnose mental disability, but plot any individual's place on a hierarchy of mental ability. Along with creating this hierarchy, Terman created a method of expressing it in a compelling way — the intelligence quotient. The intelligence quotient was the ratio of a subject's "mental age" on the test to their chronological age multiplied by one hundred (e.g., a ten year old who scored the same as the average twelve year old would have an IQ of 120 — $12 \div 10 \times 100 = 120$). Although previous psychologists had introduced the concept of an intelligence quotient, Terman's revision was the first to put it into practice and it was only possible because of the scale that the Stanford team was able to achieve.

In writing about the Stanford-Binet, Terman presented the test as a measure of intelligence, embracing the idea that intelligence was a single unitary trait and that intelligence was innate rather than the product of environment, two positions that Terman had expressed some doubt about in the past. As a single measure of innate intelligence normally distributed in a hierarchy of ability, Terman could claim the IQ test had enormous predictive power. A below average IQ score would predict below average future achievement, average scores predicted average achievement, and superior scores, superior achievement.³⁶ For Terman the IQ test could find any individual's place within the hierarchy that he already knew to exist – from the "idiot" and "feeble-minded" to "superior" and everyone in between.

³⁶ Ibid. 51-2.

Terman framed the predictive power of his IQ test as addressing an industrial problem. To Terman, testers were analogous to engineers and mental ability was their raw material:

Before an engineer constructs a railroad bridge or trestle, he studies the materials to be used, learns by means of tests the amount of strain per unit of size his materials will be able to withstand. He does not work empirically, and count upon patching up the mistakes which may later appear under the stress of actual use. The educational engineer should emulate this example. Tests and forethought must take the place of failure and patchwork. Our efforts have been too long directed by "trial and error." It is time to leave off guessing and to acquire a scientific knowledge of the material with which we have to deal.³⁷

As we have seen, the development of the IQ test required an industrial-like scale to achieve the sample size required to produce a normally distributed set of scores. To know students as materials requires knowing them not as a mass, but as individuals. If each individual's true ability were immediately recognized, the test would have little use, but the appeal of Terman's test lay in its ability to find true ability and potential (or lack thereof) "hidden" to the lay observer. As such, the test was a Taylorite technology efficiently sorting individuals according to ability.

One group of these hidden individuals were the "feeble-minded." As historian James Trent has written, starting in the early twentieth century, feeble-minded was the term given to individuals deemed to possess below average intelligence but who could "pass" in society.³⁸ According to this formulation, the feeble-minded may not have been

³⁷ Lewis M. Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence*, 5.

³⁸ This concern over passing also parallels racial anxieties of the period. Eugenicist Madison Grant, for example, decried the ability of racially suspect immigrants to pass as "American." Grant wrote, "These immigrants adopt the language of the native American, they wear his clothes, they steal his name and they are beginning to take his women, but the seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals and while he is being elbowed out of his own home the

eligible for institutionalization, but their lower mental abilities made them more likely to be manipulated into immoral or criminal behavior. Anxiety over the feeble-minded coincided with dramatic changes in American life wrought by industrialization including massive immigration and urbanization as American cities were increasingly seen as inherently corrupting. While the mentally disabled had long been seen as a burden, by the time Terman revised the Binet test, they were increasingly portrayed as an active “menace” to be segregated from the vices of urban areas in rural institutions and, beginning with an Indiana law in 1907, to be prevented from reproducing through compulsory sterilization.

Terman supported these eugenic social policies and he asserted that his IQ test could identify cases of feeble-mindedness that might not have been readily apparent. Terman wrote, “The earlier methods of diagnosis cause the majority of the higher grade defectives to be overlooked. Previous to the development of psychological methods the low grade moron was about as high a type of defective as most physicians or even psychologists were able to identify as feeble-minded.”³⁹ The gradations of intelligence levels offered by the IQ test and its ability to locate an individual’s place on a hierarchy of mental ability meant that the test could identify the “higher grade” of mental defective that might otherwise “pass” as typical.

American looks calm abroad and urges on others the suicidal ethics which are exterminating his own race.” *The Passing of a Great Race* (New York: Scribner Press, 1916) 91. Similarly the preface of James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* drew readers in with the notion of the attempted passing of “an unascertainable number of fair-complexioned colored people over into the white race.”

³⁹ Lewis M. Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence*, 6.

Terman also explicitly tied his IQ test to eugenic policies designed to control the reproduction of the mentally disabled:

It is safe to predict that in the near future intelligence tests will bring tens of thousands of these high-grade defectives under the surveillance and protection of society. This will ultimately result in curtailing the reproduction of feeble-mindedness and in the elimination of an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency. It is hardly necessary to emphasize that the high-grade cases, of the type now so frequently overlooked, are precisely the ones whose guardianship it is most important for the State to assume.⁴⁰

The IQ test as Terman envisioned could identify the so called “high-grade feeble-minded” whose defect would otherwise go undetected and he touted the test’s ability to further the eugenic goal of preventing these individuals from reproducing.

While there can be no doubt that this technology was used to further these eugenic goals, it is also striking how it fit the assumptions that underlie giftedness. Although Terman did not yet use the term “gifted,” he did speak of the test’s ability to identify “superior” children, and in many ways a mirror image to how he characterized the identification of the “hidden” among the feeble-minded.

As with the feeble-minded, Terman proclaimed that IQ tests could serve the national interest through identification of the superior child. Terman wrote,

The future welfare of our country hinges, in no small degree, upon the right education of these superior individuals. Whether civilization moves on and up depends most on the advances made by creative thinkers and leaders in science, politics, art, morality, and religion. Moderate ability can follow, or imitate, but genius must show the way.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁴¹ Ibid., 12.

The IQ test could claim to locate those at the very top as well as those at the very bottom of the innate mental hierarchy due to the large sample Terman's Stanford group had processed in developing the test. As with the feebleminded, bring the superior "under surveillance" via the IQ would be of great value to the nation, but instead of identifying future criminals it could discover future leaders.

As with the feeble-minded, Terman asserted that superior children were potentially hidden among the normal and the IQ test could reveal their true status, but the measures to be taken next were not only different, but seem to operate from completely different assumptions. Terman argued, for example, that the feeble-minded could not benefit from education, writing:

The impotence of school instruction to neutralize individual differences in native endowment will be evident to any one who follows the school career of backward children. The children who are seriously retarded in school are not normal, and cannot be made normal by any refinement of educational method. As a rule, the longer the inferior child attends school, the more evident his inferiority becomes.⁴²

Since according to Terman the feeble-minded could not be educated, they were to be segregated from the rest of populace and brought under the "guardianship" of the state in accordance with eugenics.

By contrast, the "right" education was the only hope for the superior, who according to Terman's IQ test were after all innately superior, to actually reach their full potential. The typical education available in schools was not sufficient for this task, and could "handicap" the superior student. In other words, Terman seemed to believe that the

⁴² Ibid., 116.

same education that could not raise up the feeble-minded also had the power to quash the potential of those who were naturally and innately superior:

Through the leveling influences of the educational lockstep such children at present are often lost in the masses. It is a rare child who is able to break this lockstep by extra promotions. Taking this country over, the ratio of “accelerates” to “retardates” in the school is approximately 1 to 10. Through the handicapping influences of poverty, social neglect, physical defects, or educational maladjustments, many potential leaders in science, art, government, and industry are denied the opportunity of a normal development. The use we have made of exceptional ability reminds one of the primitive methods of surface mining. It is necessary to explore the nation’s hidden resources of intelligence. The common saying that “genius will out” is one of those dangerous half-truths with which too many people rest content.⁴³

Terman, it therefore seems, was invested in hierarchy above all. When speaking of feeble-minded and mental defectives, Terman cites their lack of educational progress in schools as evidence of their innate inferiority. When speaking of the superior child, the highly intelligent child, he cites their lack of educational progress as proof of their superiority. That is, the same evidence, lack of educational progress, is used to support two completely different judgments about the students in question. The IQ test, again, was originally developed to correlate with performance in school. What this seeming contradiction reveals is that above all the project of identifying gifted children took on faith the existence of a hierarchy of ability – a hierarchy that also “twinned” its two extremes. Both failed at school, and failure at school gave evidence of abnormality to which the State must attend. At the same time, as a prominent academic who rose from a relatively humble rural background, Terman’s description of intelligence as “natural” valorized his own biography, stabilized his place, and naturalized his rise.

⁴³ Ibid., 12-13.

The worry over education stunting the development of superior children not also revealed Terman's concern that these children were "lost in the masses" and "handicapped" by social factors like poverty and inferior education. This, of course, would seem to undercut his insistence on their innate superiority, and it also conflicts with eugenic assumptions (that Terman seemed to endorse when writing of defectives) that attribute poverty to inferior genetics. Terman then embraced the first two assumptions of giftedness, that the innately superior, but rare, type existed and that they may be hidden among the masses. The Stanford-Binet test allowed for the third – the ability to systematically identify and develop these individuals for the good of the nation. As with the feeble-minded, the test could identify a "superior" individual's place within the hierarchy of ability – in a scientific manner. Terman further likened the IQ test to mining for its ability to find hidden but rare and valuable resources to be developed for the national good — an analogy that again echoes almost exactly John Ruskin's 1857 essay, *The Political Economy of Art* and also echoes Alger's search for "sterling qualities" among poor male youths.

Terman's search for superior intelligence even among the poor contradicts the typical eugenicist assumptions about poverty. For strict hereditarians there should not be superior children among the poor and Terman's practice was an indication that giftedness was its own distinct project. Giftedness attempted to reconcile an essentially hierarchical account of human difference with democratic precepts about human potential of everyone. Giftedness ability to find relative harmony between these seemingly contradictory ideas was key to its appeal.

World War I and Testing on a Mass Scale

Terman developed the IQ test as a tool to identify each individual's place in a hierarchy of mental ability for the purpose of industrial efficiency. Of particular interest was the identification of those with inferior and superior abilities who would otherwise go undetected. While Terman and his fellow psychologists had faith that a revised Binet test could perform this function, few outside their professional circle shared this optimism. As historians such as Daniel Kelves have pointed out, the opportunity for psychologists and intelligence tests to prove their worth to the nation would present itself with the entry of the United States into World War I.⁴⁴

When the United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, Robert Yerkes, president of the American Psychological Association (APA), was quick to recognize the opportunity for his discipline that the war provided. Two weeks after the declaration Yerkes called a meeting of the Council of the APA and created twelve committees charged with finding ways psychology might assist the war effort. Yerkes himself was appointed to the chair the Committee on Methods of Psychological Examining of Recruits. Terman, along with fellow psychologists Henry Goddard, Carl Bingham, Thomas Haines, Frederic Wells, and Guy Whipple were appointed to the committee as well and on May 28 they met for the first time in Vineland, New Jersey.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Daniel J. Kevles, "Testing the Army's intelligence: Psychologists and the military in World War I." *The Journal of American History* 55, no. 3, 1968, 565-581.

⁴⁵ Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 64.

The Committee quickly agreed to embark on a testing project on a scale never before seen as they decided to test every military recruit. While the Committee initially considered using intelligence tests only to identify and reject mentally defective recruits, they soon decided on a grander plan for, in Yerkes's words, the "classification of men in order that they may be properly placed in military service."⁴⁶ Intelligence tests, in the psychologists' view, would promote efficiency by aiding the Army in making all personnel decisions — the same expansive goal Terman envisioned for his Stanford Binet.

The scale of the Army project was enormous and it quickly became clear that the then-available methods of testing would not be feasible options. The Stanford-Binet IQ test Terman's team had developed took considerable time to administer and featured open-ended responses that required a psychologist to methodically score. To test each Army recruit the committee realized they would need a test that could be both administered and scored quickly and efficiently. To that end, Terman introduced the committee to a group test developed by his graduate student Arthur Otis. Otis had been experimenting with methods to adapt intelligence tests to allow for categorical rather than open-ended responses for efficiency's sake.⁴⁷ Otis had begun his work with reading tests in 1916 with the explicit goal of adapting them so that they might be administered "en masse" and scored by "unskilled labor" in order to make them more practical for use in

⁴⁶ Kevles, "Testing the Army's Intelligence," 566-7.

⁴⁷ Franz Samuelson, "Was Early Mental Testing (a) Racist Inspired, (b) Objective Science, (c) A Technology for Democracy, (d) The Origin of Multiple Choice Exams, (e) None of the Above? (Mark the Right Answer)" in Michael M. Sokal eds. *Psychological Testing and American Society, 1890-1930*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987) 117.

schools.⁴⁸ The committee agreed to adopt a test that included Otis's adaptation, as scholar

Franz Samuelson relates:

Within less than two weeks, the committee produced a new format for its tests that combined the mass administration of school examinations and the standardization of the individual intelligence tests: they had found a way to transform the testees' answers from highly variable, often idiosyncratic, and always time consuming oral and written responses into easily marked choices among fixed alternatives, quickly scorable by clerical workers with the aid of superimposed stencils.⁴⁹

Samuelson further notes that this Otis's test revised by the committee represents the invention of the multiple choice test — an innovation that would allow for the spread of not only intelligence tests but a wide variety of mental tests in educational and business contexts.⁵⁰

Otis's test would form the basis of the "Alpha" Test for literate recruits as it required reading. For illiterate recruits and recruits that could not speak English a nonverbal test, labeled the "Beta" and comprised of problems such as mazes and matching pictures and symbols, was developed. The psychologists also created explicit instructions for test administrators, in the case of the Alpha these instructions were given verbally. In the case of the Beta, the instructions were pantomimed.⁵¹

The war would prove a great boon to the reputation of intelligence testing, but during the war the tests fell far short of the ambitious goals Yerkes, Terman, and their colleagues laid out. According to Kelves, many Army officers were skeptical of the value of intelligence tests and resented implication that tests knew soldiers better than they.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 118.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 116.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 67.

Officers labeled the psychologists “pests” and “mental meddlers” for interfering with traditional protocol and taking up valuable space and resources in military camps.⁵² Few seem to have made use of the test and instead made sure to document examples of recruits who tested poorly but went on to make fine soldiers. Of one such recruit a commander wondered, “What do we care about his ‘intelligence.’”⁵³

If the Army complained about the resources and space devoted to intelligence testing, the testers had reason to complain that what was provided was not sufficient for their task. In addition to resentment Kelves has noted, the army designated barracks for testing that were too small, unfurnished, with bad acoustics, and bad lighting.⁵⁴ Test administrators complained that not all recruits could even hear (in the case of the Alpha test) or see (in case of the Beta test) instructions. The scores of the test, according to historian Henry Minton, support this assertion as there were an unusually high number of zero scores on subtests, which would be consistent with test takers not even understanding instructions.⁵⁵

Remarkably, none of these setbacks seemed to matter. The psychologists may have lost nearly every battle in getting the Army to take intelligence tests seriously, but they just as certainly won the war. Accurately or not, they tested 1,750,000 recruits and proved that intelligence testing could be carried out on a mass scale.⁵⁶ What is more, they devoted their expertise to the nation during war lending a patriotic sheen to the project.

⁵² Kelves, “Testing the Army’s Intelligence”, 574.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 575.

⁵⁴ Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 69.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Kelves, 573.

As Kelves concludes, “The wide use of examinations during the had dramatized the intelligence testing and made the practice respectable. Gone was the public’s prewar wariness and ignorance of measuring intelligence.”⁵⁷ This boost in the status of intelligence testing came just when many in United States were ready to believe in a sorting technology that could identify the value of anonymous individuals.

As Simon Cole relates in his history of fingerprinting, another technology designed to locate anonymous individuals in mass industrialized society, the IQ test appears to have gained acceptance of as a measure of intelligence during this period because technical process and expertise of psychologists was taken largely unquestioned and it because it fit a social need so well that it met with minimal skepticism. Cole borrows the sociological term “black-boxing” where the inner workings of a technology are taken for granted. For Cole, the authority of fingerprinting passed from the examiners to the technology itself between the world wars.⁵⁸ For the IQ test, the authority to determine an individual’s intelligence passed from the psychologists to the test itself over the roughly the same period.

IQ Goes to School

The extent to which the IQ test was “black-boxed” is apparent by their quick adoption by schools. As scholars Paul Chapman and Paula Fass have shown, World War I raised the profile of intelligence testing at the same moment public school enrollments

⁵⁷ Kelves, 580.

⁵⁸ Simon Cole, *Suspect Identities: A History of Fingerprinting and Criminal Identification* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 119.

were rapidly expanding, which in turn facilitated the rapid and widespread adoption of intelligence tests in schools for the purposes of sorting students for differentiated instruction. By the end of the war, public schools faced the challenge of ballooning enrollments, especially in high schools — public high school enrollments grew 554 percent from 1890 to 1915.⁵⁹ This growth was especially acute in urban areas due to combination of immigration and migration from rural areas. At the same time, and in response especially to immigration, states began enforcing compulsory education laws — charging public schools with the goal of Americanizing immigrants. While the pre-World War I high school had focused primarily on preparing college-bound students, with growing enrollments and an agenda of Americanization these institutions increasingly embraced the values of social efficiency — processing massive numbers of students to produce American citizens.⁶⁰

Intelligence tests represented a solution that fit these new problems especially well. As David Tyack explains in his history of the urban schools in the early twentieth schools, urban school superintendents embraced a program of top-down reform based on the advice of scientific experts and aimed at maximum efficiency.⁶¹ The group tests developed for testing military recruits could be administered and scored by non-experts which meant students could be tested and sorted efficiently into differentiated levels of instruction. Professionals that included school administrators and education professors

⁵⁹ Paul Davis Chapman, *Schools as Sorters: Lewis M. Terman, Applied Psychology, and the Intelligence Testing Movement, 1890 -1930* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5. See also Paula S. Fass, "The IQ: A Cultural and Historical Framework," *American Journal of Education* 88, no. 4, 1980, 431-58.

⁶¹ David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974) 7.

and philanthropic organizations such as the National Education Association, the National Research Council, and the U.S. Bureau of Education embraced IQ tests as a scientific approach to education that aligned with Progressive Era values of efficiency, conservation, and order.

Terman's Stanford-Binet exam, widely known and associated with the success of the war, was in the right place at the right time. A \$25,000 grant from General Education Board and additional sponsorship from National Research Council allowed Terman to develop group IQ tests for school children.⁶² The end result, known as the National Intelligence Tests, was published by the World Book Company in 1920 was tremendously successful — 200,000 copies sold in first six months alone.⁶³ In addition to producing tests, Terman actively advocated for their use in schools. Heading a National Education Association subcommittee, Terman published a 1922 report entitled *Intelligence Tests and School Reorganization*.⁶⁴ The report recommended using IQ test to track students in five groups: gifted, bright, average, slow, and special.

In promoting the use of the Stanford Binet in schools, Terman cited the IQ testing of recruits World War I as proof they sort individuals efficiently on a large scale:

The army tests, which were given to approximately 1,700,000 soldiers, demonstrated beyond question that the methods of mental measurement are capable of making a contribution of great value to military efficiency. That their universal use in the schoolroom is necessary to educational efficiency will doubtless soon be accepted as a matter of course.⁶⁵

⁶² Minton, *Lewis M. Terman*, 91-2.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 93-4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁶⁵ Lewis. M. Terman, *The Intelligence of School Children*, xiv.

By making the parallel with the army tests Terman was not only touting their ability to process individuals on a large scale but also implicitly making the argument that IQ tests use in schools could further national interests.

Terman argued that IQ tests could further the national interest by revealing the hidden hierarchy of mental ability, allowing schools to locate the truly superior, or gifted children, and then dedicating themselves to developing this valuable resource rather than waste time and attention on those on the lower end of the hierarchy. Terman further asserted that the variation in mental ability among school children was far greater than typically supposed. “Intelligence tests,” Terman wrote in 1920, “have thrown into bold relief the enormous individual differences which obtain for any unselected group of children of a given age.”⁶⁶ The consequence of this variation was, according to Terman, alarming and far-reaching: many students’ mental ages did not match their placement in school. “Over-age” students, the “dull and defective,” were accelerated beyond their appropriate mental age while “under-age” students, the superior or gifted, were the “real retardates” because schools held them in grades below their natural ability. The IQ test could efficiently and expertly sort these students into their appropriate placements – an especially urgent task in the case of the gifted students, a term Terman would begin to use exclusively by 1921. Gifted students, for all their innate superiority, required careful development to actually realize their exceptional talents.

That Terman used IQ test data as evidence of the “large individual differences in original endowment” is particularly ironic given that the exam itself was a norm-

⁶⁶ Lewis M. Terman, "The Use of Intelligence Tests in the Grading of School Children." *The Journal of Educational Research* 1, 1920, 20.

referenced assessment — specifically designed to produce a hierarchy.⁶⁷ According to psychologist William Huitt, the goal of a norm-referenced test is “to rank each student with respect to the achievement of others.”⁶⁸ Questions are designed to separate high and low performers and to produce scores that distinguish levels of ability or knowledge. A norm-referenced test is a technology designed to produce a ranked order. In other words, the test can be seen as a tool for producing an already imagined hierarchy like a cake or bread pan is a tool for producing the item that will take its form.

Although his IQ test was created to rank students in relation to each other, Terman presented the Stanford Binet as an industrial technology that could locate a real and valuable, natural resource of mental ability. Echoing John Ruskin again, he compared the process of finding ability a “sample” of an individual’s ability to finding gold:

In order to find out how much gold is contained in a given vein of quartz it is not necessary to uncover all the ore and extract and weigh every particle of the precious metal. It is sufficient merely to ascertain by borings the linear extent of the lode and to take a small amount of the ore to the laboratory of an assayer, who will make a test and render a verdict of so many ounces of gold per ton of ore.⁶⁹

In comparing intelligence testing to gold mining Terman reinforced both the perception of his test as an industrial technology and of superior mental ability as a limited, rare, and natural resource needing development. The gifted by this analogy could only be born and not made. Terman wrote that, in the vast majority of cases, “the feeble-minded remain

⁶⁷ Lewis. M. Terman, *The Intelligence of School Children: How Children Differ in Ability, the use of Mental Tests in School Grading and the Proper Education of Exceptional Children* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1919), xi.

⁶⁸ William Huitt, “Measurement and evaluation: Criterion- versus norm-referenced testing,” *Educational Psychology Interactive* (Valdosta, GA: Valdosta State University, 1996)

<http://www.edpsycinteractive.org/topics/measeval/crnmref.html>

⁶⁹ Lewis. M. Terman, *The Intelligence of School Children*, 1.

feeble-minded, the dull remain dull, the average remain average, and the superior remain superior. There is nothing in one's equipment, with the exception of character, which rivals the IQ in importance.”⁷⁰ While IQ tests could reliably determine an individual's true mental ability, according to Terman, teachers and other school officials and even parents could not. Far too many school children were in a grade according to their chronological age, but their IQ-determined mental age represented their real level of ability and appropriate placement.

Terman attributed schools’ problems to the fact that far too many children were in a grade either too high or too low for their mental ability. Those students of lower ability were, according to Terman, unnaturally accelerated and those of higher ability were unnaturally restrained by schools:

It will be shown that these innate differences in intelligence are chiefly responsible for the problem of the school laggard; that the so-called "retarded" children on whom we have expended so much sympathy are in reality nearly always above the grade where they belong by mental development; and that the real retardates are the under-age children, who are generally found from one to three grades below the location which their mental development would warrant. In other words, it will be shown that the retardation problem is exactly the reverse of what it is popularly supposed to be.⁷¹

Sorting students by IQ-derived mental age, Terman argued, would be more efficient than sorting by chronological age. The IQ test could find each student’s true place in a mental hierarchy scientifically and absent human sentiment or unwarranted sympathy.

Not only were many students in the wrong grade but this inefficient sorting meant that the students who were least educable, according to Terman, received the most time

⁷⁰ Ibid., 10.

⁷¹ Ibid., 24-5.

and attention while those who could benefit the most from education were actively neglected. As a result an important national resource was going to waste:

The attention of teachers is constantly being called to the large number of defectives among school children, and to the educational and social problems to which they give rise. For the intellectually superior, however, the ones upon whose preservation and right education the future of civilization most depends, no special provision is made. In the average school system their very existence, even, is ignored. Yet, as we have seen, they are just as numerous as the dull and mentally defective. The latter attract attention by their inability to do the work and by their maladjustment to school discipline. Children of superior ability are often submerged with the masses simply because they are not recognized.⁷²

For Terman, the high IQ children represented the “future of civilization” but in schools were “submerged with the masses” and not identified as such. IQ tests were needed to identify these exceptional few and develop their abilities for the good of the nation.

Terman presented these “superior” children as a category of rare individuals with innate value that could be likened to gold. Like gold ore, they needed to be developed or processed from their initial state in order to extract their value. Accordingly Terman warned that these high IQ children required a “special provision” to develop their abilities and realize that value otherwise it would waste away. These individuals were endowed both with tremendous potential and also in constant danger of not reaching that potential. The certainty that such a category actually existed despite these inherent caveats points to an underlying hope that giftedness was real.

One reason for the ready acceptance that “superior” children could be identified and developed was that it addressed a tension between hierarchy and democratic equality. As historian Harry Minton has argued, Terman asserted that this sorting of students into a

⁷² Ibid., 165.

hierarchy was actually necessary for democracy. In making the case for sorting put forward by one of his graduate students, Virgil Dickson, Terman wrote that “the differentiation of curricula and the classification of school children according to ability, far from being undemocratic measures, are absolutely essential if the public school is to be made a real instrument of democracy.”⁷³ Terman argued that true democracy was not based on “equality of endowment,” but on “equality of opportunity.” As such, “Reclassification of children and differentiation of courses of study along the lines laid down in this book will go far toward insuring that every pupil, whether mentally superior, average, or inferior, shall have a chance to make the most of whatever abilities nature has given him.”⁷⁴ The nation’s schools, in other words, could only further democracy by rejecting egalitarianism and embracing the natural hierarchy of mental ability.

The tracking of students into differentiated programs represents an important legacy of intelligence testing, but Terman in the 1920s turned his attention back to the plight of the superior or gifted student — an interest of his since at least his first graduate study of psychology over twenty years earlier.

The development the gifted required to realize their potential was also of a completely different kind than that the non-gifted required. Gifted education, both as Terman articulated and ever since, emphasized nurturing individual interests not a rigid curriculum in stark contrast with the efficient industrial sorting implicit in the use of intelligence test. Terman recommended “opportunity classes” that would allow gifted

⁷³ Virgil Dickson, *Mental Tests And the Classroom Teacher* (Yonkers-on-Hudson, N.Y.: World Book Company, 1923), xiv.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xv.

students to pursue their own interests. For gifted students, Terman wrote, “Forced culture breeds unnatural priggishness and in other ways leads to disappointment. The mind should be allowed to develop at its natural rate without artificial stimulation.”⁷⁵ Terman recommended that parents of gifted children allow them to explore topics on their own through such activities as creating nature collections, constructing machinery apparatus, or wireless sets. The gifted should be always be challenged, but a rigid curriculum should not be forced upon them. Gifted children should, according to Terman, be “encouraged to think and do for themselves.”⁷⁶ While the intelligence test promised to sort masses of students into appropriate courses of study, Terman advised that those identified as gifted be allowed to find their own path. He further advised parents to not push their children into a given interest or subject of study too early, but to allow them to change interests as they grow and find their own vocation.

Identifying the “Termites”

Terman’s extensive study of gifted subjects, officially titled the *Genetic Studies of Genius*, featured eugenic ideas about hereditary genius while remaining focused on promoting the gifted as a rare, innately talented type that might be found in any population. The study further reinforced the idea that the gifted could only be uncovered with technology born of professional expertise and subsequently developed for the good of the nation. Terman’s research team canvassed a large number of students to find a

⁷⁵ Lewis M. Terman, *Suggestions for the Education And Training of Gifted Children* (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1921), 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 10.

sizable sample of gifted children. His goal was to present data that would dispel prevailing notions about precocious children – that they were physically weak, socially maladjusted, were focused on too narrow interests, and had peaked too early. Instead, Terman showed that his gifted group was physically healthy, lead active social lives, had wide-ranging interests, and maintained their advantages throughout their lives.

Terman tracked his gifted subjects through their lives in the hopes of demonstrating that the group’s innate mental superiority was maintained and manifested in impressive academic and professional achievements. The extent to which these gifted subjects, affectionately labeled “Termites,” actually reached their potential remains uncertain. What is more relevant for our purposes were Terman’s own actions regarding his gifted group.

Even though, by his own account, the group possessed innate mental superiority and even though intervention on any subject’s behalf would severely damage any claim the study might have for scientific significance, Terman on numerous documented occasions provided direct assistance to his “Termites.” Terman’s insistence in his group’s superiority and his efforts to effect that superiority, rather than simple hypocrisy, in fact cast giftedness as a self-fulfilling phenomenon.

Terman began his study in September of 1921 with the goal of building on his previous research into gifted children by identifying a total of one thousand gifted children, enough to form a statistical basis for observations from representative sample.⁷⁷ With over \$50,000 in grants from Stanford, Terman assembled a mostly female team of

⁷⁷ Lewis Madison Terman, *Genetic studies of genius. Vol. 1, Mental and physical traits of a thousand gifted children* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1926), 4.

researchers to canvass public schools in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, and Alameda.⁷⁸ From this base of 168,000 students, Terman's researchers used a combination of teacher nominations and age-grade status to select a group screen using the National Intelligence Test. Initially Terman planned to only study those who scored in the top five percent of the test, but when that yielded too small a group he decided to include the top 10 percent and even made exceptions for occasional borderline cases.⁷⁹ The study identified 649 cases for more in depth study as part of the main survey.⁸⁰

The data Terman's team collected on each of its subjects was extensive and far-ranging. The goal in gathering this information was "to determine in what respects the typical gifted child differs from the typical child of normal mentality."⁸¹ The information gathered included:

1. Two intelligence tests (Stanford-Binet and National B)
2. A two-hour educational test (The Stanford Achievement Test)
3. A fifty-minute test of general information in science, history, literature, and the arts
4. A fifty-minute test of knowledge of and interest in plays, games, and amusements
5. A four-page interest blank to be filled out by the children.
6. A two-months reading record to be kept by the children
7. A sixteen-page Home Information Blank, to be filled out by the parents, including ratings on twenty-five traits
8. An eight-page School Information Blank to be filled out by the teachers, including ratings on the same twenty-five traits as were rated by the parents

⁷⁸ Ibid., 6-9. Terman's research team included Stanford professor, Truman Kelley as assistant director, and Florence Fuller, Florence Goodenough, Helen Marshall, and Dorothy H. Yates as field assistants. Goodenough studied under Chapter 2 subject, Leta Stetter Hollingworth at Columbia and would go on to work as a prominent scholar in the mental testing of pre-school children.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 29. In addition, nominations were solicited from schools throughout the state and volunteer field assistants tested children. Those who qualified as gifted added to the group and tracked (bringing the total to one thousand children). More in depth data on these children were not gathered, however.

⁸¹ Ibid., viii.

9. When possible, ratings of the home on the Whittier Scale for home grading.⁸²

While some of the information Terman's team gathered included information on the children's heredity and family background, most of the study was concerned with the children themselves particularly with proving that gifted children were not otherwise sickly or socially maladjusted.

Despite the fact that Terman titled his study the *Genetic Studies of Genius*, the psychologist was chiefly concerned with the characteristics of gifted children — what Terman called their “nature” — rather than questions involving heredity. Terman explained:

The problems of genius are chiefly three: its nature, its origin, and its cultivation. This volume is primarily concerned with the nature of genius, insofar as this is indicated by the mental physical traits of intellectually superior children. On the origin of such children it has only a few facts of rather general nature to present, for it has thus far not been possible to make a thoroughgoing study of the heredity of our subjects.⁸³

As had been the case throughout his career as a psychologist, Terman was primarily concerned with uncovering the nature of exceptional children rather than their hereditary background.

Still when reviewing the results of his study Terman certainly noted that the data collected on the families of his gifted subjects were consistent with the theory that mental ability was a hereditary trait and inconsistent with the “environmental hypothesis”:

To explain by the environment hypothesis the relatively much greater deviation of our group from unselected children with respect to intellectual and volitional traits appears difficult if not impossible. Our data, however, offer no convincing proof, merely numerous converging lines of evidence. There is a marked excess of

⁸² Ibid., 7-8.

⁸³ Ibid., viii.

Jewish and of Northern and Western European stock represented. The number of highly successful, even eminent, relatives is impressively great. The fact that in a State which justly prides itself on the equality of educational opportunity provided for its children of every class and station an impartially selected gifted group should draw so heavily from the higher occupational levels and so lightly from the lower, throws a heavy burden upon the environment hypothesis.⁸⁴

While Terman was not primarily concerned with disproving environmental factors in intelligence, his view was clearly that intelligence was innate and largely hereditary. Still, it is interesting to note that Terman's presentation of the data provides a more ambiguous picture of racial stock and merit than many eugenicists of the time presented. For example, while the eugenicist-inspired Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 severely curtailed immigration of Jews from eastern and southern Europe, Terman's study found that a full ten percent of his gifted subjects were Jewish drawn from a population where only about five percent of residents were Jewish.⁸⁵ A map of the birthplace of his subjects' grandparents reveals a mix of European ethnicities most eugenicists would have abhorred.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Ibid., 634.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 565.

FIGURE 34.
BIRTHPLACES OF PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS OF
HIGH SCHOOL GIFTED GROUP

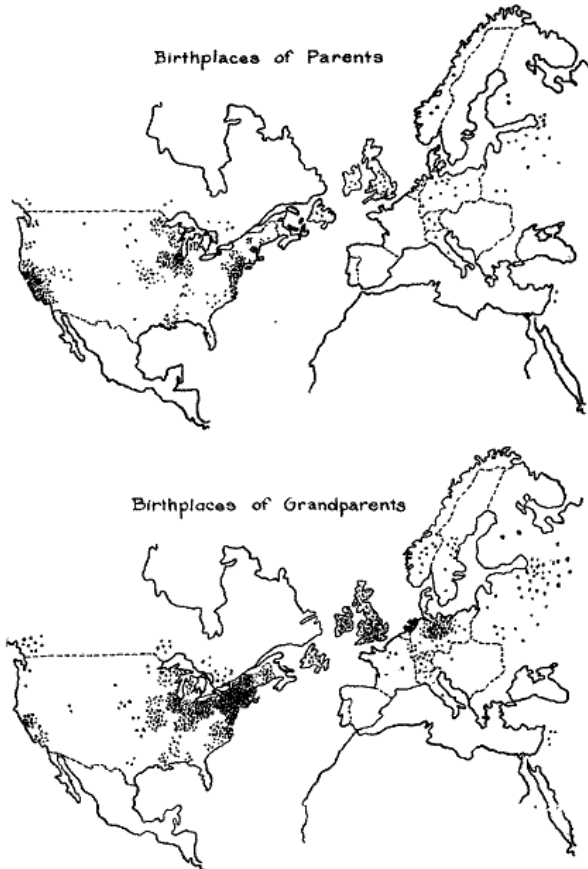


Figure 1 Birthplaces of Parents and Grandparents of Terman's Gifted Subjects

At the same time, the bulk of the study aimed to show how gifted children did not conform to traditional conceptions of precocious children as sickly, undersized, focused on singular interests, and socially isolated. Terman, by contrast, presented gifted children as normal, only more intelligent. Terman's data showed that the children in his study were physically healthy. "There is no shred of evidence," he wrote, "to support the

widespread opinion that typically the intellectually precocious child is weak, undersized, or nervously unstable.”⁸⁷ Terman further argued that the notion that intellectually superior children focused intensely on narrow interests also had no basis in fact. “The ‘one-sidedness’ of precocious children is mythical.” Terman declared, “The fact is that a considerable proportion of all children show appreciable specialization in their achievements.”⁸⁸ Terman endeavored to prove that the gifted child was a physically robust and otherwise normal child and that intellectual ability should not be associated with what might be seen as deviant characteristics.

Although Terman’s group consisted of gifted girls as well as boys, he explained the nature of giftedness in clearly gendered terms. Gifted subjects were not only healthy, strong, and interested in a range of subjects, they engaged in active social play with their peers. Terman, wrote, “The common opinion that intellectually superior children are characterized by a deficiency of play interests has been shown to be wholly unfounded. The mean play-information quotient of the gifted group is 136. The typical gifted child of nine years has a larger body of definite knowledge about plays and games than the average child of twelve years.”⁸⁹ In addition, to engaging in a wide range of play, Terman took particular care to note that the gifted boys in his sample engaged in more masculine play than average, “Another finding of considerable importance in this connection is that the play interests of the gifted boy are above rather than below the norm in degree of

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 636.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 637.

‘masculinity.’”⁹⁰ Terman’s assurance that gifted boys were appropriately masculine, even above the norm of masculine, was part of a larger argument that mental superiority should be embraced as a resource and not viewed as a sign of deviance or abnormality.

In follow on studies of his group Terman pointed to the academic and professional achievements his “Termites” attained – reinforcing the notion that the superior IQ measured in his initial study indeed represented superior innate mental ability. In 1930, Terman noted his group’s overall success in school – both in high school grades and acceptance to universities. At the same time, Terman felt the need to explain why the group’s achievements must be considered in context. In summarizing their academic record, Terman wrote:

What is here referred to is the fact that the school population with which it is necessary to make our comparisons was a much more highly selected population at the time of the follow-up study than in 1921-22. This has been alluded to many times in the exposition of the findings, but it cannot be too often emphasized. There are few who appreciate how much the composition of a class of high-school seniors has been affected by the retardation and elimination of their less-gifted fellows. This holds true, though to a less marked degree, of high-school freshmen, and of course to a far greater degree of students enrolled in superior universities. Moreover, it is constantly necessary to make allowance for the fact that the gifted group usually averages some two years younger than the school population with which it is compared.⁹¹

Terman remained confident of his group’s superior intellectual ability but clearly also felt the need to explain why their results were not more outstanding.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Barbara Stoddard Burks, Dortha Williams Jensen, and Lewis Madison Terman, *The promise of youth: Follow-up studies of a thousand gifted children*. Vol. 3. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1930), 475.

Similarly, in his 1947 follow up, Terman contextualized his group's achievements by noting that some subjects could not pursue higher education because the Great Depression demanded that they find jobs after high school. Terman wrote:

The educational records of the gifted subjects were unfavorably influenced in many cases by the fact that a majority completed high school during the severe economic depression following 1929. We have positive knowledge that this circumstance rendered college attendance impossible in several cases, particularly for subjects who had to take over the support of other members of the family as soon as high school had been completed.⁹²

While Terman felt the need to adjust expectations for his group, he also listed their accomplishments and achievements at length. He noted for example that 70 percent of men and 66.5 percent of women in his study graduated from college while the average in California was just eight percent. In addition, 47.6 percent of men and 39.8 percent of women in his group pursued graduate study.⁹³

Terman not only presented evidence that his group remained at the top of an academic hierarchy but that they remained at the top of an economic one as well. He noted that 45.2 percent of gifted men percent worked as professionals compared to 5.7 percent of men in California while another 25.7 percent worked in "semi-professional or higher business" compared to 8.1 percent of California men.⁹⁴ For the women, he noted that 48.46 percent were employed full-time wage-earning work and of these 61.2 percent

⁹² Lewis Madison Terman and Melita H. Oden, *The gifted child grows up: Twenty-five years' follow-up of a superior group*, Vol. 4, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 148.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 172.

were working as professionals.⁹⁵ In terms of money earned, the gifted came out ahead as well. As Terman wrote of urban residents who had been employed for twelve months, “The median annual income from wages and salaries for United States males in this category was \$1,389 for those of ages 25-34 as compared with \$2,373 for all gifted men (ages 20-39) with full-time employment. The corresponding medians for women are \$916 for the census group and \$1,660 for gifted subjects.”⁹⁶

In addition to tracking education attainment and income earned, Terman’s survey tracked his group’s professional accomplishments. According to Terman, by 1945 the group of 1,000 gifted individuals, then of an average age of thirty-five years old, had “published about 90 books or monographs and approximately 1,500 articles which appeared in scientific, scholarly, or literary magazines.”⁹⁷ Added to these were 100 patents earned although nearly half of those were granted to two individuals.⁹⁸ Terman could show that his group of gifted, on average, reached measurable levels of professional success that exceeded the average, but it is also clear that his group did not necessarily contain a clear identifiable “genius.”

Terman also listed what he clearly viewed as his gifted subjects’ most impressive individual accomplishments. One man, a physicist, was a director of an important atomic energy laboratory, and another, a historian, worked as director of a key project for the Office of Strategic Services.⁹⁹ Another subject, a professor of physiology during the

⁹⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 189.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 360.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 364.

Second World War, directed “what was perhaps the most important investigation that has ever been made of the physiological, biochemical, and psychological effects of prolonged semistarvation.”¹⁰⁰ Of female subjects Terman wrote, “Far fewer women than men in our group have made records of outstanding achievement. This is hardly surprising in view of the fact that only a small minority of them have gone out wholeheartedly for a career.”¹⁰¹ He went on to note that two women were nationally known writers, one a prominent stage actress, and two more successful artists.¹⁰²

Terman argued that these individual accomplishments combined with the levels of professional and academic achievement his group attained vindicated the IQ test as a measure of innate mental ability. In summarizing the 1947 report, Terman wrote, “The many comparisons we have made between these subjects and the general population confirm an opinion expressed by the senior author more than thirty years ago, namely, that the IQ level is one of the most important facts that can be learned about any child.”¹⁰³ Terman asserted that his hierarchy of giftedness contained real potential that would manifest in measurable achievement in adulthood and that his gifted study was evidence of this fact.

Terman’s study did not uncover any renowned scientists, intellectuals, or leaders of note. It also seems notable that in his follow ups, Terman himself dropped the term “genius” as a descriptor of his group. Also noteworthy is the fact that while no “Termite” ever won a Nobel Prize, two individuals who had been tested for the study but rejected,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 365.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 366.

¹⁰² Ibid., 367.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 358.

William Shockley and Luis Alvarez, would go on to win Nobel Prizes in Physics.¹⁰⁴

More significant than his subjects' relative lack of notable achievements were Terman's own actions regarding his group.

Multiple reviews of Terman's study reference the psychologist's assistance to members of his gifted group. Like a benefactor in a Horatio Alger story, Terman on numerous occasions intervened to offer a hand up to young people he deemed worthy of help. He did so in spite of the fact that any extra assistance to his gifted research subjects essentially invalidated the study of these individuals' achievements over time. It seems that he just could not help himself. According to journalist Joel Shurkin's 1992 book, *Terman's Kids: The Groundbreaking Study of How the Gifted Grew Up*, Terman wrote numerous letters of recommendation for his subjects applying for universities and later jobs. In 1923, he wrote to a caseworker in San Francisco asking for leniency for a fourteen-year-old runaway, Edward Dmytryk, a member of his gifted group.¹⁰⁵ When Japanese Americans were designated for internment camps during World War II, Terman wrote to immigration officials to attest to the loyalty of a family with four children that were included in his study.¹⁰⁶ Shurkin summarizes Terman's frequent interventions thusly:

Terman continued to meddle in their lives, skewing his own data. He would write a letter of recommendation for anyone in the group, if nothing else, stating that the person was in the Terman study of the gifted. He gave them free vocational

¹⁰⁴ William Shockley and Luis Alvarez. Mitchell Leslie, "The Vexing Legacy of Lewis Terman," Stanford Alumni Magazine, July/August 2001.

https://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=40678

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Joel N. Shurkin, *Terman's Kids: The Groundbreaking Study of How the Gifted Grew Up*, Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 1992, 206.

testing and sent them letters of explanation and advice with the results. He would intervene on their behalf to get them into graduate school or to get them a job. Sometimes they did not even ask; he intervened covertly, leaving the Termites wondering what role he played. Rodney Beard, for instance, thinks his mother may have asked Terman to help him get into Stanford's medical school, but he does not know for sure; Terman did write a letter. He probably helped pay for many of his kids' education by contributing to scholarships, always anonymously.¹⁰⁷

Terman himself was the beneficiary of several instances of aid at crucial moments in his life. Without the assistance of others Terman would not have been able to study psychology at the University of Indiana or later at Clark. Without the recommendation of his friend E.B. Huey, Terman would not have been offered the professorship at Stanford that made his career. At the same time Terman also clearly viewed himself as innately gifted as evidenced by his recounting his precocious childhood in Indiana. Terman then extended to his own gifted subjects the same kind of help he required even as he viewed their gifted status as evidence of their innate superiority.

Terman's routine of extending valuable assistance to members of his gifted group was also a clear connection to the Algeresque origins of the "gifted child." Instead of relying on face-to-face contact to identify which children possessed the "sterling qualities" that rendered them worthy of his help, Terman employed a sophisticated Taylorite tool, the IQ test, purposefully designed to efficiently rank individuals on a hierarchy of intelligence. As an individual who himself emerged from relatively mundane beginnings, the IQ test and the concept of giftedness also allowed for his own rise to prominence to be naturalized.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 139-40.

Although Terman believed that race and social class were factors in intelligence, the very “objective” and “scientific” character of the IQ test allowed space for those other than Anglo-Saxon upper middle class white males to be counted among the very intelligent. As we will learn in forthcoming chapters, various psychologists would take this aspect of giftedness further than Terman. While places for a wider range of individuals were made available, to exist the hierarchy still required individuals at the bottom. Thus Terman’s real scorn was reserved for “the dull and mentally defective” who were responsible for “an enormous amount of crime, pauperism, and industrial inefficiency.”¹⁰⁸ The costs represented by these individuals were repeatedly contrasted with the benefits that could be gained from developing the gifted implying a zero-sum formulation between the two ends of the spectrum.

¹⁰⁸ Lewis M. Terman, “The Measurement of Intelligence,” 7.

CHAPTER 2. “ARISTOCRACY OF EXCELLENCE”: LETA HOLLINGWORTH AND GENDER-BLIND GENIUS

On December 13, 1940, Columbia University Teacher’s College hosted a first-of-its-kind conference that brought together representatives of industry, labor, and organized religion, as well as educators and psychologists from across the country. Titled “The Education of Leaders in a Democracy,” the conference sought to determine the best methods for “discovering and grooming the talents of intellectually gifted children for democratic leadership.”¹ The conference’s keynote speaker, Columbia University President Nicholas Butler, laid out what was at stake during this time of global crisis:

The education of the gifted child is from a very fundamental point of view the chief problem of a democracy. The aristocracy of a democracy is not one of title, not one of heritage, not one of wealth, but it is one of excellence—excellence in whatever one may follow. If the democracy can offer opportunity, instruction, and discipline to these personalities, there may come those who are competent to rise to positions of importance and influence in the public service.

Further, Butler claimed, the issue of training this “aristocracy of excellence” was crucially important “coming as it does at a time when Democracy is on trial for its life as it never has been before.”²

The instrument relied upon to identify gifted children, the IQ test, had been used by schools and other institutions for over twenty years and no one at the conference seemed to doubt its effectiveness. No presenter questioned the notion that the tests in fact

¹ “Study Plan Sought for ‘Genius’ Child” *New York Times*, December 13, 1940.

² *Teachers College Record* 42 Number 5, 1941. 375-377
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 8909.

measured intelligence or that this intelligence quotient remained a fixed value over an individual's life. At the same time, doubts about the ability of high IQ "geniuses" (even contemporary newspaper accounts regularly placed the term in qualifying quotes) to develop into actual geniuses – or even high achievers – dominated the conference³. Indeed, the very nature of the conference's mission seems to undermine the notion of IQ as a fixed measure of mental ability. While the intelligence test represented mental ability as fixed and differentiated, the notion that these discovered "geniuses" must then be developed, trained, or groomed in order to actually reach their potential, and a particular potential at that, implied a malleable view of intellectual ability. That prominent citizens – in the wake of the Great Depression and on the eve of a world war – would look hopefully to the IQ test to locate future leaders indicates the remarkable appeal of this technology even as the apparent need to develop and train high IQ children pointed to the fragility of IQ-intelligence.

The scholarship of intelligence testing has typically addressed the ways in which these tests reinforced racial or ethnic hierarchies, but there were prominent examples of gifted advocates who articulated a more inclusive vision of giftedness. Indeed, the 1940 conference referenced above was held in memory of just such a figure, Dr. Leta Stetter Hollingworth who had died the previous year. As scholar Leslie Margolin relates, in Hollingworth's career as an academic psychologist she did much to establish the category of "gifted" as a distinct type worthy of special training. Hollingworth's dismissive

³ "Miseries of a Child Genius's Life Bared by 20 of Them, Now Adults," *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1940.

attitude toward low IQ “dullards” and her conviction that such persons were typically and inevitably found among the poor would seem to confirm Margolin’s assertion that the goal of gifted children advocates was to legitimize class hierarchies. At the same time, Hollingworth, who experienced directly gendered notions of intellectual ability, and who directed the bulk of her early research against what she called the “armchair dogmas” of supposed female mental inferiority, undoubtedly viewed IQ tests as instruments of fairness. In addition, Hollingworth’s later research and advocacy for gifted education presented mental ability as a quality that could potentially transcend class, ethnicity, and race as well as gender. Hollingworth repeatedly presented IQ-intelligence as more significant, more “real” and not constructed in the way that gender and race might be. Further, the public attention via newspaper coverage of Hollingworth’s Speyer School experiment from 1935 to 1938 indicates a link between the potential of gifted education to develop leaders during a global crisis for liberal democracies in the 1930s.⁴

From the Prairie to Progressive Era New Woman

Born Leta Stetter in rural Nebraska in 1886, Hollingworth, like Lewis Terman, emerged from a family of Midwestern farmers rather than intellectual elites. The 1943 biography of Leta Hollingworth penned by her husband, Harry, after her death extensively detailed her ancestry back to her great-grandparents much in the same way Terman did in his own autobiography, and Harry Hollingworth similarly reported that

⁴ Harry Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company, 1990) Chapter 20.

Leta's heredity showed little precedent for an intellectual career.⁵ Hollingworth wrote of his late wife that she possessed "stamina and animation" of her father and the "gentleness and appeal" of her mother, "But the caliber of her mind was peculiarly and uniquely hers, and there is nothing in her ancestry to have led one to expect it."⁶ Leta Hollingworth, at least as filtered through her husband, represented a "diamond in the rough" – an individual of innate ability emerging from humble beginnings.

In addition to retracing Leta's ancestry to show the lack of hereditary advantages, Harry Hollingworth took pains to show his late wife in childhood developed at a faster rate than average. Using a scrapbook by Leta's mother Margaret had kept, Harry created a chart comparing the ages at which Leta achieved such developmental milestones as "First "Smile", "Laughter", "Visually directed reaching", "Sitting up unaided", and "Begins to imitate" among others to the average age at which children meet these milestones. Noting that Leta met each milestone earlier than average, Harry concluded that she was innately superior just like the gifted children she would later study:

This is precisely the picture we have now learned to be that of the gifted individual. During her first year of development Leta Stetter was, so far as signs of intelligence are concerned, far "ahead of her time." She continued to show this characteristic throughout life, and her achievements, whatever she undertook, were always far beyond those that anyone had any good reason to expect from a human being selected at random.⁷

Combined with the lack of superior genetic inheritance as evidenced by her ancestry, Harry Hollingworth's biography paints a picture of Leta as a rare individual of exceptional ability emerging from a humble background. Gifted before the term was

⁵ Ibid., 18-30.

⁶ Ibid., 30.

⁷ Ibid., 39-40.

invented, Leta's gifts as a child were unappreciated by those around her, but could be interpreted later by expert psychologists as evidence of her true status.

But for her gender, Leta Stetter could have been an Algeresque hero. When she was four her mother, with whom she was close, died in childbirth. She and her sisters then went to live on her grandparents' farm, a log cabin situated on the White River.⁸ When her father remarried eight years later, Leta went to live with him and his new wife in Valentine, Nebraska, but the relationship was apparently strained. "Memories of these years are full of misery," Harry wrote, "and the scars there received by a sensitive child persisted no one knows how long into her later life."⁹ Fortunately school formed a vital outlet for young Leta who worked diligently at school and graduated high school in 1902, two days shy of her sixteenth birthday.¹⁰

Leta Hollingworth's humble background makes her unusual among prominent Progressive Era women – many of whom came from upper middle class to wealthy backgrounds benefitting from elite educations. The subject of Robyn Muncy's book *Relentless Reformer*, Josephine Roche, a Progressive-Era advocate for women's health who later served as assistant Secretary of the Treasury under Franklin Roosevelt, is a instructive comparison. Like Leta Hollingworth, Roche was born in Nebraska in 1886.¹¹ Unlike Hollingworth whose father was only intermittently employed – Harry Hollingworth describes him as "a rancher, a peddler, a trader, a teamster, a cowboy, an

⁸ Ibid., 28.

⁹ Ibid., 46.

¹⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹¹ Robyn Muncy, *Relentless Reformer: Josephine Roche and Progressivism in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015) 14.

absentee farmer, a speculator, and owned bars and entertainment halls” – Roche’s father, John, was a prominent lawyer and business owner who served as a town trustee and in the Nebraska state legislature.¹² While Leta Hollingworth was educated in a rural one-room schoolhouse and at the University of Nebraska, Roche attended a prestigious private school in Omaha and then Vassar College.¹³ Being born into wealth provided Roche and women like her with an identity secured by social class and its privileges and inculcated in reformers the necessity of service toward the less fortunate. It seems quite likely that the experience of rising from humble beginnings to a prominent academic career inclined Hollingworth to locate those individuals among the less fortunate who were innately capable of a similar rise. Also, Hollingworth’s lack of social advantages would seem to predispose her to see her own worth in terms of intrinsic ability rather than drawing on the status of her family.

Hollingworth’s intellectual ambition repeatedly conflicted with prevailing understanding about the place of women – experiences that almost certainly drew Hollingworth to the notion of unappreciated, undiscovered, and even neglected young geniuses. Hollingworth excelled at the University of Nebraska taking a keen interest in literature and graduated with honors in 1906. After college she found work as a teacher at two different schools in Nebraska, but in 1908 she moved to New York city with her new husband, Harry Hollingworth, a graduate student in psychology at Columbia University. Once in New York, Leta Hollingworth sought work as a teacher but was prevented from obtaining a position due to a New York public school policy that forbade

¹² Hollingworth, *Leta Setter Hollingworth*, 26; Muncy, *Relentless Reformer*, 13-4.

¹³ Muncy, 17.

hiring married women as teachers. Like many university-educated women in the Progressive Era, Hollingworth found her professional opportunities limited by her gender rather than her ability or ambition. According to Harry Hollingworth, Leta was not fulfilled by domestic life:

During the earlier years of married life Leta Stetter Hollingworth's time and energy were chiefly consumed by housework, cooking, dressmaking, mending, washing, ironing, making her own hats and suits and endless other domestic duties in the frugal apartment home. Almost always she effectually stifled her own eager longing for intellectual activity like that of her husband.¹⁴

Leta Hollingworth was determined, however, to build a career rather than start a family, and her husband supported her professional ambitions. Like Lewis Terman, Hollingworth received timely Algeresque assistance in pursuing her academic career. In 1911, Harry Hollingworth secured a large research project for Coca-Cola. The company at the time was hiring academics to conduct studies to show that the beverage had no adverse health effects for drinkers. The Hollingworths used this money to pay for Leta's graduate studies in psychology at Columbia University and Harry made Leta the lead researcher on the project.¹⁵

At Columbia, Leta Hollingworth began a career of academic research very much in line with Progressive Era "New Woman" scholars. As historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg has argued the New Woman "challenged existing gender relations and the

¹⁴ Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth*, 73.

¹⁵ Holly Hertberg-Davis, "Leta Stetter Hollingworth: A Life in Schools (1886-1939)," in *A Century of Contributions to Gifted Education: Illuminating Lives*, ed. Ann Robinson and Jennifer Jolly (New York: Routledge, 2014) See also Rheta Childe Dorr, "Is Woman Biologically Barred from Success?" *New York Times*. September 19, 1915.

distribution of power” presenting a powerful counter example to the assumed “naturalness” of gender.¹⁶ Hollingworth followed in the footsteps of female psychologists like Mary Whiton Calkins, Cordelia Nevers, and Helen Thompson-Woolley who first countered prevailing notions concerning mental differences in gender.¹⁷ Calkin and Nevers produced a study in 1895 that challenged what was termed variability theory – the theory that men were found more often than women at the extremes, both high and low, of mental ability.¹⁸ Heavily influenced by Darwinian evolutionary theory as it was understood at the time, variability theory accounted for the supposed fact that men were more numerous among geniuses and “mental defectives.” Thompson-Woolley similarly compared the results of mental tests of twenty-five men and twenty-five women reporting not just the group averages, but the distribution of scores demonstrating that on only a relative few of the tests did the men display any significant advantage.¹⁹ According to scholars Alexandra Rutherford and Leeat Granek, these early female psychologist emphasized the role of environment in accounting for differences between the sexes and

¹⁶ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The New Woman as Androgyne: Social Disorder and Gender Crisis, 1870-1936," in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 245.

¹⁷ Alexandra Rutherford and Leeat Granek, "Emergence and development of the psychology of women," In *Handbook of gender research in psychology* (New York: Springer New York, 2010) 22; Cordelia C. Nevers, and Mary Whiton Calkins. "Wellesley College Psychological Studies: Dr. Jastrow on community of ideas of men and women," *Psychological Review* 2, no. 4, 1895, 363.

¹⁸ Stephanie A. Shields, "The variability hypothesis: The history of a biological model of sex differences in intelligence," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 7, no. 4, 1982, 769-797.

¹⁹ Helen Bradford Thompson Woolley, *The mental traits of sex: an experimental investigation of the normal mind in men and women* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1905).

provided an influence on Hollingworth as she began to initiate her own psychological research.²⁰

Like Thompson-Woolley, Hollingworth interpreted data derived from mental tests with an appreciation of the role of environment to provide her own argument against variability theory. Hollingworth obtained a position as a substitute psychologist for the city of New York working for the city's Clearing House for Mental Defectives – also her first experience with intelligence testing. Hollingworth administered a version of the Binet test to determine whether city charity patients were “feeble-minded.” Proponents of variability theory, which included Hollingworth's own academic advisor, pointed to the fact that men outnumbered women in institutions for the feeble-minded. Leta Hollingworth, in her position as a psychologist for the city of New York, had access to data, as well as the inclination, to question variability theory. Hollingworth pointed out that while men outnumbered women among the cases of feeble-minded, among older age groups, the number of women identified was higher than men. Hollingworth argued that because of “social pressures” girls were less likely to be institutionalized at a young age as lower intelligence girls can perform domestic duties well enough. “A girl must be relatively more stupid than a boy to be presented for examination and she must be still more stupid, comparatively, to be actually segregated as unfit for social and economic participation.”²¹ The difference in cases of feeble-minded men and women, in other words, was due to gendered environment rather than the biology of sex.

²⁰ Rutherford and Granek. "Emergence and development of the psychology of women," 23.

²¹ Ludy T Benjamin, Jr., "The Pioneering Work of Leta Hollingworth in the Psychology of Women," *Nebraska History* 56 (1975): 497-98.

Indeed, throughout her graduate studies, Hollingworth continued to focus her research on what she called “armchair dogmas” of women’s supposed mental inferiority. Another Hollingworth target was the idea of “functional periodicity,” essentially the notion that women were mentally incapacitated during menstruation.²² Hollingworth had already collected massive amounts of data on women performing various mental tests for the Coca-Cola study. The data also included information about each women’s menstrual cycle to avoid any confounding effects. Using this data, Hollingworth was able to show that women’s menstrual cycles had no observable effect on their performance on mental tests.²³

Hollingworth’s career and professional ambitions were shaped by the arbitrary gendered limits, and with her research, Hollingworth aimed to disprove the “scientific” assumptions that justified those limitations. In her quest, psychological tests became the instrument to uncover truths and expose dogmas. As Hollingworth put it, “Thus, in time, may be written a psychology of women based on truth, not on opinion; on precise, not anecdotal evidence; on accurate data rather than on the remnants of magic.”²⁴ While Hollingworth herself would transition away from this psychology of women in the 1920s, the faith in data, in the “realness” of psychological testing data, particularly that of intelligence tests, contrasted with the arbitrary categorization of not just gender, but race and ethnicity as well, would inform her work in creating and promoting the interests of

²² Hertberg-Davis.

²³ Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth*, 87.

²⁴ Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth*, 87-88.

high IQ, gifted children. The “objective” character of this testing provided a space where Hollingworth could assert a more inclusive vision of intellectual superiority.

Upon earning her PhD and joining the Teacher’s College faculty in 1916, Hollingworth continued to work more sporadically on topics related to feminist psychology, but also took up a new interest, high IQ children. Her interest in these children began with an 8-year-old boy whom she later designated “Child E” in her research. Although Hollingworth had administered intelligence tests to lower performing children, she sought out a higher performing child to demonstrate to one of her classes the differences between high and low IQ children.²⁵ The encounter made a deep impression on Hollingworth. She wrote later that what set Child E apart was the “clear and flawless working of his mind a contrasting background of thousands of dull and foolish minds.”²⁶ From that time until her death in 1939, Hollingworth’s career focused on learning more about gifted children and how best to nurture and develop their talents. As with Hollingworth’s own life, the world at large may not have understood or recognized these gifted young people, but there existed a technology to identify them so they might be afforded the best possible environment to develop their natural talents.

Hollingworth’s first sizable project with gifted children involved the creation of a Special Opportunity Class at New York Public School 165 in 1922. The class of fifty students was selected on the basis of intelligence testing conducted at schools across New

²⁵ Leta Hollingworth, “Child E.” In *Children Above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and Development, Measurement and Adjustment Series*. (Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: US: World Book Company, 1942), 134–158..

²⁶ Qtd. in Hertberg-Davis. It is striking here too that in describing her reaction to a high IQ child she made a reference to those with lower IQs essentially imagining the entire hierarchy of intelligence from this encounter.

York. Although the special classes only lasted for three years, Hollingworth's interest in her research subjects extended beyond their time in the classes, she planned to follow the children's progress after leaving the experimental classes. In addition, Hollingworth evidently felt a personal connection with the gifted children mirroring the way Lewis Terman became personally invested with his gifted subjects. Harry Hollingworth wrote of Leta, "So engrossed could she become in the spectacle of a gifted intelligence at work that in her later years the search for such minds and the endeavor to further their appreciation and conservation engaged the greater part of her zeal, both professionally and in her friendly relations."²⁷ Leta Hollingworth's connection to gifted children manifested in a keen interest in their proper development. As a result of her research on students at P.S. 165, Hollingworth published thirty-two articles and a textbook entitled *Gifted Children*, believed to be the first such textbook on the subject.²⁸ While Hollingworth's research on gifted children was prolific in the 1920s, the larger public did not seem to take notice. The next iteration of special classes for gifted students at the Speyer School from 1935 to 1938 received far more press attention, an increased interest in the category of gifted children that seems closely linked to anxieties over the future of democracy in the 1930s.

Planned as a three-year experiment, Speyer School opened its doors on February 3, 1936 only blocks from Columbia University on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue and 126th Street. Fifty students attended the special classes for gifted at the school; and the students had recorded intelligence quotients between 120 and 194. The Speyer School

²⁷ Harry Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth*, 120.

²⁸ Hertberg-Davis.

also featured special classes for those below average in intelligence, in fact seven of the nine classes were for students with below-average IQs, but these pupils did not receive nearly the public attention as the gifted classes, nor were these children the primary interest of Dr. Hollingworth. The school represented a partnership between the Teacher's College and the New York public school system and would not only provide separate instruction for gifted students but also serve as an "experimental laboratory" for further research on gifted children in a separate setting. As director of the school, Hollingworth, then, combined the roles of researcher, practitioner, and advocate, which not only granted the psychologist a prominent platform but also left a lasting legacy for gifted education.²⁹ Hollingworth and supporters within the New York Public School administration, like assistant superintendent Benjamin Greenberg, were widely quoted in New York papers and across the country on the need to recognize and develop the gifted child.³⁰

While Leslie Margolin's analysis of early gifted education has emphasized how the gifted category in the 1920s and 1930s was constructed as white, upper-middle class, and masculine, the development of the Speyer School's gifted classes demonstrate that Hollingworth's apparent conviction that IQ-intelligence could transcend categories of race, ethnicity, class, and gender. The gifted classes at Speyer were evenly divided between boys and girls and Hollingworth even made a concerted effort to ensure that the

²⁹ "Half Day Wasted by Bright Pupils," *New York Times*, March 5, 1937. For impact of Hollingworth and the Speyer School on gifted education, see Hertberg-Davis, "Leta Stetter Hollingworth: A Life in Schools (1886-1939)."

³⁰ According to Harry Hollingworth's biography of Leta, the children of Speyer kept a "very incomplete" scrapbook of press clippings that mentioned the school. The resulting archive contained thirty separate articles from New York papers plus others from San Francisco and Philadelphia (to which we can add Boston and Chicago). Hollingworth also mentions additional coverage of Speyer in *The Afro-American*, *This Week*, *Literary Digest*, *Reader's Digest*, *Parents Magazine*, *Time*, and *Home and Food*. Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth*, 130.

classes contained a representative sample of the ethnic and racial diversity of New York city as a whole. Hollingworth travelled to neighborhood elementary schools to interview teachers about possible high-achieving students from underrepresented groups to whom she might administer IQ tests to determine eligibility for Speyer. In the end her efforts resulted in Speyer classes that included children from twenty-three separate groups including black students and students of Asian descent.³¹ While Margolin's larger point on how the category of gifted reflected the cultural values of a white, middle class Protestant elite remains, the appeal of the IQ test seems closely tied to its perceived "blindness" to race, gender, ethnicity, and social class. For Hollingworth and those who supported the Speyer School, then, the appeal of the gifted category seemed to be linked to the belief that it was more "true" than other social categories.

The press accounts of the Speyer School experiment reveals some common themes that provide insight into how the public understood this new category of the gifted child. As Margolin relates, Hollingworth and others asserted giftedness, based on IQ scores, as a real and distinct type. To emphasize the importance of gifted children, Hollingworth and others often compared high IQ children to a natural resource or physical asset. Further, in these accounts gifted children represented a resource that could produce future leaders, at least potentially, for these same depictions of giftedness equated not providing the gifted with special enrichment opportunities with neglect. The

³¹ Rose A. Rudnitski, "Leta Stetter Hollingworth and the Speyer School, 1935-1940: Historical Roots of the Contradictions in Progressive Education for Gifted Children," *Education and Culture*. Fall 1996. 2. The full list Speyer students ethnic backgrounds is: "American Negro, Austrian, British West Indian, Czecho-Slovakian [sic], Chinese, Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Haitian, Hungarian, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Mexican, Polish, Rumanian, Russian, Scotch, Spanish, and Swedish."

superior mental ability of the gifted child, then, represented the “reality” of potential or hope quantified — a contradiction that went largely unchallenged just as Hollingworth herself embraced the construct of IQ-intelligence even as she criticized constructs of gender. Finally, the appeal of the gifted-child-as-future-leader seems most intense in the 1930s and seems connected to anxieties over the future of liberal democracy.

Gifted advocates repeatedly described the intelligence of America’s high IQ gifted children as a crucial natural resource, implying that this intelligence actually existed in finite quantities. Dr. H.W. Zorbaugh of the New York Clinic for Social Adjustment commented that, “We have talked a great deal about conservation of natural resources, such as land and oil, but the most precious natural resources we have are gifted children.”³² Another report from Los Angeles termed the gifted “society’s greatest potential asset.”³³ The clear implication being that the intelligence of gifted children represented a resource to be developed efficiently along Taylorite lines.

Hollingworth warned that the nation was neglecting this resource— a neglect that was frequently contrasted with the costs born on behalf of those individuals with low intelligence. The *New York Times* quoted Hollingworth, “The literature of experiment with unfortunate deviates, the stupid, the delinquent, the dependent, has long been voluminous, but the literature dealing with fortunate deviates was until recently, chiefly legendary.” Hollingworth blamed this imbalance on the “natural tendency of human beings to notice whatever is giving them pain or annoyance.” She then asserted that “under this influence, expensive and even palatial institutions were established for the

³² “30 Gifted Children Make Merry at Party,” *New York Times*, May 12, 1935.

³³ “Gifted Students Go to Special Classes,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 17, 1943.

preservation and care of the feeble-minded, the delinquent, the crippled, the insane, and others who varied biologically in the direction of social incompetence.” Hollingworth concluded: ”Philanthropy, originally meaning love of man degenerated to mean love of stupid and vicious man.”³⁴ As with Lewis Terman, the greatest object of Hollingworth’s scorn were the “feeble-minded” whose care she depicted as an extravagance deliberately chosen to highlight the lack of funds devoted to developing the gifted. While Hollingworth was clearly eager to include women among the highly valued gifted and at least willing to include individuals of all races and social classes, she also framed these inclusions against who must necessarily have been excluded.

Gifted advocates in the 1930s justified public investment in high IQ children in particular by pointing to the need to produce future leaders. As Hollingworth told an academic conference in 1937, developing gifted children would mean “a step toward providing the country with needed leaders.”³⁵ A Hollingworth supporter, New York Assistant Superintendent Benjamin Greenberg told the National Education Association the same year that gifted children represented the “standard hope of men.”³⁶ From the ranks of the gifted then, the leaders would come, but as the conference described at the beginning of this essay made clear, this was leadership within a democratic context. By developing the gifted as leaders, the excellent and deserving would be promoted ahead of the common and backward, who in a democracy would nevertheless still have to choose this “aristocracy of excellence” to lead them. It seems that the nature of gifted IQ allowed

³⁴ Gladys Huntington Bevans, “Seek Out and Educate the Gifted Child,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 9, 1941.

³⁵ “Fund Urged to Aid Brightest Pupils,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1938.

³⁶ “Deplores Neglect of Gifted Pupils,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1938.

both a pessimism and optimism about the democracy, the hope that the superior few would lead well, if only they could be discovered and groomed properly.

The Speyer School experiment and the public attention it received demonstrates how giftedness could reconcile contradictions in American culture between hierarchy and democracy. Moreover, the level of press attention Speyer received and the repeated references to the gifted as future leaders, especially compared to the previous gifted classes at P.S. 165 directed by Hollingworth, seems related to fears about the future of liberal democracies in the 1930s. As historian Ira Katznelson argues, the 1930s saw the collapse of capitalism with the Great Depression and the inability of democratic governments to effectively respond especially in comparison with the certainty and assuredness of fascist governments in Germany and Italy. Katznelson writes that to understand the politics of the 1930s it is necessary to consider the perceived weaknesses of liberal democracy, “that liberal democracies were too pusillanimous to challenge the treacherous dictatorships, too effete to mobilize their citizens, and too enthralled with free markets to manage a modern economy successfully.”³⁷ The framing of gifted children as a natural resource of future leaders seems to have been especially appealing in this context. Hollingworth herself had promoted high IQ children as future leaders since the 1920s. In writing about gifted students then, she asserted, “intellectually gifted children are among the most valuable assets of a civilized nation. To waste them is to waste the

³⁷ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013) 7.

fundamentals of power.”³⁸ The context of the 1930s it seems led to a far more intense interest in the training of future leaders.

Hollingworth and others further made it clear that this natural resource of gifted children could only be reliably discovered via the systematic tool of intelligence testing. Advocates for the gifted frequently made the point that neither parents nor teachers were likely to recognize the truly gifted. A *Chicago Daily Tribune* writer quoted Hollingworth’s observation that often mothers were the last to admit that their child might be gifted.³⁹ Nor could teachers be trusted to recognize the gifted. These future scientists and philosophers were often labeled as “mischievous, troublesome, or just plain nuisances” by their teachers according to Hollingworth’s associate, Benjamin Greenberg.⁴⁰ Gifted children, it seemed, were typically much more intelligent than the adults in their lives. “Not infrequently,” intoned a 1936 article, “the child is far smarter than the parent, a situation that breeds trouble.”⁴¹ Similarly, Hollingworth lamented that gifted children “must suffer the authority of unworthy adults.”⁴² Again for Hollingworth, Taylorite IQ tests would efficiently identify the resource of mental ability, the reality that anecdotal “rule of thumb” observation often hid.

Hollingworth’s efforts at establishing the existence of the gifted child as distinct type even extended to documenting their physical appearance. Hollingworth was

³⁸ Hollingworth, *Leta Stetter Hollingworth*, 119.

³⁹ Gladys Huntington Bevans, “Mothers Slow to Recognize Gifted Child.” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 29, 1940.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Fine, “Educators Favor Gifted Pupil Test,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1937.

⁴¹ Myrtle Meyer Eldred, “Gifted Child in Difficulty: If He Cannot Keep Mind Always Occupied.” *Los Angeles Times*, January 20, 1936.

⁴² George Crane, “Find What He’s Fitted For,” *Daily Boston Globe*, April 1, 1938.

particularly interested in dispelling what she saw as the prevailing image of intelligent children as sickly, small, and weak. The Speyer School experiment gave the opportunity to explore and promote this research. Hollingworth took extensive physical measurements of her gifted subjects, measuring height, weight, and even the strength of their hands' grip. She found on average that they exceeded the measurements of typical children of that age.⁴³ Hollingworth even directed a pictorial study of Speyer students to demonstrate that gifted children were on average better looking than the typical child. A newspaper article on the study proclaimed: "The old adage, 'beautiful but dumb,' is a superstitious saying without a grain of truth. Girls – and for that matter, boys – who earn Phi Beta Kappa keys are not serious-minded and homely. On the contrary, they are above average in physical charm and rate high on personality tests."⁴⁴ Attempting to show that the high IQ did not conform to preconceptions, Hollingworth at the same time asserted that intelligence tests rather than appearance or impression best identified gifted children. Even as Hollingworth presented giftedness and IQ-intelligence as objective reality, the existence of the Speyer School and her insistence that there should be more schools like it, pointed to the ephemerality of this intelligence.

Along with asserting the existence of high IQ, gifted children as a separate and distinct type, Hollingworth also argued that they required special handling lest they fail to develop into the leaders the country needed. Forcing gifted children to attend the same schools and classes as normal children, Hollingworth argued, constituted neglect as it

⁴³ Leta Hollingworth, *Children Above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and Development*, (Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book Company, 1942) 95-103.

⁴⁴ "Clever Children Also Good Looking," *New York Times*, October 31, 1937.

lead to maladjustment of the gifted and prevented them from reaching their potential. A 1938 article in a Boston paper based on Hollingworth's research warned that having a high IQ "menaced a child with loneliness, an inferiority complex, and a cynical attitude toward life" as the gifted child was an outcast among children his own age. Hollingworth further asserted that "overcoming the foolishness of other children was one of the most painful adjustments to a mentally inferior world."⁴⁵ The problem with high IQ children according to Hollingworth was that they were forever out of step with their typical peers. As the gifted mentally tower over children their own age, they become the target of jeers because of their superior performance in school. At the same time if they are advanced to higher graders with older children, they are spurned for being younger and smaller, even though they are mentally equal. The effect of this combination, asserted Hollingworth, is disaster. The gifted children "mishandled in youth become contentious, aggressive and stubborn" and difficult and disagreeable in all human relationships involving subordination."⁴⁶ In Hollingworth's view, the proper care of gifted children came only in separate classes like those at Speyer. Given that Hollingworth herself was the director of the Speyer program, her advocacy of special classes there could be read as another connection to the nineteenth-century style, sentimental model of development – similar to Alger's stories in form, but for a woman playing the part of benefactor.

According to Hollingworth's research, gifted children became maladjusted in a typical school environment because they progressed through their work so much more

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "Children With an I. Q. Above 150 May Be Too Smart for Own Good." *New York Times*. November 1, 1938.

quickly than normal students. Hollingworth repeatedly emphasized that her students could complete normal day's worth of schoolwork in half the time. The speed with which the high IQ child worked led to bad habits, laziness, and the disdain of other children; sometimes the gifted child became a nuisance to the teacher and hated school entirely. "The superior children," commented Hollingworth, "fare as many as four or five grades below where they would be able to function normally. This makes for lazy, idle children, oftentimes making for a distaste in schooling."⁴⁷ Indeed, in light of this same research, some of Hollingworth's associates went so far as to say that the normal school curriculum "retarded" or "handicapped the gifted child."⁴⁸ Implicit in this portrayal of the school curriculum was the idea that the material learned in school was discrete and mechanistic. That the high IQ child progressed through this rote material quickly lay at the root of his/her difficulties in a typical classroom. Ironically, the original purpose of intelligence testing was to determine how a child might perform in the typical classroom environment.⁴⁹ It might be said that Hollingsworth's gifted children were so able in this education system that it actually disabled them. In other words it would seem that high IQ children, according to Hollingworth, were victims of the same industrial system of education that had declared them gifted in the first place.

⁴⁷ "Half Day Wasted by Bright Pupils," *New York Times*. March 5, 1937.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Fine, "Educators Favor Gifted Pupil Test," *New York Times*, March 7, 1937. See also: Fine, "School System Held to Be Lax In Aiding Gifted," *New York Times*, December 8, 1940.

⁴⁹ "The games people are required to play on aptitude tests are similar to the games teachers require in the classroom. In fact, many of Binet's original tests were taken from exercises that teachers used in French schools. So it is scarcely surprising that aptitude test scores are correlated highly with grades in school." David C. McClelland, "Testing for Competence Rather than 'Intelligence,'" in *The IQ Controversy: Critical Readings*, ed. N.J. Block and Gerald Dworkin (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), 46.

The 1940 conference held in honor of Hollingworth reinforced these themes through testimony from previously identified gifted children who had reached adulthood. These individuals spoke to the difficulties of being gifted in a normal school environment – reports bleak enough that one newspaper headline related, “Miseries of a Child Genius’s Life Bared by 20 of Them, Now Adults.” Preeminent among these miseries was a self-reported difficulty with social adjustment that seemed to demonstrate that the sanctuary special classes offered was only temporary relief for some high IQ young people. One man complained of loneliness while attending the University of Arizona because he wanted to study while other students socialized, while another felt out of place at a southern school after leaving Speyer. One student blamed the experience at the gifted school for making his peers there “snobbish and intolerant.”⁵⁰ While Hollingworth’s colleague, Irving Lorge, who continued her research after she died, assured the crowd that, on average the group was still superior, the overall achievements of the group were still seen as underwhelming by some press accounts.⁵¹ Still the focus of the newspaper reports remained on the failure of the school system to develop these gifted young people, rather than ascribing failure to the individuals themselves. These young people were “intellectually well-off” but “handicapped” by their preparation.

The Speyer School’s method for developing gifted students represented another implicit critique of industrial education. While half of each day at Speyer was dedicated to traditional schoolwork, or “the three R’s” the rest of day would be devoted to student-

⁵⁰ Miseries of a Child Genius’s Life Bared by 20 of Them, Now Adults,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1940.

⁵¹ Ibid., For example, one article quotes one of the adult speakers as saying he was no genius just a “high-grade mediocrity.”

directed enrichment projects – ungraded exploration of such topics as textiles, transportation, and the science of nutrition that included field trips in which the city of New York was used as a “laboratory.” As administrator Benjamin Greenberg explained:

The keynote of the whole program is living, not learning. The world has suddenly become full of light, and these children who only a year before were groping have come alive to worthwhile things. The 3 o’clock bell, the signal to depart is no longer greeted with enthusiasm.⁵²

So while the gifted students at Speyer would have to dedicate half their time to the same classroom work as their more typical peers, it was these enrichment activities that would preserve their intelligence. As education scholar Rose Rudnitski writes, these child-centered enrichment activities had much in common with the pedagogy of John Dewey, the philosopher of knowledge who opposed both intelligence testing in schools and the separation of children by ability.⁵³ Taylorism shaped giftedness, while at the same time, giftedness was a reaction against Taylorism. Gifted advocates like Hollingworth attempted to develop the gifted as a collective resource while attending to their individuality.

Leta Hollingworth would not live to see to the end of the Speyer School experiment. She died in 1939 having written eight books and seventy articles or chapters, despite never receiving a grant for her research.⁵⁴ The Speyer School model spread, however, and by 1941 forty schools across New York City featured separate classes for

⁵² Benjamin Fine, “Educators Favor Gifted Pupil Test,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1937.

⁵³ Rose A. Rudnitski, “Leta Stetter Hollingworth and the Speyer School, 1935-1940: Historical Roots of the Contradictions in Progressive Education for Gifted Children,” *Education and Culture*, Fall 1996, 2-3.

⁵⁴ Hertberg-Davis.

gifted students. In addition, New York administrator Benjamin Greenberg could boast of visitors from across the country who had come to the city to learn more about Hollingworth's approach to educating the gifted. She remains along with Lewis Terman frequently cited figure among the pioneers of gifted education in the United States.⁵⁵

Leta Hollingworth rose to academic prominence from a childhood in rural Nebraska along the way aided by Algeresque luck and assistance that supplemented her own abilities and determination. Horatio Alger, however, did not write books featuring feminine protagonists. The seemingly objective character of mental testing provided a vision of identifying mental excellence without the gendered constraints that Hollingworth experienced. Hollingworth embraced the Taylorite IQ test and the idea of giftedness and established schools where she could personally mentor these innately talented students, essentially providing the support that she had often been denied. At the same time this inclusive seeming concept was predicated on a hierarchy established by the "stupid and vicious" feeble-minded depicted as an expensive burden.

Hollingworth's Speyer school combined the harsh scientific logic of gifted selection with a sentimentalized vision of childhood that looked to free these gifted children from the constraints imposed by industrial education. In response to the cold logic of an objective mental hierarchy, Hollingworth developed a training program for her students that nurtured individuality. Like Terman reaching out to assist his "Termites" with advice, connections, and money, Hollingworth sought to personally shield her Speyer students from the implications of the rigid Taylorite system that had

⁵⁵ Ibid.

placed them in her charge in the first place. In other words, even as these early gifted advocates sought to impose a new ranked order of ability based on a scientific instrument they also almost immediately looked to escape the potential consequences of the system.

In addition, as a hierarchy that could be reconciled with inclusive democratic and egalitarian notions, the idea of giftedness addressed a cultural desire in the 1930s for leadership at a time when democracy was seen as imperiled. The next chapter will also explore the idea of giftedness in the 1930s in light of increasing criticism from psychologists of the idea that intelligence represented an innate quality. As we will see, the skepticism of IQ did not lead to a corresponding skepticism in the idea of giftedness – an indication of the strong cultural appeal of giftedness.

CHAPTER 3. “STATISTICAL ATROCITIES”: THE NATURE-NURTURE DEBATE AND THE TRANSITION AWAY FROM IQ

In October of 1940, the magazine for educators, *Phi Delta Kappan*, featured an article outlining the major issues surrounding the study of gifted children. The author, William Connor, the superintendent of schools in Allentown, Pennsylvania, asserted that the point of education should be to make every child “happy and useful as a contributor to and defender of the democratic way of life in these United States.”¹ What made this mission especially challenging, Connor maintained, were the great differences between students, the extent and significance of which had only been recently known.² On the one hand schools were charged with the instruction of “laggards” on one end of the ability spectrum and the “gifted” on the other. In the case of the gifted, Connor explained, what compounded the difficulty was a lack of consensus over who exactly the gifted were. There existed two definitions of giftedness, one group who characterized the gifted child as one who did “nearly everything” better than other children and another group who contend that the score on an IQ test identified the gifted child whether or not that child did anything better than children of the same age.³ In addition, Connor related that recent studies by a University of Iowa group found that IQ itself was not as constant as previously assumed and that children with low IQ “can and frequently do do superior work when placed in a favorable home and school environment, and eventually show a

¹ William L. Connor, "The Education of Gifted and Talented Children," *The Phi Delta Kappan* 23, no. 2 (1940), 72.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 73.

corresponding improvement in the I.Q. itself.”⁴ In other words, not only was there a lack of agreement over what giftedness was, but also uncertainty over the validity of the IQ test – the diagnostic tool which had brought attention to the gifted in the first place.

Connor outlined two distinct understandings of “giftedness.” In one, “giftedness” is imagined as innate, and independent of context. A gifted student might seem completely normal and invisible in daily life: only the “objective” technology of IQ testing could reveal their hidden nature. In the second view, “giftedness” was revealed through readily discernable qualities in a child’s daily life: giftedness was self-revealing. We can see here a profound disagreement over both the legitimacy of the IQ test and the meaning of “giftedness,” but what is striking is the assumption that the gifted, however that category might be defined certainly existed. The two views were united by a shared faith in an essential hierarchy of ability.

Despite the divergence of opinion over who the gifted were and how they could be identified, the superintendent maintained there still existed a great deal of consensus over the importance of identifying and developing gifted children:

All students of the subject seem to agree that gifted and talented children are present in most unselected groups, that they suffer from certain special problems related to their deviation from normal, that most of them can be recognized, and that recognition and special management adapted to their needs may and frequently does help them to solve their problems and put them on the road to normal development as happy and useful citizens.⁵

The lack of clarity over the nature of giftedness then did nothing to diminish the need to locate and develop the gifted for the good of the nation – for Connor or, as we will see, in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 74.

general. The gifted child was clearly part of a nationalist project. Developing the gifted child, whatever it meant to be gifted, was done for the national good.

Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth especially advocated for the gifted child as a valuable resource whose potential would go to waste if not developed, and they correspondingly promoted use of the IQ test as the vital technology to identify the superior potential of these children. Even as they did so, the validity of the IQ came under increasing scrutiny in the 1930s. Beginning in 1928, a group of researchers at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station published several studies that indicated that children's IQ scores could rise or fall based on their environment and training. These studies garnered widespread attention in academic circles and among the popular press.⁶ They were also vociferously challenged by Terman and his allies.

At the same time an alternative understanding of giftedness was emerging from psychologists like Northwestern's Paul Witty, who studied and advocated for gifted children while at the same time expressing skepticism about IQ as a measurement of innate mental ability, the heritability of mental ability, and race as a factor in intelligence. This alternative framework of giftedness affirmed the existence of a hierarchy of ability and championed the needs of the "gifted" superior group while also remaining malleable

⁶ See for example, from Beth Wellman as the sole author: "Some New Bases for Interpretation of the IQ," *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 1932; "The Effect of Pre-School Attendance upon the IQ," *Journal of Exceptional Education*, 1932-33; "Growth in Intelligence under Differing School Environments," *Journal of Exceptional Education*, 1934-5; "Mental Growth from Preschool to College," *Journal of Exceptional Education*, 1937-8; "Guiding Mental Development," *Childhood Education*, 1938; "New Tests Attack Theory of Fixed IQ," *New York Times*, July 17, 1938; "How the Child's Mind Grows," *National Parent Teacher*, 1939; "The Changing Concept of the I.Q.," *Journal of Home Economics*, 1939; (with George Stoddard), "The IQ: A Problem in Social Construction, Social Front, 1939. Biennial Survey of Education 1933-1934, U.S. Office of Education Bulletin, 1935.

and flexible and allowing for the influence of environment and the inclusion of all races as equally represented among the gifted. The Iowa Station and Witty's conception of intelligence was in many ways a preview of things to come as the national investment in gifted children after World War II would embrace this alternative framework.

Researching the Normal Child

The earliest and most prominent scholarly challenge to Terman's concept of the IQ as innate intelligence came from researchers at the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station. The station, founded in 1917, represented the first research institution in the United States dedicated to the scientific study of childhood.⁷ Although its director and researchers would engage in a contentious debate over the malleability of IQ and the usefulness of training to raise intelligence, the origins of the research station had much in common with the origin of giftedness and of IQ itself. As with Terman's efforts to use the IQ test to identify and segregate the "mental defectives," sort the mass of students into appropriate levels of instruction with particular attention to those identified as superior and gifted, the Iowa institute took a mental hierarchy as a given and looked to prevent defectives and encourage the exceptional — the difference being, as we will see, that from the beginning the ICWRS was committed to environmental solutions to the same problems.

The Iowa Child Welfare Research Station had its roots both in the "child-saving" tradition of early twentieth century progressivism and the post-1910 growth of

⁷ Hamilton Cravens, *Before Head Start: The Iowa Station and America's Children* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), x.

experimental psychology heavily influenced by G. Stanley Hall's Darwinist interpretation. The legislative push to establish funding for the Iowa station emphasized the value of using scientific methods to study the normal development of children and specifically called attention to the large sums spent on subnormal children. The campaign to establish the research station drew on concerns over the conservation of mental ability and the importance of developing normal children. Carl Seashore, the University of Iowa psychologist who championed the station, told a newspaper in 1915 that the goal of the station would be to "investigate by the best approved scientific methods the conservation and development of the normal child; to make the resulting information available and to train students for work in the field."⁸ More than one newspaper drew the comparison between studying the development of children and the application of scientific methods on agriculture. A 1916 editorial declared, "The time would seem to be ripe for the application of the same scientific methods to the study of the human animal that have so revolutionized plant and animal husbandry. To do this efficiently there must be a fixed point of departure—normal standards."⁹ The Iowa research station then had its origins in the same intellectual and cultural currents that facilitated the development and propagation of intelligence testing. The station was created to study how to scientifically produce "normal" children. While Lewis Terman returned repeatedly to the metaphor of

⁸ "Former Keokuk Woman at Head," *The Daily Gate City*, 11 Jan. 1915. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Library of Congress.

⁹ "Iowa May Adopt New Social Laws," *The Daily Gate City and Constitution-Democrat*. (Keokuk, Iowa), 20 May 1916. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87057262/1916-05-20/ed-1/seq-2/>>

mining, it is fitting that in Iowa the language of livestock was found to be more compelling.

From the beginning the Iowa station was focused more on the possibilities of environment shaping development rather than innate qualities passed through genetics, but as the repeated references to producing “normal” children indicated, the research station also embraced a hierarchical view of mental ability. Preventing feeble-minded children was an important rationale for the station, and upon its founding, the first director of the station, Bird Baldwin, reiterated the agricultural analogy stating that it had only been “a short time since we were told that good ears of corn could be made to grow where one was growing now and today this is a reality.” Baldwin predicted that the station would produce a similar effect with children as it would eventually be possible that “four or five normal boys or girls to grow up within a home or school where at present two, three, and sometimes four, of every five are defective in eyesight, hearing, speech, and physical endowments, or what is still more serious, are delinquents, epileptics, potential paupers, drunkards or criminals.”¹⁰ The Iowa station’s emphasis on environment, then, still relied on many of the same tropes associated with eugenics – namely drawing a connection between the supposed growth in incidence of “feeble-mindedness” and negative social phenomena such as crime and a breakdown in public morality. As with eugenics, the station also made the argument for economic efficiency comparing the 25,000 dollars the state would spend on the station with the “thousands”

¹⁰ “Child Welfare Aims Discussed,” *The Daily Gate City and Constitution-Democrat*, Nov 5, 1917, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*.
<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87057262/1917-11-05/ed-1/seq-5/>>

spent each year on philanthropic causes of which “practically all go for the betterment of defectives.”¹¹

With the mandate to research the development of the normal child, the Iowa station under the direction of Bird Baldwin did not at first focus on environmental effects on intelligence testing, but on the development of the “normal” child generally. In historian Hamilton Craven’s words, the Iowa station in the 1920s essentially “invented” the science of child development producing voluminous research on how the “typical” normal child acted, behaved, thought, felt, and related to others.”¹² Similar research stations established at the University of California and the University of Minnesota would follow by the late 1920s, but neither group was as focused on environmental effects on children as the Iowa station. Although Bird was not as concerned with the development of intelligence – his research focused more on physical development – he did set a precedent in the 1928 Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Education which Lewis Terman chaired and was dedicated to the subject of “nature versus nurture,” Baldwin expressed a rare skeptical note on the innateness of IQ.¹³

The Iowa Station Takes on IQ Constancy

With the untimely death of Baldwin in 1928, the directorship of the Iowa station passed to Iowa professor of psychology George Stoddard, and it was Stoddard who

¹¹ “Will Establish Welfare League,” *The Daily Gate City and Constitution-Democrat*, Nov 5 1917, *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn87057262/1917-11-05/ed-1/seq-5/>>

¹² Hamilton Craven, *Before Head Start: The Iowa Station and America's Children* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 74.

¹³ Craven, *Before Head Start*, 200.

would position the station as the dissenting voice against the innate view of mental ability. While Baldwin as director authored most of the station's research himself, Stoddard facilitated research and publication by the Iowa staff and became a more active public advocate for the station and its perspective on the importance of environment for the development of children. The group became more prolific under Stoddard as a result. In Stoddard's twelve years as director, the Iowa station published an average of fifty papers each year more than three times what it had under Baldwin.¹⁴ Stoddard also embraced the public policy role of the station to complement its research mission. He spoke out publicly on the station's research and its on the importance of preschool and parent education in developing normal children and preventing feeble-mindedness.¹⁵ The station's explicit mission under Stoddard was to discover what sort of environment or training that might raise or lower a child's level of intelligence. Along with this, the station publicly advocated for governmental policies based on their research. Understanding the particular mission of the Iowa station is important for contextualizing the later debates over the malleability of IQ.

Stoddard came to the Iowa station with a unique background for an American psychologist. While many academic psychologists of the time were heavily influenced by the biological determinism of G. Stanley Hall, Stoddard had studied in Paris, France in 1922-23 where he had access to Alfred Binet's laboratory. Binet had died ten years prior,

¹⁴ Ibid., 109.

¹⁵ Ibid., 107.

but Stoddard still had the opportunity to read Binet's research in the original French.¹⁶ Stoddard brought to the study of intelligence testing, then, an inclination to the view the scores as subject to change upon further training – an aspect of Binet's view to which Terman did not subscribe.

The chief researcher of the station, and the most prominent advocate for the environmentalist perspective was Beth Wellman. Wellman, born in Iowa in 1895, had joined the station first as a secretary in 1920, but became interested in the station's work and transitioned to a job as a research associate while pursuing graduate studies in psychology at the university.¹⁷ Interestingly, part of her work as a research associate involved spending several months in California gathering data on Terman's gifted subjects.¹⁸ In 1925, Wellman earned her PhD from the University of Iowa and that same year accepted a position as a research professor at the station. Wellman also began a relationship with the center director Bird Baldwin and the two had been planning to marry in 1928 when Baldwin took ill and died suddenly. Wellman settled Baldwin's estate and raised Baldwin's three youngest children from his first marriage.¹⁹

Interestingly, Baldwin's youngest child, a girl, had as an infant, been diagnosed as feeble-minded and it was recommended that she be placed in an institution. Baldwin

¹⁶ George Stoddard, *The Pursuit of Education: An Autobiography* (New York: Vantage Press, 1981), 33.

¹⁷ Henry L. Minton, "The Iowa Child Welfare Research Station and the 1940 debate on intelligence: Carrying on the legacy of a concerned mother," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 20, no. 2 (1984): 166.

¹⁸ Marie Skodak Crissey, "Beth Lucy Wellman," in *Women in psychology: a bio-bibliographic sourcebook*, Agnes N. O'Connell and Nancy Felipe Russo ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 351.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 352.

declined and placed the girl in preschool instead. Her IQ was later measured at 143.²⁰ While the station had already been philosophically predisposed to consider the impact of environment, it also seems likely that this intimate connection of Baldwin's and Wellman's influenced their perspective on the nature-nurture debate. Wellman committed to supporting and raising three children whose heredity she did not share and one of these children was in her eyes a living example of the power of nurture over nature. It also seems worth noting that Wellman's intervention with these children was not Algeresque in any fashion. She was not a well-situated male benefactor looking out for "sterling qualities" but a moderately-situated woman raising children out of a sense of personal connection. Further, Wellman took on this project at the beginning of her own academic career at a research station dedicated to studying the development of "normal" children. These facts of Wellman's biography help frame the direction and values of the Iowa stations work focused as it was on the possibilities of environment and training to make dramatic impact on individuals rather than emphasizing central tendencies of data on large groups.

Three Key Studies

The Iowa station under Stoddard gathered a wide variety of data on children and produced numerous studies on childhood development that emphasized the role of environment. Summarizing Stoddard and Wellman's respective roles, Cravens relates "Stoddard played the role of the public advocate and theoretician for the work, whereas

²⁰ Cravens, *Before Head Start*, 201.

Wellman gathered the data and presented it in scientific forums.”²¹ Three studies in particular formed the basis of the IQ controversy that would come to a head in the 1940 Yearbook. Wellman, along with her colleagues Marie Skodak and Harold Skeels, not only published their research in academic journals, but defended their environmental thesis in the popular press. It seems likely that the attention and notoriety that their claims received was partially responsible for the strongly worded responses from Terman and his allies who referred to the Iowa findings as “statistical atrocities.”

Wellman headed a study that followed two groups of children -- one selected to attend a preschool and a control group with similar IQs who remained in the orphanage. Children in both groups were tested at regular intervals for over a year. The preschool group showed modest gains in intelligence scores and the largest gains were made by those children who initially began their schooling with the lowest scores.²² More striking was the finding that the IQ scores of the orphanage children showed a downward trend throughout the study. The longer the stay in the orphanage, the more pronounced the loss. The study concluded “The trend for the control group is very clear. Regardless of the original classification, all groups headed for a final classification between 70 and 79 IQ. The effect of long residence for the control children was thus a leveling one, tending to bring all children to high grade feeble-mindedness or borderline classification.”²³ The

²¹ Cravens, *Before Head Start*, 132.

²² Harold M. Skeels, Ruth Updegraff, Beth L. Wellman, and Harold M. Williams, *A study of environmental stimulation: An orphanage preschool project* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1938), 44.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45.

research team concluded that the environmental conditions of the orphanage in effect produced “feeble-minded” children regardless of their biology.

Another study examined the effects of environment on IQ by studying mothers who gave their children up for adoption and then tracked the children’s IQ as they were raised by foster parents. Using a group of 154 children, data about the children’s biological parents, where available, was recorded. Intelligence tests were given to the mothers and their average level of education completed was recorded.²⁴ Data about the education and occupational status of the biological fathers were recorded as well, mostly based on testimony of the mothers, as in most of the cases (140 out of 154) the father had abandoned the family. In addition, similar data were collected on the foster parents with which the children were placed — the educational levels and occupational status of this group were markedly higher than that of the biological parents.²⁵ The children were adopted as infants and their IQs were tested at age two and again at age four.²⁶ From this, Skodak found that the IQs of the children more closely matched the levels associated with their foster parents than the biological parents. The Iowa researchers concluded that these findings indicated a strong role of environment in measured intelligence, “It may be concluded, therefore, that rather than the influence of heredity becoming manifest at the older preschool ages, the differentiation on the basis of family socio-economic level is primarily the result of the environmental influences to which the child has been

²⁴ Marie Skodak, *Children in foster homes: A study of mental development* (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa, 1939), 40.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 46-9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

exposed.”²⁷ As in the study of the preschool children versus the orphanage children, the Iowa group produced a conception of measured intelligence that was at once malleable and hierarchical focused as it was on preventing cases of lower IQ.

In another study, Howard Skeels of the Iowa station followed two orphanage infants diagnosed as feeble-minded via an IQ test and sent to the Iowa Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children, a custodial institution in Glenwood. Due to a lack of staff at Glenwood, the infants were transferred to a ward of female inmates to be cared for. In the ward, the two infants received copious attention from the inmates and on a routine visit six months later Skeels was surprised to see the children had rapidly developed in a short time — interacting in ways that should have been impossible given their low IQs. Skeels tested them again and found that one child’s IQ had risen from 46 to 77 and the other’s from 35 to 87. He tested them again two years later and their scores were higher again 95 and 93. The two children had risen from severely disabled to average having received no expert instruction, but only interaction with inmates at the feeble-minded asylum.²⁸

The Iowa research indicating a strong role of environment in shaping measured intelligence also gained attention in the national press. In July of 1938, Wellman herself authored an article in the *New York Times* headlined “New Tests Attack Theory of Fixed IQ.” Referencing Iowa research, Wellman declared, “Given sufficient time and the right combination of circumstances, children will change in IQ in very large amounts. This is in essence the discovery arising from long-time studies of the same children, measured

²⁷ Ibid., 84.

²⁸ Hamilton Cravens, *Before Head Start: The Iowa Station and America's Children*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 192-3.

and remeasured from the pre-school ages to college.”²⁹ Wellman cited three examples from Iowa’s research on preschools to show that IQ could be raised, children with early IQs of 89, 98, 98 who tested later as 149, 153, 167.³⁰ She also warned that children may be made feeble-minded under “especially unfavorable environments.”³¹ Accounts the next year in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor* sounded similar themes. Each of these quote Wellman criticizing the notion that IQ was fixed, “One of the most pernicious ideas which has invaded American education is that of labeling children with definite intelligence quotients.”³² While Wellman and the Iowa station argued that IQ was not fixed, they also argued that it represented an important measure of mental development. Wellman called the test “very helpful” and declared that “More frequent tests rather than no tests are needed” in order to better measure the changes in children’s mental levels.³³ Wellman and the Iowa group dissented from the prevailing view among psychologists that mental ability was innate, but they fully embraced the notion that mental ability was hierarchical – hence Wellman’s endorsement of the IQ test as a valuable tool.

Wellman’s research with her colleagues at the Iowa station directly challenged the idea that intelligence was an innate, natural quality. If taken to its logical conclusion, the Iowa research undermined the notion that the rare “gifted” child even existed – for if

²⁹ Beth L. Wellman, "NEW TESTS ATTACK THEORY OF FIXED IQ," *New York Times*, July 17, 1938.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² "Iowa Educator Calls Child I.Q. Tests Pernicious Idea," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 08, 1939' "'The I.Q. Not Infallible,'" *The Christian Science Monitor*, Aug 19, 1939.

³³ "Iowa Educator Calls Child I.Q. Tests Pernicious Idea," *Los Angeles Times*, Sep 08, 1939.

intelligence was largely a product of environment, then it stood to reason that gifted children were not born but could be made. The Iowa researchers did not seem to embrace these radical implications but rather still held to the idea that children had inherent limits to their potential mental ability and their eventual place on a hierarchy of intelligence. In keeping with this was Wellman's insistence that IQ was useful as a way to track individual progress along the hierarchy. Nevertheless Terman and his allies clearly viewed the Iowa emphasis on environment as a threat and went to great lengths to mitigate its effects. That the debate existed at all indicates a fundamental ambivalence about the entire idea of intelligence. Faced with compelling evidence that intelligence scores were the result of training, the psychologists were still drawn to the idea of intelligence as an innate quality.

The 1940 Yearbook and Terman's Response

In the National Society for the Study of Education 1940 Yearbook the innate and malleable views of IQ-intelligence would come into direct conflict. For the previous yearbook, compiled in 1928, Lewis Terman served as chairman of the committee and the resulting volume accordingly reflected Terman's own emphasis on IQ as the measure of innate mental ability. For the 1939 version, George Stoddard proposed an examination of nurture versus nature in shaping IQ in light of the research conducted at the Iowa station.³⁴ According to historian Hamilton Cravens, the yearbook "provided the

³⁴ Henry L. Minton, "The Iowa Child Welfare Research Station and the 1940 debate on intelligence: Carrying on the legacy of a concerned mother," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 20, no. 2 (1984), 161.

framework for a major debate on the Iowa IQ findings.”³⁵ The yearbook featured reviews and research from Iowa psychologists including Stoddard, Beth Wellman, and Howard Skeels as well as that of Lewis Terman, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, and his allies Florence Goodenough, who along with most of the other contributing psychologists, looked to counter the Iowa group’s claims.

Lewis Terman and his allies, many of whom were former graduate students, vehemently attacked the Iowa station’s findings characterizing the research as “statistical jugglery” or even “statistical atrocities,” and utterly lacking in scientific rigor. These attacks were published in both prestigious academic publications and the mainstream press. The 1940 Yearbook featured both original research studies and “comparative and critical exposition,” overviews of current research. Contributing to the journal were the most prominent past, present, and future of gifted scholars including Lewis Terman, Leta Stetter Hollingworth, and Paul Witty. Witty’s contribution also discussed the research of his PhD student, Martin Jenkins, the subject of chapter 4. While the Iowa Station director Stoddard chaired the yearbook and it featured the work of Iowa Station researchers such as Beth Wellman, Marie Skodak, Harold Skeels, and Kurt Lewin, the yearbook also provided an opportunity for Terman and his current and former graduate students to directly dispute the Iowa group’s findings on the importance of environment. In addition to the debate in the yearbook, Terman’s disciple Quinn McNemar published a criticism of the Iowa findings in the 1940 *Psychological Bulletin* an issue that also included the Iowa researchers’ response. Rather than consider these attacks separately, I will outline the

³⁵ Hamilton Cravens, *Before Head Start*, 200.

major themes in the debate between the Iowa group and its critics and discuss the implications for how giftedness was understood.

It is also important to note that this debate took place in the context of a perceived crisis in democracy, which as the previous chapter discussed created an environment in which the development of democratic leaders was seen as a vital question. As Ira Katznelson relates, in the 1930s with authoritarian regimes in place in Germany, Italy, Spain, and the Soviet Union, the United States represented the “only major example of a liberal democracy successfully experimenting and resisting radical tyranny.”³⁶ The debate between the Iowa researchers and Terman had potentially profound implications for how this leadership development might be accomplished. Moreover the racial purification policy of Nazi Germany was widely discussed at the time and certainly any discussion of environment versus heredity at the time must be considered in this context. It is therefore significant and worth noting the extent to which both sides of this contentious debate found a common ground in the existence of a hierarchy of intelligence.

Terman and his allies condemned the findings of the Iowa researchers in no uncertain terms. While scholars like Cravens have typically cast this as a hereditarians versus environmentalists debate it seems more accurate to consider the main issue at hand one of the innateness versus malleability of intelligence. As discussed in the two previous chapters, inherent in giftedness was the idea that it might be found anywhere. The purpose of the IQ test was to efficiently identify these individuals regardless of social background. The frequently employed metaphor equating IQ identification of gifted

³⁶ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013), 9.

children to the mining of gold implies this sense of hidden value systematically uncovered – not a framework that readily brings inherited qualities to mind. It is quite possible that Terman’s adamant denunciation of the Iowa findings came from the assumption that if IQ were shown to be malleable the whole idea of the innate mental hierarchy on which giftedness rested would be meaningless. It turns out, he need not have worried, the idea of gifted children survived and even thrived despite the criticism of IQ. Terman’s reaction, nonetheless, is instructive.

The overarching theme of the Iowa critics was that the research station’s studies represented shoddy science. They characterized Stoddard’s group as forwarding unwarranted conclusions shaped by preconceived ideas rather than their actual evidence. Terman complained in the yearbook that the research on intelligence over the past ten years suffered from a “retrogression” in “methodological procedures.”³⁷ Terman further charged, “This has shown itself at times in careless formulation of the problems to be attacked, use of unsound techniques, neglect of proper controls, misinterpretation of data, and the publicizing of unwarranted conclusions.”³⁸ The thrust of Terman’s criticism was that the Iowa group did not engage in objective scientific research, but rather selectively interpreted their data to meet predetermined conclusions. Terman charged that the Iowa’s findings were “biased and uncritical” and that their conclusions were “sensational in character and have been widely publicized by the authors through both lay and

³⁷ Lewis Terman, “Lewis Terman,” in *The Thirty-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Intelligence: Its nature and nurture, Part 1, Comparative and critical exposition*, ed. Guy Montrose Whipple (Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company, 1940), 460.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

professional channels.”³⁹ Terman was clearly bothered by the implications of Iowa group’s findings on the malleability of intelligence and what it meant for his own research.

Terman’s graduate student Quinn McNemar similarly criticized the Iowa group’s “startling inadequacies” in their research.⁴⁰ Of the preschool and orphanage study, McNemar dismissed the study’s conclusions due to the fact that neither group of students was consistent throughout the study (since children at the orphanage who were the research subjects were adopted over the course of the study and new children were added to the data set as well). McNemar bemoaned, “This is the first of a series of jugglings in a monograph which is literally filled with highly questionable procedures.”⁴¹ In his conclusion, McNemar echoed Terman that the Iowa group’s research on malleability did not stand up to scrutiny and labeled it a “hasty promulgation of unverified and largely invalid research results.”⁴² Again, McNemar reiterated the charge that the Iowa group’s findings did not reflect a rigorous scientific approach and that the data were selectively interpreted to support a predetermined conclusion about the importance of environment on intelligence.

According to Terman and his allies, the “statistical atrocities,” as Terman characterized the Iowa research at a conference, consisted of relying too much on individual cases of growth or decline, not accounting for all possible variables for IQ

³⁹ Ibid., 461.

⁴⁰ Quinn McNemar, “A critical examination of the University of Iowa studies of environmental influences upon the IQ,” *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 37(2), (Feb 1940): 65.

⁴¹ Ibid., 66.

⁴² Ibid., 91.

changes, and a reliance on changes from IQ tests given to children under the age of six for whom scores were known to be unreliable.⁴³ Terman and Florence Goodenough, a former Terman graduate student who had become a prominent child psychologist at the University of Minnesota, took particular issue with Howard Skeels's study of the two infants initially diagnosed as feeble-minded but who IQ scores later grew under the care of institutionalized women at the Iowa Asylum for Feeble-Minded Children in Glenwood. "One wonders whether it might not be a good idea for the rest of us to take lessons in child-training from the morons. Certainly they appear to have done a better job than anyone else has been able to accomplish!" Goodenough mused sarcastically.⁴⁴ Terman was similarly incredulous about the benefits of what he called "moron nursemaids" on IQ. Of Skeels findings, Terman mused, "This may not seem to make sense, but it is at least an interesting wonderland that the environmentalists have opened to us."⁴⁵

The reaction of Goodenough and Terman reveals an insight into their scheme of mental hierarchy as articulated by IQ testing. The two prominent and respected psychologists found it patently absurd that women objectively lacking in mental ability

⁴³ "Dean Stoddard Defends Work of Iowans on Intelligence at Columbus Meeting of A.A.A.S." *The Daily Iowan*, December 29, 1939. See also: Quinn McNemar, "A critical examination of the University of Iowa studies of environmental influences upon the IQ," *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 37(2), (Feb 1940), 63-92; Lewis Terman, "Lewis Terman," 460-66 and Florence Goodenough, "New Evidence on Environmental Influence on Intelligence," 307-367 in *The Thirty-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Intelligence: Its nature and nurture, Part I*.

⁴⁴ Florence Goodenough, "New Evidence on Environmental Influence on Intelligence," in *The Thirty-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Intelligence: Its nature and nurture, Part I*, 346.

⁴⁵ Lewis Terman, "Lewis Terman," in *The Thirty-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Intelligence: Its nature and nurture, Part I*, 464.

according to the IQ test could provide an environment that would foster a growth in IQ for two young children. The Skeels experiment must have also have been especially irksome to Terman's faith in what he saw as his own scientific expertise. Terman's model of giftedness rested on the ability of scientific experts to identify and develop individuals of exceptional intelligence and here were examples of "morons" achieving feats of development through mere "attention" that he claimed were impossible.

At the same time, this experiment reveals the extent to which Skeels and the Iowa group were no less invested in the same idea of hierarchy. The study, like many Iowa studies, was directed at finding how IQ might be raised through training or change in environment. While the Iowa group did not view IQ-intelligence as innate, their malleable vision of ability still ranked the gifted on top and the "moron" and feeble-minded on the bottom. Their unstated goal was to prevent the latter.

At the root of the Terman-Iowa debate was whether the relative constancy of IQ represented a scientific consensus – relative because even Terman demurred from asserting that IQ measurements were constant for all. Terman and his allies clearly believed it did, and found the evidence the Iowa station produced inadequate to overturn this consensus. The Iowa station researchers, when they defended their conclusions, disputed this premise, frequently noting that the inventor of the intelligence test, Alfred Binet, originally believed that training could raise children's scores on the exam, even referring to their position as the "Iowa-Binet theory of intelligence." As Stoddard and Wellman wrote in the 1940 Yearbook, "In essence what may be termed the 'Iowa-Binet theory of intelligence' simply permits a large amount of change in a child's brightness

through environmental impingements on the organism: the growing child changes his rate of growth.”⁴⁶ In addition, as this defense suggests, the Iowa station under Stoddard was focused on uncovering the environmental conditions under which IQ might rise in an effort to advocate for governmental policies that would help provide those environments for children. Given that this was the station’s mission, focusing on individual and small sample cases made sense. Terman, for his part, was more concerned with group averages and not as involved with individual development although his personal interest in the individual development of gifted children did parallel with the Iowa group’s work.

Paul Witty and an Alternative Perspective on Gifted Children

While Terman may have feared that claims that IQ was a malleable product of a favorable environment endangered his own project of researching, popularizing, and advocating for gifted children, those fears would have been unfounded. Another, psychologist, Paul Witty of Northwestern also published in the 1940 Yearbook on the topic of gifted children. Here Witty did not engage the Iowa-Terman controversy directly — although he was skeptical toward assertion that the IQ or any test scores were the product innate of qualities. Nevertheless his belief in the importance of gifted children was strong. He believed in the category of giftedness and the hierarchy that undergirded it even though he saw the IQ test – that invented the gifted child – as malleable. In many

⁴⁶ George Stoddard and Beth Wellman, “Environment and the I.Q.,” in *The Thirty-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Intelligence: Its nature and nurture, Part I*, 436.

ways Witty's perspective has endured and is echoed in present day descriptions and definitions of gifted children.

Witty would become one of the most prominent and influential scholars in the country, including serving as advisor of the psychologist who will be the subject of the next chapter, Martin Jenkins, while also charting a middle course in the nature/nurture debate. In Witty's conception of gifted children the IQ score was important, but not the sole determinant of gifted status. In many ways it is Witty's conception of gifted that is still embraced today with the IQ score serving as an important but not sole criterion. Giftedness has come to be defined using more qualitative and subjective criterion with less claim to scientific objectivity which includes the acknowledgement that environment plays a role in giftedness. Still, the certainty that the gifted nonetheless exist as a distinct category has persisted. Indeed, from his initial interest in the study of gifted children in the 1920s to his work in the field into the 1960s, Witty seemed to grow increasingly doubtful of the usefulness of the IQ test, but no less sure that giftedness was real and gifted children needed to be identified and developed. Again he mirrors the rest of the nation which would, as we will see in the final chapter, beginning in the 1950s increasingly devote national resources to the promotion of the gifted without basing that support in the validity of measured mental intelligence.

Paul Witty was born in 1898 in Terre Haute, Indiana. Witty attended high school and college in Terre Haute as well graduating from the Indiana State Normal School (now Indiana State University) in 1920.⁴⁷ Witty's background mirrored Terman's in

⁴⁷ Robert McFadden, "Dr. Paul A. Witty, Educator, 77, Dies," *New York Times*, Feb 14, 1976.

many ways — both born in Indiana to middle class families (Witty’s father worked for a telegraph company), both educated at an Indiana state college for teachers, and both then went on to graduate school to study psychology. Interesting in light of Witty’s later skepticism concerning racial differences in intelligence, was the fact that Witty graduated from Wiley High School in Terre Haute, an integrated school. In fact, Witty’s student at Northwestern, pioneer in the field of black gifted children, and the subject of chapter four, Martin Jenkins, graduated from the same high school five years after Witty. It seems reasonable to assume that the experience of attending classes with academically advanced black students influenced Witty the psychologist when presented with claims of vast differences in intelligence based on race.

After graduating from the Indiana State Normal School, Witty attended graduate school at the University of Chicago and then Columbia University earning his PhD in psychology from the latter in 1923.⁴⁸ At Columbia it seems, Witty first came across the research of Leta Stetter Hollingworth which sparked his initial interest in gifted children.⁴⁹ Witty also studied under John Dewey and E.L Thorndike (who was also Hollingworth’s advisor). The influence of Dewey can be seen in Witty’s later interest in creativity and play in children and perhaps also his skepticism of narrow definitions of intelligence. At Columbia, Witty also may have come into contact with Franz Boas whose work he would later quote. From Columbia he accepted a position teaching educational psychology and

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Martin Jenkins in a letter to Leta Stetter Hollingworth referenced Witty’s time at Columbia writing, “since his interest in gifted children came from his contact with you, I suppose that my own interest in this field may be traced to the same source.” Martin D. Jenkins, to Leta Stetter Hollingworth, May 16, 1939, MJMC.

child development at the University of Kansas where he would work until moving on to Northwestern University in 1930.⁵⁰ Witty's interest in gifted children spanned at least four decades from his first published article on giftedness in 1927 to his last in 1971. His near half century of work on gifted children provides an opportunity to follow how the notion of giftedness endured through the twentieth century even as the reputation of the IQ test as an reliable measure of innate mental ability waned.

In Witty's early research, he frequently collaborated with professor of education, Harvey Lehman, his colleague at the University of Kansas who later took a position at the Ohio University. Lehman was a Kansas native who completed his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago and his research focused on the role of play and creativity in childhood development also drew on the work of John Dewey.⁵¹ Lehman, who studied the phenomenon of genius as well, is likely best known today for his studies of the average age in which various types of "geniuses" in various fields, science, medicine, literature and the arts, achieved their acclaimed breakthroughs.⁵² Witty and Lehman collaborated on multiple articles that criticized the notion IQ as innate ability promoted

⁵⁰ McFadden.

⁵¹ Harvey Christian Lehman and Paul Andrew Witty, *The psychology of play activities* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1927) 3. It is not entirely clear if any aspect of Lehman's background may have influenced his suspicion of measured intelligence. Lehman appears to be of German, but not Jewish, ancestry as evidence by his middle name "Christian" and seemingly confirmed by an online photo of Lehman's grave which is adorned with a cross: <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/97336052>

⁵² Harvey Christian Lehman, *Age and achievement*. (Princeton University Press, 2053). Interestingly, even though Lehman was an IQ skeptic, he and Lewis Terman enjoyed a mutual professional admiration. Terman wrote the preface to Lehman's *Age and Achievement* writing, "In my judgment, Lehman's work deserves to be ranked among the most important contributions that have thus far been made to the literature of genius." Lehman, v. For his part Lehman thanked Terman in the acknowledgments of the same book writing that he was "Especially grateful" to Terman who "read this manuscript several times" and made "invaluable suggestions." Lehman, x.

by psychologists like Terman and Hollingworth. They explored the role of drive and opportunity in addition to ability as factors that lead to the development of creative geniuses and leaders in a variety of fields. They approvingly quoted the research of cultural anthropologists and racial skeptics, Franz Boas and Margaret Mead as they dissented from the view that the research on IQ proved that mental ability was an inherited trait and the related position that there existed significant differences in intelligence between races.⁵³

With a trio of published articles in 1927-29, Witty and Lehman poured cold water on what they saw as the “rather extraordinary optimism” that children with high IQ scores would inevitably develop into adult geniuses.⁵⁴ Referring to Terman’s claims about the potential of gifted children, the pair responded, “From the gifted (children of I.Q. 140 and above) and from nowhere else our leaders in every line are recruited. Here we have over-simplification in the extreme—leadership in every line of endeavor reduced to a magical formula—I.Q. 140 and above.”⁵⁵ To Witty and Lehman, IQ represented a possibly useful measure of mental ability, but they rejected the notion that it represented a child’s destiny. Significantly while they were skeptical of the power of IQ to predict an individual’s future place on a hierarchy of achievement, they nevertheless accepted the existence of such a hierarchy and looked for other contributing factors that Terman and Hollingworth and other IQ-advocates neglected.

⁵³ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, “Racial differences: the dogma of superiority,” *The Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol 1, (1930): 398.

⁵⁴ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, “Drive: a neglected trait in the study of the gifted,” *Psychological Review*, Vol 34(5), (Sep 1927): 364.

⁵⁵ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, “Nervous instability and genius: poetry and fiction,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol 24(1), (Apr 1929): 77.

Witty and Lehman expressed skepticism both that IQ measured all facets of mental ability and that ability alone manifested in achievement. Of Leta Stetter Hollingworth's work on gifted children they wrote, "The assumption is set forth clearly by Hollingworth that gifted children actually can be selected by means of mental tests. The validity of this assumption rests upon decision as to what mental tests really measure and upon decision as to what general intelligence actually is."⁵⁶ To Witty and Lehman the available evidence did not necessarily support the assumption that IQ measured general intelligence. Beyond their skepticism that IQ represented innate mental ability, the pair also argued that achievement and success were due to factors outside of ability alone.

Witty and Lehman drew a distinction between "ability" and "effective ability." As the pair explained, "It is the belief of the present writers that the fruits of genius are a function of no less than three integers, namely, ability, drive, and opportunity."⁵⁷ Drive, which they defined as "any tendency or disposition, implicit or explicit, toward intense or persistent activity," was more likely the result of conditioning than an innate quality.⁵⁸ They further noted that Terman's own research indicated that drive was lacking among the gifted as he made note that some children with IQs of 140 and above showed only average educational attainment.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, "Drive: a neglected trait in the study of the gifted," *Psychological Review*, Vol 34(5), (1927): 364.

⁵⁷ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, "Ability versus effective ability," *Psychological Review*, Vol 35(1), (1928): 69.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, "Drive: a neglected trait in the study of the gifted," *Psychological Review*, Vol 34(5), (1927): 367.

Witty and Lehman also argued that Terman's data on the all around good health and emotional stability of his gifted subjects actually could be interpreted as a strike against their chances to become future geniuses. Taking a page from Freudian psychoanalysis, Witty and Lehman argued that an important source of drive resulted from a thwarted desire. "Thwarting desires," the pair wrote, "is one element that leads to intensity of effort toward a desired end."⁶⁰ Terman insisted gifted are emotionally well-adjusted, but Witty and Lehman argued that the unstable person may be less able to endure thwarting. "Consequently, ability plus nervous instability seem to furnish a propitious background for literary eminence, for when a capable but nevertheless unstable individual is thwarted he is likely to seek satisfyingness through an easily accessible and intensely satisfying channel, namely, imaginative writing."⁶¹ As examples, the psychologists listed a number of artistic geniuses literary geniuses who had reputations for emotional instability including Goethe, Edgar Allen Poe, and Lord Byron.⁶²

In addition to drive and ability, Witty and Lehman explained that any potential genius required opportunity to reach that potential. They noted anecdotally that eminent figures of the day such as Charles Lindbergh, Henry Ford, and Babe Ruth would not have been as successful had they not been alive at a time in which airplanes, steel, and baseball

⁶⁰ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, "Nervous instability and genius: poetry and fiction," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol 24(1), (1929): 78.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 80-1.

had been invented.⁶³ Beyond an individual's era of birth, the psychologists argued that success of any kind was the result of favorable circumstances. "The preceding citations illustrate a rather obvious fact, namely, that environment must be propitious if the capable individual is to attain eminence. To assume that genius will out is almost equivalent to assuming that the individual is not dependent upon his predecessors, his co-workers, or other circumstances in which he chances to find himself."⁶⁴ With their explication of the importance of drive and opportunity, Witty and Lehman cast doubt on the focus on innate ability as IQ expressed.

In addition to dissenting from the position that IQ represented innate mental ability, Witty and Lehman were generally skeptical that heredity determined intelligence. Witty and Lehman criticized eugenic family studies such as Henry Goddard's *The Kallikak Family*. The Kallikak study purported to show that mental traits were passed down through generations. Witty and Lehman asserted that these studies vastly oversimplified a complex process and engaged *a priori* reasoning by assuming their conclusion at the outset. The psychologists wrote, "In a given individual it is not possible to identify the particular ancestors from whom chromosomes and hereditary traits have been derived. Moreover, in tracing ancestry, the noble (or the ignoble) are hunted up and the other ancestors are neglected. The domination of preconceived notions thus affects

⁶³ Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, "Ability versus effective ability," *Psychological Review*, Vol 35(1), (1928): 67-84.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 84.

the result.”⁶⁵ Witty and Lehman maintained that the claims of those who insisted that mental ability was hereditary were not supported by available evidence.

The psychologists also argued that broad claims gifted advocates like Terman made about IQ, that it represented general intelligence, undercut their position that IQ was heritable. As the authors explained in a 1930 article, “The very definition of intelligence (which many mental testers accept) as a sum total of closely related abilities precludes the possibility of paralleling the inheritance of intelligence to the inheritance of physical traits until each of the mental abilities has been identified and its inheritance demonstrated empirically.”⁶⁶ In other words, Witty and Lehman argued, if hereditarians were going to claim that mental traits were as heritable as physical traits then they must also show what specific mental traits were subsumed under IQ.

Along with skepticism about the heritability of intelligence, Witty and Lehman also argued against the idea that there were racial disparities in mental ability. In a 1927 study on black and white students in a Kansas school district, Witty analyzed test data on educational achievement and expressed skepticism that differences in average achievement were due innate biological differences in capacity.⁶⁷ A study of play behavior of black and white children similarly explored the origins of achievement disparities in cultural context rather than biological capacity. Witty and Lehman

⁶⁵ Paul A. Witty and Harvey C. Lehman, “An Interpretation of the Heredity Background of Two Groups of Mental Deviates,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Sep., 1928): 326. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2765604>

⁶⁶ Paul A. Witty and Harvey C. Lehman, “The Dogma and Biology of Human Inheritance,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Jan., 1930): 561.

⁶⁷ Paul Witty and A. I. Decker, “A comparative study of the educational attainment of negro and white children,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 18(7), (October 1927): 500.

suggested black children feel inferior not because of innate inferiority but because of treatment by whites.⁶⁸ The psychologists' characterization of black children damaged by the negative treatment of whites is consistent with what historian Daryl Scott has termed "damage imagery" the idea that racial disparities stemmed in large part from the psychological trauma inflicted on blacks Americans by whites.⁶⁹ According to Scott, social scientists promulgated damage imagery and racial liberals embraced its core assumptions. Scott further demonstrates that damage imagery was incorporated into critiques of racism even framing a major justification for the *Brown v. Board* decision while also reinforcing ideas about black pathology.⁷⁰ Witty and Lehman explored how a greater participation in certain forms of play behavior may be a compensatory mechanism against this damage – one that provided for black children a "mastery impulse" denied them in most areas of life.⁷¹

In 1930, Witty and Lehman authored a more sweeping criticism of innate racial differences in an article titled "Racial differences: the dogma of superiority" in the *Journal of Social Psychology*. In the article, the psychologists explicitly aligned themselves with scholars like Franz Boas and Margaret Mead who argued for a view of human difference based in culture rather than biology. The article summarized research that indicated that differences in average IQ scores between the races were likely due to education and experiences rather than native faculty. They cited studies by Mead and

⁶⁸ Harvey Lehman and Paul Witty, "Some compensatory mechanisms of the negro," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol 23(1), (April 1928): 29.

⁶⁹ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and pity: Social policy and the image of the damaged Black psyche, 1880-1996*. (Univ of North Carolina Press, 1997) xi.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 130-6.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

others that showed that immigrant children did better on non-verbal intelligence tests than they did on verbal intelligence tests implying that acquired language skills were a component of measured intelligence.⁷² To support their claim they quoted at length from Boas' *The Mind of Primitive Man*:

[T]he average faculty of the white race is found to the same degree in a large proportion of individuals of all other races, and although it is probable that some of these races may not produce as large a population of great men as our own race, there is no reason to suppose that they are unable to reach the level of civilization represented by the bulk of our own people.⁷³

By quoting Mead and Boas, Witty and Lehman offered a different framework for understanding mental ability, one that emphasized environment and training over biology. In their article's conclusion the psychologists referenced the Army's World War I intelligence testing, which had been used frequently to show the supposed differences in intelligence between racial groups and noted that black recruits from Ohio had higher average scores than white recruits from at least four southern states, Georgia, Kentucky, Arkansas, and Mississippi and asserted "The simple, natural, and obvious conclusion to be drawn from the above figures is that educational opportunity is probably a potent force in affecting mental test scores."⁷⁴ Witty's interest in and advocacy for gifted children seems odd in light of his position that education and environment influenced mental tests. Clearly Witty embraced a giftedness that did not rely on IQ as an objective measurement of innate intelligence.

⁷² Paul Witty and Harvey Lehman, "Racial differences: the dogma of superiority," *The Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol 1, (1930): 395-6.

⁷³ Ibid. 398.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 400.

By the mid-1930s, Witty had moved to Northwestern University where he advised Martin Jenkins work on gifted black children — the first comprehensive study of gifted black children in the United States. Jenkins’s research argued that gifted black children need to be systematically identified and developed just as white gifted children were. Jenkins and Witty also made a related argument that the existence of black children with very high IQs strongly indicated that race was not a significant factor in measured intelligence. In Witty’s submission to the 1940 Yearbook, co-authored with Leta Stetter Hollingworth and titled “Intelligence as Related to Race” he cited Jenkins research.

The Witty and Hollingworth’s entry was the only article in the volume explicitly dedicated to the issue of intelligence and race – interesting given the year 1939 and Nazi Germany’s militarism and utilization of racial science would have been international news. Some scholars had already spoken out against Nazi racism. The most notable example being the American Anthropological Association (AAA) which, at the urging of Franz Boas, issued a statement declaiming racism and disputing the existence of biological race in 1938.⁷⁵ That statement read, "Anthropology provides no scientific basis for discrimination against any people on the ground of racial inferiority, religious affiliation or linguistic heritage."⁷⁶ Hollingworth’s portion of the article made note of the AAA statement but struck an ambivalent tone as to the relationship between race and intelligence, maintaining that “psychological connotations of race have not been

⁷⁵ Kamala Visweswaran. "Race and the Culture of Anthropology." *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 100, no. 1 (1998): 71. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/682809>.

⁷⁶ Qtd in Ibid.

ascertained.”⁷⁷ Admitting that precise definitions of race did not yet exist, Hollingworth nevertheless maintained that it would be useful to study differences in IQ among “distinguishable and nameable congenies of persons to be defined as belonging to census groups.”⁷⁸ In her conclusion, she called for more research on the links between race and intelligence.

Witty’s section took a much more skeptical view of the links between race and intelligence noting that while many studies have compared the average scores of white and black sample groups little has been done to dig deeper and explicitly link IQ to ancestry.⁷⁹ Despite this lack of data, Witty asserted broad sweeping claims about black children’s supposed mental inferiority:

The uncritical student has made, however, sweeping generalizations concerning the ‘lack of educability’ and the general constitutional inferiority of Negro children. One leaves the literature with the impression that the Negro child constitutes hopeless school material. In addition, one might almost conclude that gifted Negro children are so rarely found in the public school that search for them would prove unprofitable.⁸⁰

On the contrary, citing Jenkins’s work, Witty noted that gifted black children were just as common as gifted white children in communities where similar educational opportunities were available. How many black children of superior intelligence, Witty wondered, were going unidentified and denied educational experiences necessary to their fullest

⁷⁷ Leta Hollingworth and Paul Witty, “Intelligence as Related to Race,” in *The Thirty-Ninth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education: Intelligence: Its nature and nurture, Part 1, Comparative and critical exposition*, ed. Guy Montrose Whipple (Bloomington, IL: Public School Publishing Company, 1940), 258.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 258-9.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 263.

development?⁸¹ Witty did not reference the scientific racism of Nazi Germany, but his characterization of race and intelligence was far more in line with the AAA statement than was Hollingworth's.

Interestingly, Witty did not directly address the debate between the Iowa Station researchers and those who sided with Lewis Terman in the Yearbook, but he did address it in a different journal article in 1940. Witty cited the Iowa station's research on the malleability of IQ and wondered, "Why is it that the intelligence test has proved so generally disappointing in terms of the optimism expressed concerning the development of gifted children?"⁸² Witty pointed to creative ability and drive as factors important to giftedness, but outside the purview of the intelligence test.⁸³ He concluded that the criteria for gifted status should be "estimated by observation of the child's behavior" and that a gifted child was one "whose performance is consistently remarkable in any potentially valuable area."⁸⁴ Significantly, in promoting this alternative criteria for giftedness, Witty still maintained that the gifted exist as an elite few to be developed as a national good and that the scientific expertise of psychologists was still necessary to identifying them.

Conclusion

⁸¹ Ibid., 267.

⁸² Paul A. Witty, "Some considerations in the education of gifted children," *Educational administration and Supervision* 26 (1940): 513.

⁸³ Ibid., 516.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

From 1928 to 1940, the idea of intelligence became the object of extensive debate among psychologists. IQ, the Taylorite tool that promised to efficiently locate innate intelligence and express it in a single number, was increasingly questioned by psychologists including those at the Iowa Child Welfare Research station and Harvey Lehman and Paul Witty. These scholars pointed to the impact environment could have on individual cases, and while IQ remained stable over large group averages, its ability to reliably determine individual mental worth was no longer certain. Increasingly, psychologists and education professors came to de-emphasize IQ as the sole “objective” measure of intelligence, while still holding on to the idea that some children were simply “gifted.” So even as the IQ test lost a certain degree of status, the idea of the gifted child survived the admission among psychologists that environment played a large role in mental development. This seeming contradiction between intelligence as innate and intelligence as created mirrored underlying tensions between hierarchy and democracy. The new emphasis on environment was more inclusive on the subject of race as the writings of Witty suggest. Following WWII, most psychologists would abandon the idea that innate intelligence was connected to race by insisting that “giftedness” was to be found among individuals of any race. This approach was well suited to serve the emerging idea of gifted children as “our greatest national resources” which must be developed to their fullest potential in a pluralistic, multiracial democracy.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Paul Witty, "What is special about special education? The gifted child," *Exceptional Children* 19, no. 7 (1953): 259.

CHAPTER 4. “FOR THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE SOCIAL ORDER”: MARTIN JENKINS AND THE CREATION OF RACE-BLIND GIFTEDNESS

In 1935, the *Journal of Social Psychology* published a case of giftedness unlike any before documented. The article, entitled “The Case of ‘B’ — A Gifted Negro Girl,” described a nine-year-old girl from Chicago who achieved on the Stanford-Binet exam an IQ of 200 — among the highest ever tested. The article describes the girl, referred to as “B” to protect her identity, as being able to answer questions remarkably quickly, taking less than ten seconds to answer a series of questions for which a minute was allotted. The article also reports that she possessed a wide and impressive vocabulary providing dictionary-accurate definitions of words such as *Mars* (“God of war in Roman mythology”), *mosaic* (“A number of brightly colored stones — no, tiles — put together to form a design”), and *treasury* (“A place where a cooperating group keeps the money”). According to the authors, B did not even attempt to define those words she did not know and at the end of the exam was displeased with her performance lamenting, “she only knew the easy words.”¹

The authors, psychologists Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins, argued that the discovery of a black child with an IQ as high as B’s provided evidence that racial differences in tested intelligence were more likely due to a disparity in environment and educational opportunities rather than innate mental ability as many psychologists thought at the time. Witty and Jenkins wrote, “The case appears to have unusual psychological

¹ Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins, “The case of “B”—A gifted Negro girl,” *Journal of Social Psychology*. 6 (1935): 119.

significance. The fact that we can find a Negro child whose IQ falls in the very highest range indicates that Negro blood is not always the limiting specter so universally proclaimed in discussions of intelligence measured by the Binet technique.”² The authors went on to note that B’s family records indicated that she had no known white relatives — a fact that to them further discredited the idea that mental ability was linked to race.

Witty and Jenkins argued that the disparity between the average IQ scores of whites and blacks was due to the fact that the tests did not measure innate ability, but learned ability, “The intelligence test, containing a composite of tasks selected from the experiences of children, presupposes that the elements shall represent ‘constant’ or common factors in the life activities of every child.”³ In emphasizing the importance of “experiences of the children” to a child’s score on IQ tests, Witty and Jenkins stressed the role of environment implying that black Americans had lower overall IQs because of limited opportunities to develop innate mental abilities.

Witty and Jenkins did not dismiss the role heredity played in accounting for “B”’s intelligence. Instead they found that there was no obvious overriding factor in the girl’s intellectual development. Through interviews with family and school, they did not find that she had been excessively “pushed” in school – nor was there even apparent recognition at home or at school of “*extremely* superior ability.”

While both the extreme hereditarian and the environmentalist can find in these data ample support for dogmatizing concerning the importance of heredity or of environment, the writers, after months of study of this child and the social setting,

² Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins, “The case of “B”—A gifted Negro girl,” *Journal of Social Psychology*. 6 (1935) 124.

³ *Ibid.*, 117.

believe that the provenance of this child's rare ability can be traced to a fortunate biological inheritance plus a fairly good opportunity for development.⁴

Witty and Jenkins rejected the notion of a racial factor in intelligence, but did not dismiss idea that intelligence had a hereditary component.

At the same time, for Witty and Jenkins, B's test performance was also evidence that IQ testing was a useful technology to identify the most talented from any population, including black Americans. In addition, they argued that the importance of finding these gifted individuals and developing their talents was for the good of society as a whole. As the authors state, "The case is of significance further in that it demonstrates that we may discover extreme deviates in any school population, unrecognized and denied the types of educational experiences for their best development, as well as for the best interests of the social order."⁵

Although the authors described B as "one of the most precocious and promising children in the U.S." they also admitted that her academic performance in school did not thus far match the superiority of her test scores. Witty and Jenkins wrote,

B appears to be a typical victim of the educational lockstep of large educational systems which usually can make little provision for children of very superior ability and which frequently fail to recognize the abilities of these deviates. B has approximately 45 classmates of varying abilities, and the teacher's special efforts are inevitably devoted to the duller students. Under such a régime rare ability is usually sacrificed.⁶

Rather than cast doubt on B's superiority, her relative lack of achievement simply seemed to confirm that she was in fact a typical gifted child who received a relative lack of

⁴ Witty and Jenkins, "The case of "B"—A gifted Negro girl," 124.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 122.

attention from teachers compared to less exceptional students. The fact that such an exceptionally gifted child's grades might not match their test scores could justify intelligence testing as a way to find gifted children otherwise "hidden." Gifted children, in other words, represented a natural resource that could only be detected reliably by an "objective" technology informed by scientific expertise.

B was discovered as part of Martin Jenkins's dissertation study at Northwestern University (Paul Witty was Jenkins's advisor) — a large-scale study of Chicago schools one reviewer touted as the first "comprehensive investigation of Negro children of superior intelligence in a large school population."⁷ Jenkins's observations concerning B reflect many of the same assumptions and approaches to giftedness found in gifted advocates like Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Lewis Terman. These gifted advocates in the 1930s had widely differing views on the role of racial, class, and gender differences in intelligence. They disagreed whether IQ tests represented an innate skill or whether they were also the product of environment. What they had in common was a belief that gifted represented a real category, a small percentage of children in possession of potentially exceptional talents. They further believed that these rare individuals were no different typical children in their interests, appearance, personality, and sometimes, as in the case of B, in their academic achievement. "Hidden" though these gifted children were, they could be identified with systematic, Taylorite methods, the Binet test first among them, and subsequently with careful development could realize their considerable potential. As

7 D. A. Wilkerson, Reviewed Work: "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence." by Martin D. Jenkins, *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Jan., 1936), 126;

such, the gifted concept was something of a paradox – the gifted child possessed enormous potential, real and quantifiable while at the same time was always in danger of not fulfilling it. The failure of gifted children to reach this potential was ascribed to inadequate schools, a lack of enriching opportunities in the home, improper guidance, or a lack of motivation, but not to a flaw in the concept of giftedness itself. Advocates believed that given appropriate support the gifted would achieve more and perform better than their non-gifted peers — that equality of opportunity would inevitably produce an inequality of outcome. The idea that these exceptional individuals appeared in testing, and could be managed like a natural resource, offers a distinctly twentieth century take on the idea – one that struggles to balance hierarchy and equality.

The work of African-American psychologist Martin Jenkins on gifted black children in the 1930s and 1940s provides a uniquely valuable window into this contrast between democratic equality and an assumed mental hierarchy. Jenkins endeavored to prove that black gifted children shared the same characteristics of all gifted children, that black children too were among the rare few who possessed superior levels of tested intelligence – intelligence that represented a resource that must be identified and developed. In addition, Jenkins’s object was to demonstrate that this resource could only be developed in the appropriate environment, one with adequate schools and enriching cultural opportunities, an environment that the vast majority of black children in the United States were systematically excluded from. Jenkins sought to show that tested intelligence was a quality that only the rare gifted individual possessed at high levels. While Jenkins’s vision of mental ability viewed the differences among individuals as

great, Jenkins also sought to disprove the existence of intelligence disparities between races. With equality of opportunity, Jenkins believed, the real underlying hierarchy of human ability would reveal itself and at the same time disprove the fiction of racial hierarchies.

In many ways, Jenkins continued a legacy that extended back decades – a legacy that emphasized the importance of finding and educating the most talented and able black Americans. The most notable and influential proponent, sociologist and critic W.E.B. Du Bois, argued in 1903 that contra the assertions of men like Booker T. Washington, black Americans needed to educate their most able and ensure that this “talented tenth” received an academic education in colleges and universities. Du Bois wrote,

The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst, in their own and other races.⁸

Du Bois drew on history to make his case. Citing historical examples of exceptional black men such as Benjamin Banneker, Dr. James Derham, Lemuel Haynes, and David Walker, he argued that elite leadership had always been central to the struggle for abolition and emancipation.

Specifically, Du Bois took issue the notion that black leaders who gained positions of responsibility and authority during Reconstruction were examples of failed black leadership.

⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *The Negro Problem: A Series of Articles by Representative American Negroes of To-day*,” Booker T. Washington eds. (New York: James Pott & Company, 1903) 33.

It is the fashion of to-day to sneer at them and to say that with freedom Negro leadership should have begun at the plow and not the Senate — a foolish and mischievous lie; two hundred and fifty years that black serf toiled at the plow and yet that toiling was in vain till the Senate passed the war amendments; and two hundred and fifty years more the half-free serf of today my toil at his plow, but unless he have political rights and righteously guarded civic status he will still remain the poverty-stricken and ignorant plaything of rascals that he now is.⁹

To Du Bois, the failure of Reconstruction was not a failure of leadership, but due to the determined, organized, and often violent opposition of whites.

In claiming that elite leadership was necessary for racial progress, Du Bois echoed sentiments common in progressive circles. Also reflective of the era was Du Bois's explicitly gendered notion of what leadership meant as the sociologist drew a distinction between masculine and feminine leadership. Describing white attacks on black leaders by Du Bois wrote:

Because for three long centuries this people lynched Negroes who dared to be brave, raped black women who dared to be virtuous, crushed dark-hued youth who dared to be ambitious, and encouraged and made to flourish servility and lewdness and apathy. But not even this was able to crush all manhood and chastity and aspiration from black folk.¹⁰

Du Bois's conception of talent and excellence, then, clearly had a different meaning for men and women — for men, it meant bravery and ambition and for women, chastity and virtue. In addition, exceptional black Americans, Du Bois reminded his readers, were beaten down rather than raised up.

Jenkins's thinking on the right course for the most talented black Americans had much in common with that of Du Bois. Jenkins also believed that the most mentally able

⁹ Ibid., 42-43.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43-44.

must be identified and promoted for the good of the race and the good of society as a whole. Rather than the nineteenth century Horatio Alger-type model of a benevolent patron raising up the exceptional member of the lower classes, Jenkins embraced the systematic, scientific, and “neutral” model of giftedness. He, like Du Bois, believed that the most able should pursue academic training at colleges and universities. Jenkins also repeatedly asserted that these exceptional individuals were kept from reaching their potential by the disparities caused by racial discrimination rather than by any innate difference between the races. At the same time, there are instructive differences between these two visions of talent. For one, as the example of B above proves, Jenkins’s concept of giftedness was not gendered in the way that Du Bois’s was. The use of intelligence tests to identify those with the most mental ability suggested, at least in theory, a universal idea of intelligence, one not specific to any particular race or gender. Still, it is also remarkable that Jenkins used these tests – a technology often associated with reinforcing racial hierarchy and one eugenicists enthusiastically embraced – to not only promote the interests of gifted black children but to argue against prevailing notions of mental inferiority of black Americans, and to argue for a systemic, formal, bureaucratized solution in place of Alger-style individual benevolence.

Giftedness and Race

The most prominent early scholars of the gifted, Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Lewis Terman, did not specifically study gifted black children, and expressed the opinion that such children were rare. While Hollingworth would include black children in her Speyer

school gifted classes, the psychologist was also of the opinion that black children were generally of lower intelligence than whites. In her 1926 textbook, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture*, Hollingworth wrote:

Several surveys have been made to test the mentality of negro children. These surveys unexceptionally show a low average of intellect among children having negro blood. Comparatively few of these children are found within the range which includes the best one per cent of white children. It is, however, possible by prolonged search to find an occasional negro or mulatto child testing above 130 IQ.¹¹

Lewis Terman was even more convinced that IQ measured innate intelligence and provided proof of a real difference in intelligence between social and racial classes. Considering two case studies in his 1916, *The Measurement of Intelligence*, Terman famously wrote that these two,

. . . represent the level of intelligence which is very, very common among Spanish-Indian and Mexican families of the Southwest and also among negroes. Their dullness seems to be racial, or at least inherent in the family stocks from which they come. The fact that one meets this type with such extraordinary frequency among Indians, Mexicans, and negroes suggests quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods. The writer predicts that when this is done there will be discovered enormously significant racial differences in general intelligence, differences which cannot be wiped out by any scheme of mental culture.¹²

While numerous scholars have explored the close connection between intelligence testing and hierarchical views of race and class, the notion that giftedness based on an “objective” IQ number could transcend these categories and identify the mentally superior regardless of race, class, or gender was important to the technology’s remarkable

¹¹ Leta Hollingworth, *Gifted Children: Their Nature and Nurture* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1926) 69-70.

¹² Lewis Terman, *The Measurement of Intelligence*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916) 91-92.

appeal.¹³ The research and advocacy of Martin Jenkins offers a unique opportunity to examine how this appeal functioned. Jenkins, in essence, used Lewis Terman's technology to further the ends of W.E.B. Du Bois — finding and tracking the talented elite American black children through large-scale IQ test screening.

Jenkins was not the first to call attention to black children with high IQs. In 1927, educator and scholar Horace Mann Bond, a notable critic of intelligence testing, published a study, in the NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, concerning the test results of thirty black children who had taken the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Bond conducted his study using black testers with black children in an effort to show that the testing environment affected the end scores. Bond reported that of the thirty students, eight tested above 130 with the highest scoring 142.¹⁴ The only other study that focused exclusively on black gifted children prior to Jenkins's research was conducted by Lillian Steele Proctor, whose 1929 master's thesis at the University of Chicago studied thirty black students who tested as gifted in Washington, DC, screened from a total of twenty-six schools.¹⁵

As Nancy Stepan and Sander Gilman have demonstrated, there existed an extensive tradition of scientists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century who were themselves members of minority groups and who used the “idioms of science” to

¹³ For more on IQ as enforcing racial and class hierarchies see: Leslie Margolin, “Goodness Personified: The Emergence of Gifted Children,” *Social Problems* 40, no. 4. (1993); Leon J. Kamin, *The Science and Politics of IQ*, Psychology Press, 1974; Stephen Jay Gould, *Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996).

¹⁴ Horace Mann Bond, “Some Exceptional Negro Children,” *The Crisis*, 1927, 257-259.

¹⁵ Kathryn Kearney and Jene LeBlanc, “Forgotten pioneers in the study of gifted African-Americans” *Roepers Review*. May/Jun93, Vol. 15 Issue 4, 192; Horace Mann Bond, “Some Exceptional Negro Children,” *The Crisis*, 34: 257-59. 1927; Lillian Steele Proctor, “A Case Study of Thirty Superior Colored Children of Washington D.C.” Unpublished Masters' Thesis, Chicago: University of Chicago, 1929.

counter prevailing notions of scientific racism accepted by the mainstream.¹⁶ Bond and Proctor fit within this “critical tradition” identified by Stepan and Gilman and certainly, Jenkins’s work on gifted black children fit within this tradition as well. At the same time, as we will see, Jenkins’s research also fit within the broader “gifted child” project to identify via objective means those children who could be developed as a resource for the good of the nation.

Jenkin’s Early Life

Jenkins was born in Terre Haute, Indiana in 1904, the son of a successful carpenter who worked on bridge construction contracts for the state. Jenkins graduated from an integrated high school at age sixteen – interestingly the same high school as his later mentor and PhD advisor, Paul Witty, had attended five years earlier. Jenkins then went to Howard University earning a Bachelor of Science degree in 1925. From there Jenkins returned to Terre Haute working for this father in construction for five years. He later told a newspaper, “I started out as a water boy, and pushed wheelbarrows, and ran concrete mixers and clam shells . . . I couldn’t decide to stay in the business, though I’d have made a great deal more money.”¹⁷ Forgoing a career in construction, Jenkins returned to academia in 1932 to study psychology at Northwestern University under Paul Witty.

¹⁶ Nancy Leys Stepan and Sander L. Gilman, "Appropriating the idioms of science: The rejection of scientific racism," in *The Racial Economy of Science—Toward a democratic future*, S. Harding ed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993): 170.

¹⁷ Burke Davis, “Dr. Jenkins to be Inaugurated Tonight at Morgan,” *The Sun*, December 17, 1948.

While the author could find no evidence that Witty and Jenkins knew each other from Terre Haute, it seems likely that these two men who attended the same high school five years apart and then worked together as advisor and advisee at Northwestern had a previous connection. If there were a prior relationship, it certainly would add an Algeresque spin to Jenkins's biography – a fortuitous connection between a young man of promise and an older male benefactor who provided the opportunity he needed to succeed. Regardless of how Jenkins came to study psychology at Northwestern, he quickly focused his research on the phenomenon of gifted black children.

First Study of Gifted Black Children

Jenkins's doctoral research project utilized the same framework as Lewis Terman's initial studies of gifted children at Stanford that began in 1921. Like Terman, Jenkins began with a large population of students — over 8,000 black public school students in Chicago from grades three to eight. Jenkins directed teachers to nominate students using three criteria: most intelligent, produced the best work, and young for their grade. On the 539 nominees, Jenkins conducted group intelligence tests, and then every student who scored over 120 on the group test, was retested with the individual test, the Stanford-Binet. The 103 children that tested with an IQ above 120 constituted the basis of Jenkins's study.¹⁸

Jenkins framed his research questions thusly:

¹⁸ Martin Jenkins, "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence," *The Journal of Negro Education*, (April 1936), 175-6.

1. What is the incidence of Negro children of superior intelligence in a segment of school population of Chicago, Illinois?
2. At what age and grade-level are Negro children of superior intelligence found?
3. In what respects do superior Negro children conform to the general pattern of superior children studied by previous investigators in matters such as home background, educational achievement, interests, and developmental history?
4. What is the racial composition of Negro children of superior intelligence?¹⁹

In addition to administering intelligence tests to his gifted group, Jenkins gathered additional data to learn about the characteristics of gifted black children. Jenkins administered personality tests and surveyed his subjects' interests and preferred activities. He also investigated their families' backgrounds, including socio-economic status and levels of education. In addition, Jenkins surveyed each family's "racial ancestry" to roughly gauge the racial composition of group.²⁰

Using this data, Jenkins found that gifted black children largely resembled gifted children generally – the incidence of high IQ children, in the population he studied was similar to the incidence of giftedness in the population at large. The group even included B, whose IQ of 200 was "equaled or exceeded by fewer than ten of the hundreds of thousands of children to whom intelligence tests have been administered."²¹ The children in Jenkins's study represented a range of ages, a fact that countered the "frequently-expressed opinion that Negro children tend toward mediocrity above the primary school

¹⁹ Ibid., 175

²⁰ Jenkins, "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence," 176; D. A. Wilkerson, Reviewed Work: "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence." by Martin D. Jenkins *The Journal of Negro Education*, 127.

²¹ D. A. Wilkerson, Reviewed Work: "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence." by Martin D. Jenkins *The Journal of Negro Education*, 128.

level.”²² In terms of interests and activities, Jenkins found a wide range among his subjects and typical for children their age — findings that mirrored similar studies of white gifted children. Jenkins concluded, “Certainly, the findings of this study can lead to no other conclusion than that the Negro children of superior intelligence are *typical* children of superior intelligence.”²³ Jenkins articulated giftedness as a distinct type that was racially inclusive. Jenkins’s argument is striking in a number of ways not least of which is the contradictory idea of typical exceptional individuals. “Gifted” here is treated as an essential category, as is, ironically, race even as Jenkins is attempting to disprove the scientific racism that prevailed in psychology of intelligence.

In terms of the family background of his subjects, Jenkins’s results were also similar to psychologists who had studied mostly white populations. For example, the parents of the gifted children in Jenkins’s study tended to be well-educated — on average fathers had 13.9 years of schooling and mothers, 12.8 — figures similar to research conducted by Terman. These parents also tended to be of a higher occupational status — another commonality with Terman’s research. Using the Taussig Scale, most of Jenkins’s gifted children had a parent in the highest category, “Group V: Professional or large business,” or the second highest, “Category IV: Clerical or semi-intellectual.” At the same time, only 6.3 percent had a parent in the lowest category, “Group I: Unskilled occupations.”²⁴

²² Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins, “The educational achievement of a group of gifted negro children,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 25(8), Nov 1934, 189.

²³ Qtd in D. A. Wilkerson, Reviewed Work: “A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence.” by Martin D. Jenkins *The Journal of Negro Education*, 128.

²⁴ Jenkins, “A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence,” 182.

While these findings were similar in form to the findings of Terman and Henry Goddard, Jenkins also demonstrated his willingness to interpret data in the context of black Americans' limited career opportunities within the United States. For the data on occupational status, Jenkins explained that racism imposed limitations on black Americans had to be considered in when using assessments of this kind. Jenkins explained:

The limitations of the Taussig Scale and other measures of socio-economic status, when applied to Negro groups, should be recognized. The hierarchy of occupations is not the same for Negroes and whites in the United States, consequently, a given occupation may represent a different socio-economic level in the two groups. The classification of postal workers is a case in point. Tuassig places "mailmen" in Group II of his scale, along with semi-skilled workers and the like. The Negro postal worker, however, certainly enjoyed a higher relative status than this within the Negro group; the writer, therefore, feels justified in placing postal workers in Group IV.²⁵

This ability to contextualize quantitative psychological data and consider the social position of black Americans was a hallmark of Jenkins research and key to understanding how he viewed tested intelligence and giftedness. Jenkins revision of the Taussig Scale was largely subjective, but of course the scale itself with its attempts to measure a cultural concept like socio-economic status was largely subjective to begin with. Jenkins's willingness to make nuanced use of this data mirrors his treatment of intelligence testing.

In addition to his assertion that gifted black children were "typical" gifted children Jenkins used his research to counter prevailing notions of racial differences in

²⁵ Ibid.

mental ability in general. Jenkins began by surveying his gifted subjects' parents on their racial background. Explained Jenkins:

Parents were asked to state to the best of their ability, their racial composition, i.e., approximate proportions of Negro, white, Indian, or other racial ancestry. The racial composition of each child was then computed from that of his parents. The subjects were divided into four groups: (1) N (those having no white ancestry), (2) NNW (those having more Negro ancestry than white), (3) NW (those having about an equal amount of Negro and white ancestry), and 4 (those having more white ancestry than Negro). Gross classifications of this character tend to eliminate minor errors in final estimates.²⁶

Using these responses, Jenkins found that 68.3 percent of his subjects had more African ancestry than white — a percentage comparable to the general black population in the United States, according to recent anthropological studies.²⁷ This finding, Jenkins argued, was relevant to the debate over differences in mental ability based upon race. If intelligence were linked to race, one would expect the most intelligent black individuals to have a higher percentage of European ancestry. As Witty and Jenkins explained in another paper,

Now, if whites are superior to Negroes in intelligence-test performance *because of a racial factor*, a group of Negro children of superior intelligence should be composed predominantly, if not exclusively, of children with large amounts of white ancestry. This group of Negro children of superior intelligence, however, constitutes a typical cross-section, in racial composition, of the American Negro population.²⁸

This framework, what Witty and Jenkins termed an “intra-race” rather than an “inter-race” approach, was premised on the idea that intelligence test scores were partly the product of an individual’s environment and in the words of the psychologists “reflect

²⁶ Ibid., 184.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins, “The educational achievement of a group of gifted negro children,” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 25(8), (Nov 1934): 189.

cultural opportunities as well as innate factors.”²⁹ For Jenkins, tested intelligence could be both the product of environment and a meaningful identifier of individuals who possessed exceptional potential.

Jenkins argued his research subjects were gifted due to both their innate superior abilities and the relatively propitious opportunities they received living in Chicago where education for black children was of a higher quality than other regions of the country, especially the South. 73.4 percent of Jenkins’s gifted subjects were born in Chicago, while 15.6 percent were born in the South. Jenkins additionally noted, “It is perhaps significant that not a single member of the superior group has ever attended school in a southern state.”³⁰ Jenkins explicitly made the link between his group of gifted children and the beneficial environment in which they were raised:

Objective test scores reflect cultural as well as innate factors. Essential to a valid interpretation of test data is an understanding of the socio-economic milieu of individuals or groups whose test performance is being evaluated. The superior children in this paper all live in Chicago’s South side between 45th and 68th Streets. This section is populated almost exclusively with Negroes. The community affords opportunity for educational and cultural development – standard schools providing instruction from the kindergarten through the university, libraries, museums, parks, *et cetera*, are available to all persons.³¹

For Jenkins, then, tested intelligence represented a real resource worthy of development, and the highly intelligent, who Jenkins referred to as “superior,” were gifted and necessarily must be identified and developed in the same manner as gifted white children.

At the same time, Jenkins recognized that even the highly intelligent and most superior

²⁹ Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins, “Intra-race testing and Negro intelligence,” *Journal of Psychology*, 1, 438.

³⁰ Jenkins, "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence," 181.

³¹ Jenkins, "A Socio-Psychological Study of Negro Children of Superior Intelligence," 176.

required these “opportunities for educational and cultural development” for their ability to become measureable.

Even though Jenkins’s dissertation broke new ground in the field of gifted children as the first systematic study of gifted black children, it was not published. Instead a comprehensive article on his research appeared in the *Journal of Negro Education* in 1936 – the journal in which the bulk of Jenkins’s research would appear in subsequent years. Founded in 1932 by Charles Thompson professor of education at Howard University, the *Journal of Negro Education* was founded to directly address the lack of research about and advocacy for the education of black Americans.³² Over the course of its run, which continues to the present day, the journal published articles by Horace Mann Bond, Ralph Bunche, W.E.B. Du Bois, John Hope Franklin, and Alain Locke.³³ Most notably, the journal featured Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s 1950 "Emotional factors in racial identification and preference in Negro children” the famous “doll experiments” research that would later be cited in the *Brown vs. Board* decision.³⁴

Tracking Highly Gifted Black Children at Howard

Jenkins would earn his PhD in 1935 and accepted a position as registrar and professor of education at North Carolina A&T, later moving to dean of instruction at

³² "Editorial Comment: Why a Journal of Negro Education?" *The Journal of Negro Education* 1, no. 1 (1932): 1-4. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2292009>.

³³ "The Complete Bibliography of ‘The Journal of Negro Education,’ 1932-2006," *The Journal of Negro Education* 75, no. 2 (2006): 73. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40037237>.

³⁴ Kenneth B. Clark, and Mamie P. Clark, "Emotional factors in racial identification and preference in Negro children," *The Journal of Negro Education* 19, no. 3 (1950): 341-350.

Cheyney State Teacher's College in Pennsylvania — both historically black colleges. From there, Jenkins in 1938 joined the faculty of Howard University as a professor of education. At Howard, Jenkins embarked on his next major project to gather information on highly gifted black children – children with IQs over 160 – and tracking their achievements in a longitudinal study. As with his dissertation research, Jenkins took Lewis Terman's work as model for his own. Although working on a smaller scale, Jenkins, like Terman, looked to follow the progress of exceptional young people as identified by their IQ scores — a research study that by its very design indicated a faith that these high IQ children held exceptional potential worthy of close study.

To find highly gifted black children, Jenkins, beginning in May of 1939, contacted psychologists who had conducted research on gifted children and had reported black children among their subjects. Jenkins wrote to Leta Stetter Hollingworth of New York University for more information on students in her Speyer classes, to Harvey Zorbaugh also at New York University at the Clinic for the Social Adjustment of the Gifted, to Dr. M. G. Reiman of Catholic University, and Professor Arthur Bills of University of Cincinnati. Jenkins letter to Bills was typical. He summarized his own previous research into gifted black children, and mentioned in particular his discovery of the highly gifted “B.” Concerning his project to obtain information on black children with record IQs 160 and above, Jenkins wrote, “Our Bureau of Educational Research is attempting to secure authentic records of very superior Negro children since the existence of these children is a matter of some educational or psychological significance.”³⁵

³⁵ Martin D. Jenkins to A.G. Bills, May 16, 1939, MJMC.

In addition to scholars, Jenkins also wrote directly to school districts across the country including New York, Washington DC, Chicago, Cleveland, and Glencoe, Illinois — sometimes referencing newspaper profiles of exceptional students. To the principal of Walton Senior High School in New York City, Jenkins wrote, “Recently reported in the press was an article concerning Miss Bernice Joyce Calvin, who graduated from your school either last June or in February of this year. It appears that Miss Calvin completed the high school course at the age of fourteen and was the youngest member of her class.”³⁶ Jenkins then explained his project and asked for a brief case study of the student including information on her home background, grades, test records, and extra-curricular activities. Jenkins concluded, “I am hopeful that you will consider this request in the light of its possible contribution to our fuller knowledge of Negro youth.” Using this somewhat haphazard method of reaching out directly to possible sources of gifted black students, Jenkins located a total of twelve children who met his criteria. Along with two students, which included “B,” Jenkins had fourteen subjects with documented IQs over 160.³⁷

For Jenkins, the difficulty of locating gifted black children was itself an indication that such students were less likely to receive the support and opportunities of their white counterparts. Jenkins noted, for example, the lack of supporting infrastructure for the gifted within schools that served black students. As Jenkins wrote,

A word may be inserted here concerning the difficulty of securing verified cases of Negro children of exceptionally high Binet IQ. In general the high IQ child

³⁶ Martin D. Jenkins to Principal of Walton Senior High School, May 16, 1939, MJMC.

³⁷ Martin Jenkins, “Case studies of Negro children of Binet IQ 160 and above,” *Journal of Negro Education* 12, no. 2 (1943): 160.

(without regard to race) is identified either (1) in surveys of gifted children, (2) in psycho-educational clinics, usually those connected with universities, or (3) in schools or school systems which provide for the individual examination of exceptional children. A relatively small proportion of the Negro population is covered by any of these.³⁸

Jenkins also pointed to the fact that there was no recorded instance of a gifted black child identified in the South likely due to a lack of these institutional services for that population. In continuing with a recurring theme in Jenkins work, the highly gifted black children were less commonly identified because they lacked the support, environment, and opportunities to which white children typically had access.

As he did in his dissertation study, Jenkins again carefully delineated the ways in which his group of highly gifted subjects were “typical” of all such exceptional children. For example, Jenkins noted that eight of the students were accelerated to higher-grade levels, including a six year old who had advanced to the sixth grade. Like many gifted advocates, Jenkins worried about the effects, explaining that acceleration imposes a handicap to making a satisfactory social and emotional adjustment.³⁹ Like other gifted advocates, Jenkins also expressed concern that teachers of these students did not fully appreciate their gifts. He noted, for example, that one student was nominated as “best student” by her 5th grade teacher but the same teacher “named as ‘most intelligent’ a 12 year old girl of 90 IQ!”⁴⁰ In addition, Jenkins noted, as he did in his dissertation study, that it was typical of highly gifted students to come from families with high socioeconomic status with high levels of education. At the same time Jenkins placed this

³⁸ Ibid., 160-1.

³⁹ Ibid., 163.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

data in context, “But it must be understood that even the most exceptional members of the racial group of which these subjects are members have a much more restricted opportunity for attaining eminence than do members of the dominant racial group in this country.”⁴¹ Jenkins repeatedly emphasized how racial inequality in the United States restricted even those with identifiable talent from achieving their potential.

In his work on gifted black children, Jenkins repeatedly contextualized the achievements of his subjects within a culture that systematically denied black Americans opportunities. In an important sense, Jenkins echoed Du Bois argument in “The Talented Tenth” that the exceptionally talented leaders among black Americans were denied their rightful status due to white supremacy. At the same time, drawing on the scientific authority of intelligence testing, Jenkins attempted to make an argument about the universality of mental ability. Again this meant Jenkins took the paradoxical position that gifted black children were exceptional in the typical way.

While admitting that his sample was small and his data on such factors as social adjustment, health, emotional maturity, and development history was incomplete, Jenkins took pains to show how his group of highly gifted black children shared characteristics of highly gifted children in general. Jenkins explained, “On the basis of information now at hand, however, the generalization may be made that the Negro child of extremely high IQ manifests essentially the same characteristics as the white child of extremely high IQ, at least during the early years of development.” Jenkins’s research on these highly gifted or superior children supported his thesis that such gifted represented a real resource of

⁴¹ Ibid., 163-4.

potentially high achieving children. If they were not necessarily geniuses, he allowed, he still maintained that, “Perhaps it is safe to say that it is from among the ranks of these extreme deviates in IQ that genius is recruited.”⁴² Jenkins argued then that the “genius” of highly gifted black children had to be cultivated just like the “genius” of highly gifted children of any race.

At the same time Jenkins, like all psychologists and educators who promoted the gifted, characterized giftedness as a real category of rare individuals with an elite potential. Jenkins was also uniquely aware that an adequate environment and appropriate opportunities were required for gifted children to develop. Racial inequality systematically denied this environment and opportunities to black children in the United States, Jenkins believed. Jenkins argued that his group of gifted black children demonstrate “that we may discover extreme deviates in psychometric intelligence in our schools unrecognized and denied the type of educational experiences which are necessary for their best development.” He noted that environment played a large factor in the development of his subjects, noting that all of the children in his study lived in one of four northern cities New York, Chicago, Washington, and Cincinnati and that there was no reason to assume that gifted Negro children are concentrated in these cities. Jenkins asserted, then, “It may be concluded, or at least hypothesized, that similar children, unidentified and unrecognized, are to be found in other communities throughout the country, their potential usefulness to society, partly or wholly lost.”⁴³ Jenkins then echoed many advocates for the gifted by lamenting the impending loss of a key natural resource

⁴² Ibid., 160.

⁴³ Ibid., 165.

if these children were not properly identified and developed. Jenkins's plea adds the element of racial discrimination as yet another force preventing the United States from fully developing this natural resource of latent mental ability in all the individuals in which it might be found.

With his study on highly gifted black children, Jenkins again used his research to argue against racial differences in intelligence. Jenkins asserted that the very existence of black children with IQ scores that exceeded 160, a group estimated to be only one tenth of one percent of all children, indicated that the distribution of intelligence among blacks and whites was essentially the same. As Jenkins concluded, "The extreme deviates are of the greatest significance as they indicate that Negroes are as variable as other racial groups and that Negro ancestry is not a limiting factor, per se, in psychometric intelligence."⁴⁴ For Jenkins too the existence of highly gifted black children only highlighted the systematic discrimination all black Americans faced: "Finally, these cases bring into sharp focus the limitations which our society places on the development of the highly gifted Negro. These children are nurtured in a culture in which racial inferiority of the Negro is a basic assumption. Consequently, they will experience throughout their lives, educational, social, and occupational restrictions which must inevitably affect achievement and motivation."⁴⁵ For Jenkins the limitations placed on black Americans meant that the most able would be in danger of never reaching their potential.

Through his research, Jenkins sought to show that when black communities were provided with an adequate social and educational environment, they could produce the

⁴⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

same high IQ, gifted children as white communities and that race was no barrier to superior intelligence. Underlying this argument was an assumption that mental ability was a highly variable attribute with extreme deviates on both end, and that when all children were given equal opportunities this hierarchy of talent would necessarily reveal itself. For Jenkins, perhaps the rare psychologist who rejected and actively debunked the idea that tested intelligence was variable by race, this affirmation of a colorblind hierarchy demonstrates the persistence and attractiveness of hierarchical notions of intelligence.

Jenkins clearly recognized that quantitative psychological tests in general and the IQ test in particular were powerful tools. To Jenkins these tools could identify potential genius as they were invested with the imprimatur of scientific authority that could dispassionately prove that an individual possessed superior mental capacity. Well aware of the systematic racism that sharply limited opportunities for black Americans, he used his position as a research psychologist to make these tools to demonstrate that individual black Americans could also be among the mental elite. Doing so however involved making a claim for equality that explicitly endorsed the existence of a natural hierarchy. Hence the paradoxical claims that gifted black children were not only exceptional, but exceptional in the typical way. Jenkins's argument for equality buttressed by inherent inequality ultimately seems to be self-defeating.

Developing Gifted Black Children as a National Resource

Jenkins also had occasion to share his thoughts on how gifted black children should be identified and educated. Here again there were many similarities with white gifted advocates, but also an acknowledgement that black gifted students faced unique challenges due to racial inequality. Speaking in Philadelphia to the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools in 1937, Jenkins warned the teachers to not neglect their gifted students. Noting that the conference theme of “individual student differences” as timely Jenkins added, “Timely too, is the emphasis upon the gifted and the talented. Confronted, as we have been in Negro education, with large numbers of underprivileged children, we have perhaps devoted too much attention to the problems of below-par students; certain is it that we have been too little concerned with the above par students.”⁴⁶ As with gifted child advocates like Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Lewis Terman, Jenkins justified more resources to be allocated to identify and develop the gifted by implying that resources were wasted on those at the bottom of the same hierarchy. Jenkins went on further to say that this lack of attention the gifted had resulted in “too much retardation of superior students.”⁴⁷ Common among gifted advocates, Jenkins reinforced the “twin” nature of the two ends of the intelligence hierarchy by claiming that the school curriculum effectively “handicapped” or “retarded” the gifted student.

Jenkins also worried that the gifted black children were not being challenged in school to sufficiently develop their abilities. He pointed to the narrow course offerings and limited extracurricular activities for black high school students as an issue that

⁴⁶ Martin Jenkins, “The Conservation of Talent,” Address to National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, Philadelphia, PA, July 28, 1937. MJMC.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

impedes the potential development of the gifted student. Noting that the Office of Education and the National Survey of Secondary Education among Negroes have reported that the secondary curriculum at black high schools was typically uniform for all students in both kind and length, Jenkins argued that as a result of this uniformity, it was likely that superior students did not have to work at full capacity. “One of the serious consequences of this is the inculcation of habits of laziness and indifference,” he warned. Drawing on the metaphor of physical development Jenkins warned that not providing gifted students with opportunities to engage in more varied and difficult works meant their talents would go undeveloped, “The result is that many talents are not awakened, others not adequately developed, and still others are allowed to atrophy because of disuse.”⁴⁸ Jenkins’s framing of the issue, in many respects echoed Frederick Taylor’s worries over workers “soldiering” or working only the minimal amount required – a practice that reduced efficiency and represented an anathema to the entire system of scientific development.

In Jenkins framing, the gifted student project could not fail, but only be failed. The fact of their existence and potential superiority went unquestioned, even though his research on the interaction between race and intelligence revealed just how malleable and environment-dependent tested intelligence could be. Jenkins argued,

Perhaps the strongest indictment against the school, however, in this matter is the fact that the superior students fail as much as the average and inferior students. This shows that in disregarding his strong points he has been assigned to tasks in which he is weak or has no interest, or that because of the quantity and rate of speed of the work are so far below his capacity he loses interest and fails.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Jenkins embraced the central paradox of giftedness, that it both existed only in a small number of children and required “special provisions” to develop.

Jenkins noted that the situation with regard to gifted black students at colleges and universities mirrored that of secondary schools. Black colleges, Jenkins alleged, generally made no special provision for superior students, noting that a survey of college catalogs shows that only four mention superior students at all. Overall, Jenkins writes, Negro colleges have far more policies directed at the underperforming student, “Almost without exception the college catalog sets forth very definitely what will be done with the student who does not come up to the required standard; provisions for probation, dismissal, curtailment of privileges or of schedule are familiar to all of us. Striking indeed is the difference in the amount of attention given the above-average and the below-average student.” Concerning black colleges and universities Jenkins concluded, “The very meager amount of evidence adduced here suggests that these institutions, in the main, are giving far too little attention to the conservation of intellectual talent.”⁵⁰ Like Taylor, Jenkins viewed exceptional ability as a national resource that required scientific development to properly conserve.

Jenkins outlined for teachers the changes he believed were needed in schools for black children to properly develop the gifted students. First, schools needed to recognize that such students existed. Jenkins argued that the lack of recognition of gifted black students in black schools stemmed from these schools particular focus on the less able students. Jenkins asserted, “So concerned have we been with the need of remedying in

⁵⁰ Ibid.

part the meager educational background of sub-standard students, with the need of raising the general average level of achievement, that we have neglected almost entirely the very existence of those individuals who constitute that most valuable material we have.” Even though Jenkins believed the deleterious effects that racial inequality had on development of all black students, he nevertheless also insisted that the very few gifted comprised the “most valuable material we have.” Jenkins later emphasized, “Every administrator, every teacher, in our schools must recognize the existence of, and the potential value of, these individuals to society and to the race.”⁵¹

According to Jenkins, beyond recognizing the existence of gifted students, schools serving black students also needed to do more to identify them. Jenkins believed that intelligence tests represented the best available, if still flawed, technology for locating gifted students. Jenkins maintained, “The best means yet devised for isolating deviates is the use of standardized tests of mental ability. As imperfect as these tests admittedly are, they do provide a fairly accurate evaluation of the academic aptitude of individual students.” At the same time Jenkins allowed that, especially in the case of black students, intelligence tests should not be the only criteria for giftedness. Because of their background and relative lack of opportunities, black students, according to Jenkins “have not had the opportunity to gain the experiences presupposed by the intelligence test technique.” Therefore he recommended that students whose academic achievement was high should also be considered as gifted even if their test scores were relatively low. Jenkins clearly viewed intelligence test scores as partly a product of environment and

⁵¹ Ibid.

therefore could not be relied upon to always identify gifted black children or accurately represent the relative intelligence of blacks compared to whites. Given this belief, it seems significant that he nevertheless believed in not only the usefulness, but the necessity of the gifted category. Jenkins displayed a faith that a small percentage of individuals were superior even if testing was an unreliable gauge. “The identification of talent is an essential prerequisite to the conservation of talent” Jenkins urged the teachers.⁵² Exceptional ability and potential existed and must be conserved.

Like his mentor, Paul Witty, Jenkins had a nuanced view of intelligence testing – not surprising considering his refusal to take the average group scores of black and white Americans at face value. Jenkins’s view of these tests, in fact, has much in common with the view that would eventually be commonplace among psychologists and scholars of gifted children – essentially that intelligence tests were flawed but provided one tool to identify gifted children. What Jenkins certainly believed, and what continues to be commonly accepted among scholars and educators in the field, was that despite the flawed nature of what was once the only diagnostic instrument to identify the gifted, the category of gifted was nevertheless a real classification just one that might require a variety of tools to uncover.

As to what kind of development black gifted students needed, Jenkins followed the advice of many gifted advocates while also providing an outline for a curriculum particular to black gifted students. Jenkins believed that the curriculum at black schools must be adapted to the meet the needs of gifted students. In doing so he again embraced

⁵² Ibid., 13.

the framing of white gifted advocates, “All too often one hears the statement, ‘The good student needs no special provision, we will take care of himself,’ I can’t emphasize too much the tragic waste which inheres in such a point of view.”⁵³ This insistence that the gifted child could not “go it alone” or “take care of himself” reinforced the notion that the enormous potential for the gifted to succeed was real, but also tenuous and fragile.

Jenkins like many gifted child advocates weighed various available methods for providing the gifted students with the challenging curriculum they needed to develop their talent. Jenkins relayed that special classes for gifted students allowed for students to receive more challenging instruction but at a price. Jenkins argued “for segregation, whatever its basis, may become inimical to the democratic foundation of the public school. Certainly the public school should aim to inculcate in children the philosophy of social responsibility and it should, in so far as it is able, provide children with technique which will aid them in living effectively together.”⁵⁴ This idea that gifted students should not be separated from their more-typical peers in order to better inculcate democratic values was common among gifted advocates, but of course Jenkins characterizing special classes as “segregation” that is “inimical to the democratic foundation of the public school” to an audience of black teachers who worked in segregated black schools adds another dimension to the typical balancing of promoting the elite and maintaining democratic values that gifted advocates strove for. In essence, Jenkins made a claim for racial equality that explicitly endorsed the existence of a natural hierarchy. Jenkins’s thinking was also evident in his seemingly self-contradictory assertion that gifted black

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 14.

children were exceptional, but exceptional in a typical way. Jenkins's argument for racial equality seems limited by framework of innate inequality in which it was couched.

Jenkins also mentioned acceleration — promoting gifted students to higher grades where the schoolwork might match the student's ability — and expressed concerns that gifted children could become socially maladjusted if placed with much older children.⁵⁵ Jenkins spoke of a third method, enrichment, more favorably. Enrichment meant placing gifted children in classrooms with their typical peers while also providing them challenging material when they finished that day's assigned work. Jenkins cautioned that this enrichment should not consist of merely additional work but activities that “will provide wider and richer experiences for the pupil and which will stimulate him to do independent and creative work. This type of work involves recognition of pupil's interests, larger individual freedom, encouragement of creative and research-type work, projects and independent reading.”⁵⁶ Like his fellow gifted child advocates, Jenkins emphasized the importance of nurturing the gifted student's imagination and creativity through meaningful student-directed work— an explicit rejection of rote and industrial education even though an affinity for this industrial education was what the IQ test measured in the first place.

Jenkins summarized his argument thusly, bringing together his main themes of the existence of gifted black students and the need to systematically develop their talent lest it go to waste:

⁵⁵ Ibid., 15-16.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 17.

The conservation of intellectual talent should be one of the major goals of modern education. To identify exceptional individuals, to provide opportunity for their development, to stimulate them to their highest achievement, to assure that their potentialities become actualities, becomes both an obligation of and an opportunity for teachers of Negro youth. Let us neither decline the obligation nor neglect the opportunity!⁵⁷

While Jenkins advocated for gifted black students to be identified and afforded the same treatment as white gifted students, he also acknowledged the particular curricular needs of academically able students who would attend college and become professionals. In another speech to the National Association of Teacher in Colored Schools in 1937, Jenkins outlined the kind of additional instruction black students would need in order to ensure the “development of attitudes, appreciations, aptitudes, information and skills which will function with respect to the peculiar problems of American Negroes.”⁵⁸

Jenkins argued that “Negro education means more education, not less” and that education in black colleges must “orient students with respect to the peculiar problems which Negroes must face.” While for Jenkins the education of black students in the sciences should be no different than white students, courses dealing with “social experience” — history and the social sciences — should be adapted for the particular social needs of black students. In reviewing the course catalogs of black colleges for courses “dealing specifically with the Negro,” Jenkins found that of thirty-seven

⁵⁷ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁸ Martin Jenkins, “The College Curriculum as an Instrumentality for Serving the Needs of Negro Students,” Address to National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools, Philadelphia, PA, July 28, 1937. MJMC.

institutions, thirty had a history course, nineteen a sociology, fourteen a literature course — each of which focused on black Americans.⁵⁹

Building off of this foundation of coursework that taught black students with the social needs of black Americans in a racist society, Jenkins proposed that every graduate of a Negro college should be required to take three courses dealing specifically with the black experience: Social and Economic Problems of the Negro, History of the Negro, and Race Relations. He further recommended that prospective teachers take a course on Negro education. A further issue for Jenkins was whether the faculty at most black colleges would be prepared to teach these course as most faculty at black colleges were trained at northern predominantly white universities which do not consider the special problems of the Negro. To address this problem, he proposed a committee of national organization of black college teachers could create syllabi for such courses.⁶⁰

Jenkins's speeches to the National Association of Teachers in Colored Schools reflected his belief in the reality of black gifted children and the essential sameness they shared with gifted children of all races. His advice also reflected his understanding of the role a racialized environment played in shaping the lives of black children in America, gifted or not. This faith that elite and rare talent existed in the gifted yet still had to be expertly developed to be conserved less it disappear was common to all gifted advocates, but Jenkins in particular provides a fascinating case given his clear understanding of the role racism played in limiting the potential of gifted black students.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

While Jenkins speeches outline his philosophy regarding how best to develop black gifted children, it is also worth looking at the children who took part in his study of highly gifted children. It seems clear that Jenkins was personally as well as professionally invested in these sixteen children. The psychologist gathered and saved a considerable number of documents related to them: case files from their schools, letters he received from their parents, photographs, and even clippings of newspaper articles in which they had been profiled. Jenkins did not get the chance to complete his longitudinal study that would follow these children into adulthood – he worked for the United States Office of Education during the Second World War and in 1948 accepted the position of President of Morgan State. Still, it is clear from his later letters that Jenkins did not forget his cohort of highly gifted black children.

Children and their gifts

Framing gifted children as a collective resource to be developed inevitably ran into the issue of the whether the children themselves would cooperate. Much like Taylor’s soldiering workers, gifted children individually varied as to their enthusiasm for the “system” that direct their development. “Gifts” according to cultural anthropologists, demand reciprocation, but gifts also can be unwelcome and the need to reciprocate an onerous and unwanted obligation.⁶¹

⁶¹ See: Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, 1925. Translated by Ian Cunnison, (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 2011 ed.); David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn, (NY: Melville House, 2014 ed.).

Like the “typical” gifted children to whom Jenkins regularly compared them, the highly gifted children in his study would have been expected to reciprocate their giftedness with achievement in academics, obtaining high-status occupations and acclaim for their work. In addition to realizing their potential as highly gifted children, Jenkins expected them to be data points in his argument that gifted children could be black and black children could be gifted. In letters, Jenkins expressed his hope that his research would convince his white colleagues of this fact. In one 1942 letter to a school official in Cincinnati for more information about a young gifted boy, Darwin Turner, Jenkins wrote:

I need not convince you of the significance of these highly gifted Negro children. White psychologists and educationists are generally unaware that such children are to be found. What is needed is careful and objective study of a relatively large number of these children and particularly their adjustment in this biracial culture of ours.⁶²

In another letter to a Chicago psychologist, Jenkins wrote that he had presented a paper at the Washington-Baltimore meeting of American Psychological Association, noting “It appeared to be well received, especially as many of our white friends have never thought of Negro children at this level.”⁶³ Jenkins was one of the only psychologists researching high IQ black children, and worked in a field where many of his colleagues assumed that race and intelligence were linked. He no doubt felt pressure to accumulate as much data on the subject as he could, and it is reasonable to suppose that the children he studied felt a similar pressure as well.

Jenkins actively sought to convince his white colleagues to acknowledge his research on gifted black children. After his paper, “Case studies of Negro children of

⁶² Martin D. Jenkins to Laura K. Turner, November 28, 1942, MJMC.

⁶³ Martin D. Jenkins to Albert Beckham, April 22, 1942, MJMC.

Binet IQ 160 and above” was published in the *Journal of Negro Education*, Jenkins sent copies to eminent psychologists such as John Dashiell, head of the Psychological Laboratory at University of North Carolina, E.L. Thorndike at Columbia University, and even Lewis Terman at Stanford. Jenkins distributed the article even further, but the above three were among those who wrote back.⁶⁴ Although Jenkins’s scholarship argued that these high IQ children were typical of all gifted children, it seems evident that in an important way they were not. Jenkins children, unlike Terman’s “Termites,” were expected to help combat entrenched ideas about intelligence and race – an additional obligation it seemed that black gifted children were expected to reciprocate.

The extent to which the children were affected or even aware of these obligations is an open question, but there are indications that they were. In the newspaper profiles of the children Jenkins saved there exists a clear theme that the existence of these high IQ children disproved racist assumptions about mental ability. For example, columnist Havelock Ellis wrote in 1935 in the *Chicago Herald and Examiner* referencing Jenkins’s research on Blanche Leatherman (using the pseudonym, “B,”) and writing that the discovery of a black girl with a 200 IQ meant “that there is no ground for the commonly proclaimed limiting influence of Negro blood on intelligence.”⁶⁵ A 1944 article in the African-American paper, *The Chicago Defender*, profiled Jenkins’s subject, Craig Work.

⁶⁴ John F. Dashiell to Martin D. Jenkins, June 30 1943, MJMC; Martin D. Jenkins, Letter to E.L. Thorndike, June 21, 1943, MJMC.; Lewis M. Terman to Martin D. Jenkins, July 15, 1943. Dashiell sent along his thanks and called Jenkins article an important study. Thorndike responded that he had read the article with great interest. Terman wrote that he hoped Jenkins continued his research until he had a large amount of data and commented that Jenkins’s research was, “particularly important at this time.”

⁶⁵ Havelock Ellis, “Precocious Children: The Predominance of Individuality Over Race,” *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, June 8, 1935, MJMC.

Work had a white mother and black father and the profile, entitled, "Mixed Marriage Produces Genius," begins "The Bilbos and Rankins won't like this one."⁶⁶ This statement was a reference to the staunch segregationist congressmen, Theodore Bilbo and John Rankin, who regularly railed against the dangers of race mixing. The line implies that simply by existing as a gifted and black twelve year old, Craig Work was striking a blow against racist political rhetoric. In another article in Jenkins's collection from the *Washington Afro-American*, a photo of Work on the front page sits under the caption "Has IQ Enough for Two."⁶⁷ The implication that being gifted and black came with certain obligations would have been difficult for a child like Work to ignore.

In the archives there are numerous letters to Jenkins from Craig Work's mother, Arminta, and from Josephine Schuyler, mother of Philippa Schuyler, another of Jenkin's subjects. The mothers – both of whom incidentally were white – endeavored to provide Jenkins with as full a picture as possible of their children. Jenkins saved six letters from Arminta Work, Craig's mother, all of which followed his request for "additional information" regarding Craig beyond what was contained in his testing files. Jenkins informed Mrs. Work that, "The very existence of these children is a matter of some educational and psychological significance and it is our purpose to check the identification of these children and to follow their later development."⁶⁸ Arminta Work sent along a certificate of merit Craig earned, report cards, newsletters, a list of her son's

⁶⁶ "Mixed Marriage Produces Genius," *The Chicago Defender*, Apr 22, 1944.

⁶⁷ "Has IQ Enough for Two," *Washington Afro-American*, April 15, 1944, MJMC.

⁶⁸ Martin D. Jenkins to Mrs. Work, November 28, 1942, MJMC.

extracurricular activities, and several photographs.⁶⁹ In the end, it appears that Mrs. Work at least was satisfied with Jenkins's article on Craig and the other black children with IQ over 160 — in which he was like the others anonymous. Arminta Work thanked Jenkins after receiving a copy of the article, "It is difficult to adequately express my appreciation for the gift of that wonderfully written article."⁷⁰ Mrs. Work then goes on to describe mention that she looks forward to meeting Jenkins the next time he is in New York and describes in detail a play that Craig had a role in.

Philippa Schuyler's mother, Josephine, had a more ambivalent response to her daughter's inclusion in Jenkins's research. While it appears that Josephine Schuyler was not hesitant to seek publicity for her daughter in general, she also expressed reservations about Philippa gaining notoriety for her intelligence test score.⁷¹ She wrote to Jenkins about a planned newspaper article that would profile both Craig Work and Philippa (all emphasis in original):

Philippa has always gotten publicity by legitimate means — she did something that had news value. She performed in recitals, on radio or in contests. She MADE NEWS. That is different from "MAKING UP NEWS." She is a performing musician and gets in the papers because she has accomplished something - NOT because she as a high IQ - that is only incidentally mentioned. A high IQ is not an end in itself and not very interesting to anyone except teachers, it is only a means to an end. The end is accomplishment of some kind.⁷²

⁶⁹ Araminta Work to Martin D. Jenkins, January 1, 1942, MJMC.

⁷⁰ Araminta Work to Martin D. Jenkins, April 18, 1943, MJMC.

⁷¹ Josephine Schuyler's relationship with her daughter, Philippa, has been written about in detail in Kathryn Talalay, *Composition In Black and White: The Tragic Saga of Harlem's Biracial Prodigy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Also in Jenkins archive is a newspaper profile of Philippa Schuyler which mentions Josephine Schuyler's theories on parenting (she felt a diet of raw food important for development) and discusses Philippa's piano performances describes, but does not mention her IQ at all. Tom O'Connor, "Around Town: The Story of A Gifted Child," *PM*, April 5, 1945.

⁷² Josephine Schuyler to Martin D. Jenkins, Date Unknown, MJMC.

Mrs. Schuyler clearly felt, contra Jenkins, that the IQ score was not significant in and of itself and not a real achievement worthy of recognition. While this says little about how Philippa herself might have felt about her gifted status, at the very least Mrs. Schuyler's assertion indicates a vision of success or even of giftedness that diverged from Jenkins's own.

Returning to Blanche Leatherman, the girl known only as "B" in Jenkins's first published article, what did she think of her status as "one of the most precocious and promising children in the U.S." which was how Jenkins described her at nine years old in 1935? Four years later, Leatherman at fourteen was profiled by two Chicago newspapers, the *Chicago Defender*, an African American paper, and the *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, a newspaper with a primarily white audience. It is quite possible that both profiles stem from the same interview as they cover the same topics although the quotes are not identical. The profiles both frame Leatherman as a child "genius." The profile in the *Tribune* by Edwin Stoll features a photo of Leatherman under the headline, "Girl, 14, Rated as Genius by Psychologist."⁷³ The basis of her genius according to the article was her superior intelligence test score. Chicago Public School psychologist and Jenkins associate Albert Beckham is cited explaining that Leatherman's IQ was over 150 and that "Blanche is a startling young genius."⁷⁴ The article describes Leatherman's interest in chemistry and her academic advancement — she skipped the second, sixth, and seventh grades and entered high school at age twelve. Leatherman told Stoll that she did not

⁷³ Edwin Stoll, "Girl, 14, Rated as Genius by Psychologist," *Chicago Sunday Tribune*, April 30, 1939.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

really socialize with other children and she preferred being alone. When asked about her ambitions, Leatherman seems to hesitate to embrace her “genius” status, “Once she wanted to be a great scientist and do something for humanity. Now she’s a bit undecided, but adds with a laugh. ‘I guess I want to be a good cook.’” It is impossible to know if Leatherman truly no longer harbored the ambition to be a scientist. Perhaps she did not want to seem arrogant in front of a white male reporter. Perhaps she genuinely began to have mixed feelings about her “gifted” status and her future as a “genius” as it was envisioned by men like Beckham and Jenkins.

The article from the *Defender*, the nation’s leading African American paper, is longer and goes into more detail. It features a photograph of Leatherman examining a test tube under the headline, “Blanche, Du Sable High Genius, Likes Own Company, Chemistry And Swing.”⁷⁵ In the article, Leatherman’s “genius” status was primarily attributed to her intelligence test score. School psychologist Beckham is cited again explaining that Leatherman’s IQ was over 150 and that the teenager was a “young genius.”⁷⁶ The article also notes that Leatherman was advanced academically. Explaining how she knew so much about chemistry even before taking classes in high school, Leatherman related, “Well, I’ve always wanted to be a scientist so I read several textbooks on organic and inorganic chemistry.” “Sometimes” she continued, “some of the boys in the neighborhood who are studying chemistry in high school would bring

⁷⁵ Christine Nicholson, “Blanche, Du Sable High Genius, Likes Own Company, Chemistry And Swing,” *Chicago Defender*, March 4, 1939. MJMC.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

their apparatus home and we would perform experiments. I find them very interesting.”⁷⁷

The article goes on to note that Leatherman was advanced in school and was on track to be one of the youngest graduates ever of Du Sable High School.

Leatherman also explained that she did not tend to socialize with other children her age, “I like it better alone. I have more time to think. As a matter of fact, I find it very interesting discussing things with myself. Some people think I’m crazy, maybe I am, I don’t think so. I play sometimes with the younger children.” It must be kept in mind too that Leatherman as a fourteen year old high school junior was two to three years younger than her classmates. In any event, Leatherman seems to reject the characterization of herself as lonely or a social misfit.

The *Defender* reporter, Christine Nicholson, who profiled Blanche Leatherman also assessed whether the label of “genius” or “gifted” seemed to affect the girl. Nicholson wrote, “In spite of the fuss that has been made over her, Blanche does not look upon herself with the great respect some persons with ability regard themselves. She is quite human, and quite level-headed in spite of it all.” Given that Leatherman is no longer living, did not appear to have any children, and left no written record of her life as far as I can discover, these lines might be the only lasting evidence of her own feelings on her status as highly gifted. From this we can gather at the very least that the pressure of being “one of the most precocious and promising children in the country” does not seem to have been a central concern for Chicago teenager. This is one possibility we must keep in

⁷⁷ Ibid.

mind when reflecting on how Jenkins might have viewed Leatherman's choices for her life and how she may have had other priorities.

Unfortunately much of Leatherman's life is a mystery although it seems clear that the path Jenkins envisioned for her was not the one she eventually followed. In 1942, Jenkins contacted Albert Beckham and expressed concerns about Leatherman, by then a girl of sixteen or seventeen. Jenkins wrote, "'B' is continuing to be unsuccessful. I want to have a long talk with you about her sometime."⁷⁸ Jenkins had evidently decided to intercede and work with Leatherman more directly. Beckham replied to Jenkins a week later writing, "I am particularly glad to know that you have our blessed little 'B' in hand. Both mother and daughter act so queer. I do hope you'll be able to get her through adolescence without too much emotional frustration."⁷⁹ Neither man elaborated on how exactly they found Leatherman's achievements wanting, but it is clear that the promise of her giftedness was not being realized in the way that they had envisioned.

Blanche Leatherman appears one more time in Jenkins's papers. In 1954, Jenkins, then president of Morgan State College, wrote to his former advisor Paul Witty regarding a panel the two men would participate in. In the letter he passed along information on the progress of the young woman who was the subject of their co-authored paper nineteen years before, "I may have told you that Blanche Leatherman, (the case of "B") is at school here still working at the undergraduate level with a major in physics. She is doing superior work but generally I am sure that she is not nearly as bright as indicated by her

⁷⁸ Martin D. Jenkins, to Albert Beckham, April 22, 1942, MJMC.

⁷⁹ Albert Beckham, to Martin D. Jenkins, April 29, 1942, Box 2, MJMC.

early testing.”⁸⁰ Clearly Jenkins believed that Leatherman did not reach the heights her superior IQ score promised.

In the same letter and immediately after updating his mentor on Blanche Leatherman, Jenkins described another subject his study on highly gifted children providing some idea of what his expectations for this group had been,

One of the subjects of one of my gifted groups (not from the Chicago study) is on the faculty here. He was originally tested at the University of Cincinnati. At the age of 6 or 7, he had a Binet IQ of 183. Later he finished college at age 15 years and made Phi Beta Kappa. Now, at 22 years, he has had five years’ teaching experience and hopes to complete his dissertation in English at the University of Chicago this year. He is a bright youngster and should go places.⁸¹

The young man Jenkins refers to here is almost certainly Darwin T. Turner who would go on to a distinguished career in academia in English and African-American Studies at the University of Iowa.⁸² Advanced degrees from a prestigious institution, Phi Beta Kappa membership – and all at a very young age – this seems to be the kind of achievement that Jenkins expected of his gifted subjects. Interestingly, in both the cases of Blanche Leatherman and Darwin Turner, Jenkins, like Lewis Terman, seems to have directly intervened in their lives like an Algeresque benefactor, providing opportunities to the gifted subjects whose “sterling qualities” mental testing revealed.

In the case of Leatherman, it would be highly misguided to discount the intelligence and perseverance a black woman in the 1950s required to earn a degree in physics. Not only did Blanche Leatherman earn her degree, but in 1957 she earned a

⁸⁰ Martin D. Jenkins, to Paul Witty, July 7, 1954, Box 7, MJMC.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² “Biographical Note,” Guide to the Darwin T. Turner Papers, University of Iowa Library, <http://collguides.lib.uiowa.edu/?RG99.0340>.

fellowship to pursue her studies and work as an instructor at Smith College in Massachusetts – an achievement notable enough to be mentioned in an article in the NAACP’s *The Crisis* on black students achievement in higher education.⁸³ At Smith, Leatherman taught the courses *Fundamentals of Physics*, *Fundamentals of Physics for Premedical Students*, and *Electricity* to undergraduates.⁸⁴ According to Smith College records, Leatherman in fact earned a Masters of Arts in Physics in 1960.⁸⁵ I can find no record of Leatherman after 1960 to her death in Chicago in 2011. Leatherman was by any measure exceptional even if she did not develop in the manner that Jenkins envisioned.

The highly gifted black children were expected to achieve and thereby disprove entrenched racist ideas about mental ability. In Jenkins’s mind, Blanche Leatherman was supposed to achieve in spite of the obstacles placed in front of blacks and women in America. While the psychologist clearly understood systematic obstacles black Americans faced, he also still expected the most highly gifted like Leatherman and Turner to overcome them. It is quite possible — even likely -- that in assessing Leatherman he underestimated the extent to which gender as well as race limited her opportunities to pursue a career in science. It is significant too that in his references to Leatherman he did not blame systematic barriers but rather Blanche’s own intelligence when reflecting on her achievements. Ultimately, it appears, Jenkins believed that the gifted type and the hierarchy of mental ability were more “real” than the pervasive effects of racism and sexism.

⁸³ “The American Negro in Higher Education,” *The Crisis*, August-September, 1957, 393.

⁸⁴ Smith College, *Vol. 1958/1959 Smith College Catalog*, 122.

<https://archive.org/details/smithcat5657smit>

⁸⁵ Via e-mail with Smith College archivist, Nanci Young, October 19, 2017.

The relationship between Jenkins's work and that of the man who originated the concept of gifted children, Lewis Terman, is useful to consider. Terman was a strong advocate for the use of IQ tests to identify the gifted, consistently defended IQ-measured intelligence as an inherited characteristic, and believed that differences in group IQ measures largely explained class and racial differences in achievement. Jenkins's rejection of the idea that IQ testing revealed actual racial differences and intelligence obviously put him at odds with Terman's conclusions, but Jenkins nevertheless designed his research studies using Terman's model revealing commonalities between the two men's thinking. Also, while Jenkins clearly acknowledged the role environment played in producing gifted children, he nevertheless believed in the central idea of giftedness – that elite levels of potential talent existed in a rare few, and that this talent must be discovered and carefully nurtured for it to develop into real achievement.

The complex nature of how Terman's work related to Jenkins's can be seen in a 1948 review in *Scientific Monthly* by Jenkins of Terman's *The Gifted Child Grows Up*, Terman's update of his longitudinal study of gifted individuals that began in 1921. While the review is largely positive in tone, Jenkins noted that Terman's study of achievement of gifted individuals failed to take environmental effects into account. Jenkins notes,

On the interpretational side, remarkably little attention is given to the hypothesis that adult attainment may be related to the socio-economic and educational level of the parents. A suggestion lies in several of the relationships presented that these factors may be crucial determinants of adult achievement. We have here a group for which the primary selective factor was a high I.Q., but which is also characterized by high socioeconomic status, uniformity in state of residence, and predominantly urban residence. Consequently, in the absence of adequate

controls, what is attributed to high I.Q. may be due, in part at least, to one or more of the other factors.⁸⁶

In addition to calling attention to the fact that Terman's subjects already had advantages apart from IQ that were associated with achievement later in life, Jenkins also noted that simply being in the famous group of "Termites" would have an effect on later achievement.

Further, the very fact of being included in the study produces changes in the behavior of the subjects. In the present instance, membership in Terman's group must surely have affected the level of aspiration of many subjects as well as have provided unusual opportunities for scholarship aid and employment. In the light of these considerations, generalizations based on the present study must be made with considerable caution.⁸⁷

In spite of these weaknesses in Terman's work, Jenkins still praised the study, asserting that it had "inestimable value, for it has been primarily responsible for bringing American schools to an understanding of the needs of exceptional children."⁸⁸ In other words, as flawed as it was, Jenkins clearly believed that the work of establishing in the public's mind the reality of giftedness and the importance of conserving gifted talent made Terman's work worthwhile. A position that Jenkins not only affirmed in his review of Terman, but in his own research built as it was on Terman's model. Terman and Jenkins shared a central assumption about giftedness and the hierarchical nature of mental ability even though they disagreed on the exact mechanics of how ability manifested itself and where in the population ability might be found.

⁸⁶ Martin D. Jenkins, "Genius Does What It Must," *The Scientific Monthly* 66, no. 6, June 1, 1948, 527.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 528.

Gifted advocates hoped that intelligence tests could identify the mentally elite so that their talent might be conserved, and Martin Jenkins argued that black children belonged among these elite as much as white children did. Jenkins's career as an advocate for the gifted would not reach the prominence of Lewis Terman. Despite its position as a groundbreaking study in gifted education, Jenkins's dissertation was not published. Also Jenkins was not able, for whatever reason, to continue his longitudinal study on highly gifted black children, although he did continue to keep tabs on them into the 1940s, clipping newspaper profiles on his subjects and corresponding with their parents. Forgoing psychological research, Jenkins instead became an administrator, accepting the presidency of Morgan State College in 1948 — a position he would hold for twenty-two years. Although his career in gifted education essentially ended at this time, as will be seen in the next chapter, his view of a more universal view of giftedness, in which giftedness potentially found throughout the population would become the consensus just as the United States would make a national commitment to invest in gifted talent for the good of the social order.

CHAPTER 5. DIVISION WITHOUT DIVISIVENESS: JAMES BRYANT CONANT AND THE COLD WAR NATIONALIZATION OF GIFTED CHILDREN

For the future, we must endeavor to combine the “natural aristocracy of talents” with the American insistence on general education for all future citizens. If we can do that, then our industrialized society will prosper and the at the same time the necessary degree of instruction will be provided for all people so that in their hands our liberties will remain secure.

James Bryant Conant, *Education and Liberty* (1952)

On April 11, 1965 about seventy miles north of San Antonio, Texas, President Lyndon Johnson sat on a wooden bench in front of his old elementary school – a one-room schoolhouse formerly known as the Junction School. The occasion was the signing into law of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), a law that would raise the federal government’s budget for education to four billion dollars – more than double what it had been the year before.¹ After signing the bill, the president handed the ceremonial pen to an older woman sitting beside him, the woman, Kate Deadrich Loney, was his first schoolteacher fifty-three years earlier. The combination of the President of the United States, the rural schoolhouse, and teacher formed a clear narrative – a child who rose from humble beginnings to become the leader of a global power. At the same time, the occasion of signing of the ESEA and the massive funds allocated was an admission that this narrative was no longer valid and that an unprecedented federal

¹ Julia Hanna, “The Elementary and Secondary Education Act,” Summer 2005 issue of *Ed.*, the magazine of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.
<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/05/08/elementary-and-secondary-education-act>

commitment was needed to ensure that Johnson's rise was possible for American children of any background.

In signing the law, the president extolled the benefits of extending quality education to children in rural and urban communities. Of the law he said, "I believe deeply that no law I have signed or will ever signed means more to the future of our nation."² In urging Congress to approve the legislation, Johnson described the issue of educating the entire citizenry to their fullest potential as something on which all other vital issues depended:

Every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take. We want this not only for his sake--but for the nation's sake. Nothing matters more to the future of our country: not our military preparedness--for armed might is worthless if we lack the brainpower to build a world of peace; not our productive economy--for we cannot sustain growth without trained manpower; not our democratic system of government--for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant.³

Johnson cast educational opportunity as a national priority for a global power – necessary for the survival of American democracy. The biggest impact of the ESEA, Title One, provided direct funding to schools that served students from low-income families. The law did not specifically mention gifted children other than to provide the funds “to offer a diverse range of educational experience to persons of varying talents and needs,” but as the Council for Exceptional Children noted when the act passed, “Each of the five titles

² Charles Mohrs, "PRESIDENT SIGNS EDUCATION BILL AT HIS OLD SCHOOL," *New York Times*, April 12, 1965.

³ Lyndon B. Johnson, Special Message to the Congress: "Toward Full Educational Opportunity," January 12, 1965, The American Presidency Project.
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27448>

of the act has implications for the development of quality education for gifted children.”⁴
Indeed, future authorizations of the law would formalize the federal commitment to
gifted children.⁵

The 1965 law promised to develop ability as a national resource and through
funding provisions for low-income students communicated that this resource might be
found anywhere. Further, as Johnson’s remarks to Congress indicate, the global political
considerations of the Cold War provided another justification for this investment. In the
1950s and 1960s no American figure personified this connection between developing
mental ability as a national resource in a global context than James Byrant Conant.
Conant’s associate, John Gardner, lead the task force appointed by Johnson in 1964 to
craft the ESEA, a group that also included a man named Francis Keppel a Conant disciple
who had been hired by the then-Harvard president to head the university’s School of
Education in 1948.⁶

In the two decades following the Second World War, concerns over neglect of the
gifted and wasted talent moved from a relatively small number of educational
psychologists to a matter of national policy justified by Cold War necessities. A new
group of advocates, powerfully connected elites with ties to academia, government, and a
variety of non-profits in the United States, took up the cause of individual “excellence” in

⁴ Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, 30 U.S.C. (1965); Bryan, J. Ned, and James C. Chalfant. 1965. "The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965: Potential for Serving the Gifted." *Exceptional Children*. 147.

⁵ The 1969 reauthorization of ESEA included specific language regarding gifted children and this has been expanded further in subsequent reauthorizations most notably with the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Act of 1994, now codified at 20 U.S.C. §§ 8031.

⁶ Ellen Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 212.

general and giftedness in particular. These policy advocates embraced the idea that “talent” was not the province of a single race or ethnicity. Further they emphasized the necessity, indeed the urgency, to develop said talent both to ensure national competitiveness abroad and social fluidity at home. Promoting talented individuals, these advocates believed, would prevent a stratification based on hereditary class that could be exploited by communist propaganda. The necessity for “social fluidity” in the United States was repeatedly contrasted with the class systems of European nations with warnings that the U.S. must develop its gifted and talented in a fair manner via free comprehensive public schooling lest the nation leave itself vulnerable to the communist accusations of inequality. As Conant’s Education Policies Commission report put it in 1950 while recommending national investment in gifted children, “if opportunity can be open to youths who are most able (rather than those who are most able to pay), then we shall at the same time enhance the general welfare through the fullest conservation and utilization of human talent and preserve that social fluidity that has been the glory and strength of dynamic democracy in the United States.”⁷

Although both Gardner and Conant believed that American “talent” was currently neglected and squandered in United States public schools, they nevertheless shared the conviction that only in “comprehensive” public schools where students of various abilities were educated together could the talented few be developed without perpetuating rigid divisions. These divisions, they worried, would lead to a stratified American society and leave the nation vulnerable to Soviet propaganda. It was in this context,

⁷ Uncle Dudley, “TALENT ON TAP,” *Daily Boston Globe*, Aug 04, 1950.

driven by ambitions for a global role for the United States and anxious about domestic security in a divided nation, that investment in a particular idea of talent became a national priority.

In 1965, Gardner would be primarily responsible for implementing the law as Johnson's Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, but it was Conant who Gardner turned to nine years earlier to authoritatively assess and report on the state of education in the United States. Around Christmas in 1956, Gardner and Bryant met in the offices of the Carnegie Foundation in New York. Despite a nineteen-year age difference, the two men were remarkably alike. Gardner, then president of the foundation and James Bryant Conant, former president of Harvard University and then Ambassador to West Germany both rose to elite circles in American public life from less than affluent families and felt strongly that exceptional mental ability could be found in any social class. At Carnegie, Gardner had focused on encouraging federal programs to find and develop talented young people for future leadership. He laid out his vision for "The Great Hunt for Educated Talent" in *Harper's* explaining "Throughout the ages human societies have always been extravagantly wasteful of talent. Today we can no longer afford to be. Among the historic changes which have marked our era this may in the long run prove to be one of the most profound."⁸ Gardner viewed Conant, with his experience in elite academia and international politics, as the ideal spokesman for making the case that identifying and developing the talented was a Cold War imperative, a matter of national survival. As Conant's time as ambassador was nearing its end, Gardner reached out to the former

⁸ John Gardner, "The Great Hunt for Educated Talent," *Harper's Magazine*, January 1957, 48.

university president with a proposal that Carnegie fund a Conant-led study of American schools. As Gardner would write later in the study's introduction, "It would be hard to find anyone better equipped to make such a study at this moment in history."⁹

The commission envisioned a future United States where nationally developed talent begat a hierarchy of intelligence that would replace a hierarchy of heredity – the "most able" usurping the "most able to pay." Further it framed this vision as a Cold War imperative. These most able, according to this thinking, may have been found anywhere, but it was still clearly a rare, limited resource. No one person exemplifies this nationalization of this resource, of giftedness, as a Cold War strategy than James Bryant Conant.

From Scholarship Student to National-Minded University President

Conant's life and early career took place among a hereditary New England elite of which Conant himself was not a natural member. Born in 1893 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, Conant's family was financially comfortable, if not particularly wealthy – his father having worked first as a builder and later as a photo engraver in the Boston area. As a young man, Conant was intellectually curious and a good student at a local private college preparatory school, Roxbury Latin School. There, Conant took an interest in science, particularly in chemistry. According to Conant's autobiography, a chemistry teacher at Roxbury Latin, Newton Henry Black, encouraged Conant's interest allowing him to perform his own experiments in the school's chemistry lab beginning when Conant

⁹ John Gardner, introduction to *The American High School Today* by James Conant (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959) ix.

was fifteen.¹⁰ According to Conant, it was through Black's personal advocacy on Conant's behalf that the young student was able to gain admittance to Harvard in 1910. Conant's admission to Harvard, then, also mirrors in many ways what we have seen before, a Horatio Alger story where a young man's exceptional ability is recognized by an older male benefactor who then provides an opportunity that enables the youth's success.

According to historian James Hershberg, Conant was not among the elite inner circle of students at Harvard whose backgrounds tended to be linked to old Boston Brahmin families. Conant attended the university under scholarship awarded at the time to students from moderate circumstances.¹¹ It was to this experience as an outsider among the ultra-elite of Harvard that Hershberg attributes Conant's developing faith in the ideas of meritocracy and equality of opportunity. This sense that the talented can be found among a wide variety of backgrounds and the conviction that the development of that talent was crucial to national survival were the governing principles of Conant's prolific and varied career. Although Conant would go on to positions as wide ranging as university professor, university president, high-level official for the Manhattan Project, Ambassador to West Germany, and finally as a prominent speaker on public high schools and the need for gifted education, the unifying theme in Conant's "many lives" was how the United States could efficiently develop its "reservoir of talent" to maximize the United States' global influence.

¹⁰ James Bryant Conant, *My Several Lives: Memoirs of a Social Inventor*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) 15.

¹¹ James Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age*, (New York: Knopf, 1993) 18-19.

Whether in spite or because of his outsider status, Conant quickly built an academic career earning a PhD in chemistry and an appointment to the faculty after brief service in the Army's Chemical Service during World War I. Conant's work in the Chemical Service in many ways foreshadowed his later work assisting with the Manhattan Project during the Second World War. In both cases, Conant willingly put scientific talents to use developing military technology to aid the United States in a global war – in the first case developing a gas known as Lewisite, a deadly chemical weapon to counter the German's use of mustard gas. In both cases Conant expressed few ethical qualms about his contribution to the introduction of new, potentially catastrophic technology.¹² Conant, in other words, saw science as a form of inquiry that should be leveraged for national, as well as personal goals.

After the war, Conant returned to Harvard and began what would be a relatively short career as a professor of chemistry. In 1933, Conant, then only forty, accepted an offer to become Harvard's president. When later a student asked why he decided to give up a career as a research scientist for the position of president, Conant answered “the challenge to make Harvard truly great: to make the College more representative of the whole nation and of every class of society and to transform the University into a center of science and learning for the whole world.”¹³ Conant's predecessor, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, had worked to maintain Harvard as a bastion for New England white Protestant elites, and actively sought ways to limit the number of Jewish students admitted to the college. Conant, similar to gifted child advocates of the day such as Leta Stetter

¹² Conant, *My Several Lives*, 49-50.

¹³ Qtd. in Hershberg, 66.

and Martin Jenkins, believed that talent and intellectual potential could be found in individuals from a wide variety of economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds. That is, he explicitly rejected race-based arguments about talent and intelligence. To uncover these potential students, Conant embraced the technology of intelligence testing just as the gifted child advocates did.

At Conant's very first meeting with the Harvard Cooperation, the university's governing body, in 1933 the new president moved to attract students who, like himself, were academically able but not from the wealthy elite. The result was known as the National Scholarship designed to provide financial support to students with high potential but whose families could not afford the university's tuition. To determine the most worthy candidates for the scholarship, the university turned to the newly introduced Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) from the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The SAT was essentially an intelligence test adapted from the IQ test by Princeton psychologist Carl Brigham which promised to uncover academic ability without regard to background or training.¹⁴ Conant was enthusiastic about this technology that could efficiently and objectively identify innately able students. He later reflected, "the more I learned about the use of the objective tests and the more I became familiar with the concept of scholastic aptitude, the more I showed signs of a recent convert to a new religion."¹⁵ The goal, Conant would write later was "The elimination of ancient barriers – geographical or

¹⁴ Nicholas Lemann, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 31. Lemann's excellent popular account of the origins of the SAT details the central role of Conant and his associate, Henry Chauncey, in developing and popularizing the SAT in an effort to turn higher education in the United States into a meritocratic objective elite.

¹⁵ Conant, *My Several Lives*, 418.

financial – in our education system.”¹⁶ With its determination to find the talented few regardless of family background, Conant’s plan for Harvard anticipated the effort to nationalize giftedness after World War II.

Conant’s tenure as president of Harvard was marked by not only an interest in making Harvard a national university by diversifying the student body, but by Conant’s own entry into national political debates –most notably as a public advocate for the United States to intervene in World War II. Conant was an early supporter of all out aid to England, and lobbied for proactive war measures such as the Selective Training and Service Act.¹⁷ Along with other prominent citizens, Conant formed the Century Club to publicly push for the United States to counter the Axis powers. In press reports, Conant’s advocacy for talented young people and for a greater international role for the United States were presented side by side. A July 20, 1941 New York Times profile for example, characterized Conant as leading a “triple life” as university president, national defense advisor, and private citizen. Conant not only called for aid to England, including going to war to defend the country if necessary, but also supported universal conscription with no deferments for college – an unusual stance among university presidents. Further, Conant framed opposition to Hitler and totalitarianism as necessary for the development of the gifted scientist. As the *Times* profile quotes Conant, “Progress in science has been made by the unusual person, the unorthodox individual. He cannot survive in a regimented social order.” Later in the same article, Conant repeats his claim that these talented individuals can be found from a variety of backgrounds and more must be done to

¹⁶ Conant, *My Several Lives*, 136.

¹⁷ Hershberg, 120.

discover and develop their talents. Conant claimed, “Too many heirs and heiresses allowed to stay near the top even as their natural level is near the bottom, at the same time, it is harder than it should be for the talented but impoverished to climb.”¹⁸ For Conant, then, the reason for the United States to take a global role in countering facism was related to the effect of authoritarianism on exceptionally talented individuals.

Conant’s advocacy for the war led to an active and prominent role during the war itself and a chance to leverage scientific knowledge for national ends. Along with fellow Century Club member, Vannevar Bush, Conant served in as an advisor to President Roosevelt on matters of science and technology including the direction of a nuclear research – what would become the Manhattan Project – beginning with the creation of the National Defense Research Committee in June of 1940.¹⁹ Conant played a key role in decisions including advising Bush and Roosevelt on what form of nuclear device was most practical to pursue. Conant also actively recruited scientists to work on the program – including directly recruiting his former student at Harvard, J. Robert Oppenheimer.²⁰ With his work during World War II on the Manhattan Project, Conant built a resume like no other figure in America – familiar with the worlds of elite academia, politics, national defense, and international relations.

Linking Education to National Security, 1945-1950

¹⁸ Robert Van Gelder, “Being Harvard’s President, Aiding National Defense and Acting as Private Citizen Keep One Man Busy: DR. CONANT’S TRIPLE LIFE,” *New York Times*, July 20, 1941.

¹⁹ Hershberg, 127.

²⁰ Hershberg, 168.

After the war Conant, now back at Harvard, increasingly advocated publicly for more national attention to developing talented young people from all backgrounds, which he framed as necessary to national security. For Conant this meant not only training the next generation of talented scientists and engineers to maintain the United States' international advantage, it also meant promoting "equality of opportunity" over hereditary advantage. Only finding and developing the most talented from all social classes, Conant argued, would prevent class divisions and ensure the survival of American democracy and its economic system. Writing in the *New York Times* magazine in 1946, Conant invoked the "American ideal of equality of opportunity" to the need to prevent a stratified and divided society. Conant wrote, "This ideal implies, on the one hand, a relatively fluid social structure changing from generation to generation, and, on the other, mutual respect between different vocational and economic groups; in short a minimum of emphasis on class distinctions."²¹ To achieve this ideal, Conant argued, required a system of quality public schooling through high school that developed talent in a fair manner without regard to social or economic background. High school, Conant insisted, can be an instrument to "restore a high degree of social fluidity to economic and social life" as well as "make available for the national welfare reservoirs of potential talent now untapped."²² In Conant's view, the ideal system of public education would develop the most talented from all economic and social backgrounds allowing these talented few to rise.

²¹ James B. Conant, "The Challenge to American Education: We Must Provide Equality of Opportunity, Says Dr. Conant, and Thus Tap New Sources of Talent," *New York Times*, April 14, 1946.

²² *Ibid.*

Ensuring this social fluidity in the United States, Conant argued, was necessary to preserve America's democracy and free market system – a defense against communism and fascism that Conant believed thrived in stratified nations. Conant wrote that public high schools can also inculcate “social and political ideals” necessary for the development of “free and harmonious people operating on an economic system based on private ownership and the profit motive, but committed to the ideals of social justice.”²³ In a speech on atomic power in the postwar world, Conant framed the need to develop the talented as a defense against extreme ideologies, U.S. will need “many highly-trained men of great ability to make our civilization work: that is, make it work with effectiveness and keep our society from crumbling to the virus of totalitarianism from the right or left.”²⁴ Similarly, in a 1947 speech in Los Angeles, Conant declared that tax supported schooling “contains the answers to our problems and future relationship with Russia.” Calling free public schooling “the sinews of democracy,” Conant argued that only a system that promotes talent fairly could provide social fluidity necessary for “A continuation of our highly competitive economic system with its wide divergence of pecuniary rewards.”²⁵ Conant, therefore, framed the fair promotion of the talented as central to the preservation of democracy and free market capitalism.

In a 1948 speech to the United States Conference of Mayors, Conant again stressed the themes of public education providing freedom of opportunity justified by

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “We Must Learn to Live Maturely in Atomic Age, Says Pres. Conant,” *Daily Boston Globe*, February 28, 1947.

²⁵ “Conant Calls Free Schools Pillar of U.S.: Challenge to U.S. Dynamic Economy Needed Based on Free Competition,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 11, 1947.

national security – going further by invoking the United States place in the world.

Threatened by “European radical doctrines based on class struggle,” Conant maintained that public education ensured the preservation of equality of opportunity vital to the survival of American democracy and capitalism. Conant asserted,

Primarily our survival depends on a vigorous demonstration in the next decade that we can make our form of democracy function even in a war-torn world. This in turn means bold policies both abroad and at home; a realization of our international responsibilities as a great power, and satisfactory development of our internal economy; above all a realization of the unique nature of American democracy and a determination to move a few steps nearer our historic goals.²⁶

The “responsibilities as a great power” Conant referenced reflected not only his conviction that the United States had a duty to intervene in global affairs, but also his insistence that equality of opportunity in education would be central to maintaining U.S. national power. Importantly, Conant linked education to America’s role in the world a full decade before the flight of Sputnik in 1957 when these issues would suddenly gain national attention.

In 1948, Conant further expounded on his views on education policy and its relationship to national security in *Education in a Divided World*, based on a series of lectures he delivered at Columbia University contrasting the United States with European nations that in his view were divided and vulnerable. The ideal of equality of opportunity he declared would deliver social fluidity whereas the “absence of this ideal may be the reason the communistic philosophy and sympathy with Soviets has made inroads in

²⁶ Frank S. Adams, “Conant Urges U.S. Aid to Schools To Help Us Survive in Grim World,” *New York Times*, February 19, 1948.

France and Italy.”²⁷ Conant again invoked the United States’ global role asserting that “the responsibilities of world leadership require us to extend the boundaries of our interest and sympathy as never before.” For Conant the equality of opportunity education ensured allowed a consistency with past American values while also allowing Americans to “force our imagination to leap two oceans.”²⁸ To Conant, the American tradition of equal opportunity would prevent the expansion of communism abroad as well as at home as the Soviet Union could be countered through the “successful leadership of non-communist nations” based on the premise of “a free competitive society which hold promise for the future to large numbers of people.”²⁹ In framing the need to invest in education to prevent social stratification in terms of United States leadership, Conant was clearly aware of how criticism of inequality in the United States might be used as Soviet propaganda throughout the world. For Conant, the promotion of the talented was a matter of national security – central to domestic and foreign policy.

Conant Advocates for Gifted through the NEA

In addition to Conant’s post-war lectures and writings that framed the need to educate the talented as a Cold War imperative, the university president also worked through the National Education Association (NEA), founded in 1857, to issue its first paper on the need for gifted education. In a 1950 report by the NEA’s Educational

²⁷ James Bryant Conant, *Education in a Divided World: The Function of the Public Schools in our Unique Society*, (New York: Greenwood, 1948) 7.

²⁸ Conant, *Education in a Divided World*, 18.

²⁹ Conant, *Education in a Divided World*, 30.

Policies Commission (EPC) entitled, *The Education of the Gifted*, produced by a subcommittee Conant chaired, the commission advocated for increased attention in public schools to identifying and developing gifted students. The report echoed the pre-war gifted advocacy by psychologists like Leta Stetter Hollingworth, but also emphasized Conant's own priorities about social stratification and its consequences for national security. The report, following Hollingworth's precedent, recognized the gifted as an essential type, and further characterized gifted children as a neglected minority noting, "Acquaintance with present educational practices has convinced the Commission that the gifted member of the total school population constitute a minority which is too largely neglected."³⁰ In addition to depicting giftedness as a neglected minority, Conant's report stressed the importance of the gifted to national security, not only producing future leaders and top scientists, but also decreasing internal tensions through increased social mobility. The report claimed that the "closing of the frontier, the urbanization and mechanization of American life, the increased complexity of economic life and our culture, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge" meant that opportunities to rise would be limited to those who could afford a professional training via a university education.³¹ If the gifted young people from all backgrounds were not developed, the report argued, the United States risked turning into a stratified society—echoing Conant's favorite themes. The report also reflected Conant's beliefs about the role of the United States in global affairs. Conant had argued within the EPC for education in the United

³⁰ Education Policies Commission, "Education of the Gifted," (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1950) iii.

³¹ Education Policies Commission, *Education of the Gifted*, 5.

States to cultivate an “enlightened selfishness” with regard to nation and its prominent role in world affairs.³² The report itself reflected this sentiment asserting that the “world of the mid-twentieth century has contracted into a figuratively small and interdependent sphere” in which the United States would necessarily play an outsized role.³³ The education of the gifted then would ensure security through social fluidity and support the nation’s status as a global power. In addition, in terms of the gift economy, the gifted receive the proper development and then were expected to reciprocate by ensuring national greatness.

Education of the Gifted was notable given that the typical focus of the Commission and orientation of the NEA in general had been to emphasize the need for general education for all students rather than focus on the gifted.³⁴ The EPC in particular was created by the NEA in 1935 to advocate for federal funding to offset the economic effects of the Great Depression on public schools. As education historian Wayne Urban notes, EPC members mostly consisted of K-12 administrators, but also included university professors of education, and politically influential citizens with an interest in education. Membership included at different points, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Ralph Bunche, as well as Conant.³⁵ After World War II, the EPC released two major reports emphasized common educational needs for all students *Education for All American Youth*

³² Hershberg, *James B. Conant*, 441.

³³ Education Policies Commission, *Education of the Gifted*, 9.

³⁴ The NEA, before its transition into a teacher’s union beginning in 1957, was primarily an organization controlled and directed by public school administrators across the United States. See Wayne Urban, “The Making of a Teacher’s Union: The National Education Association, 1957-1973,” *Historical Studies in Education*, 1993, 33-53.

³⁵ Wayne Urban, “Why Study the Education Policies Commission,” *Georgia Educational Researcher*, <http://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gerjournal/vol3/iss1/1> (accessed September 27, 2015)

(1944) and *Education for All American Children* (1948) that emphasized common educational needs for all students. In many ways, *The Education of the Gifted* can be seen as a departure from this focus on general public education, but at the same time the advocacy for the gifted in the context of a commitment for free public education for all fit perfectly with Conant's belief in developing the most talented from all social backgrounds, equality of opportunity, and the prevention of social stratification that left the nation vulnerable to Soviet subversion.

While the report affirmed the EPC's support for educating all students and stressed the importance of developing the gifted from all social backgrounds, the report nevertheless warned against the notion that talent was evenly distributed. The report stated, "This idea still has a great hold on the American people in spite of its patent fallacy — attested by both the common-sense conclusions from every-day observation and the data of psychology. Yet, there persists a tendency to idealize the average man and to belittle the exceptional man."³⁶ American educational institutions must recognize the unequal distribution of talent and craft their policies accordingly. "Toward this end the schools and colleges have an important responsibility — one which they share with all other agencies which influence the ethos of our society — to educate the American people at large to appreciate their stake in fostering recognition, education, and utilization of human talent."³⁷ Like the psychologists who promoted the gifted before the war, the report embraced a hierarchy of mental ability that recognized the gifted as a distinct type. Also similar, the commission regarded the fact that not all the gifted fulfilled their

³⁶ Education Policies Commission, *Education of the Gifted*, 11.

³⁷ Education Policies Commission, *Education of the Gifted*, 12.

potential as a sign of neglect rather than an indication that the notion of giftedness was flawed.

To demonstrate the ways in which the talents of the gifted were neglected, the report outlined four specific, “hypothetical case histories” -- representing common ways they believed American talent was going to waste. The case of “Josephine Gould Tolman” demonstrated the lack of enriching opportunities for Americans in rural areas. Tolman displayed great artistic promise as a young woman, but Tolman “whose small town school offered no courses in art, who has never seen an original or a good reproduction of an art masterpiece, who scarcely knows that art schools or art museums exist.” As a consequence, “Her days are filled with housekeeping and childcare.”³⁸ What if, the report ponders, “Mrs. Tolman had studied art, might not some of her paintings be hanging today in the art galleries of American cities or, in reproductions, bringing color and beauty into schools and homes?” or, alternatively, Tolman might have been artist for a greeting card company.³⁹ A second hypothetical case study, “Clarence Findlay,” illustrated the how racial discrimination wasted talent. Findlay, a Pullman porter, “who is doing very well financially even though family extravagances dissipate his earnings. He never forgets the instructions of superiors or the requests of passengers, and he always gives accurate answers to questions about the route and train schedule.” Unbeknownst to Mr. Findlay, he is gifted. “The porter doesn’t know it, but buried in the files of the large

³⁸ Education Policies Commission, *Education of the Gifted*, 14-15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

city school system which he attended twenty-five years ago is a pupil record card with this notation, ‘Clarence Findlay, IQ 144.’”⁴⁰ The report asks:

What might Clarence Findlay have done with his high intelligence if his schoolteachers had encouraged its development once it had been discovered?—if the value patterns of his family had placed some emphasis on intellectual development?—if his parents could have afforded to send him to college?—if he had not been a Negro—or if, being a Negro, American society had not so nearly closed the door of professional opportunity to members of his race?⁴¹

Racialized allusions to “family extravagances” and “value patterns” aside, the report clearly accepted that giftedness crossed racial boundaries and systematic discrimination prevented talented black Americans from realizing their potential..

Another persona, “Marie Eklund,” served as an example of how inflexible schooling could lead to wasted talent. A farm girl from North Dakota who moved to Chicago to look for work at age eighteen, now finds that many occupations are closed to her because she did not earn a high school diploma. Although gifted, she did not like school. The report explains, “She rebelled at the routine exercises required in her English course and the ‘meaningless’ problems assigned in algebra, and she failed both courses. After more failures the next year and humiliating punishment for not doing as she was told, she developed a warm dislike for her teachers and stopped going to school.”⁴² If lacking an appropriate curriculum or understanding teachers might lead the gifted to drop out of school so too could a family’s financial situation. As demonstrated by the case of “Joseph Block” who earned “As” in math in school and appeared to be headed to college to study engineering, but was forced to drop out of high school and take a factory job

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., 18.

⁴² Ibid., 16.

when his father lost work. Now with a family of his own he will likely never return to school.⁴³ His scenario taken together with that of “Clarence Findlay,” the report concluded that these two cases “illustrate the social waste that can result from individual instances of family poverty.”⁴⁴

The “hypothetical case studies” demonstrate the Commission’s argument concerning where talent could be found, how it should be developed, and why it too often was not. Talented individuals, the report argued, could come from anywhere, be men or women, black or white, and from all economic backgrounds. According to these examples, these gifted individuals saw their opportunities unnaturally limited by a lack of exposure to high culture, unequal opportunities due to race, uninspired, rote education, and the costs of higher education. Talent in this view, while not limited to any particular racial or social background, was nonetheless rare. As had been the case since the notion of “giftedness” originated, proving that potential achievement existed in the absence of achievement was difficult, if not impossible – that the report might have resorted to hypothetical scenarios to do so could be taken as a tacit admission of this difficulty as well as evidence of an enduring faith that a talented exceptional few did indeed exist.

In addition to these fictional personas, the report also cited data from testing recruits during World War II to demonstrate the extent to which talented individuals were neglected. Intelligence testing data from 15 million military draftees revealed “many gifted men had not been recognized as such.”⁴⁵ The report goes on to note that these same

⁴³ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 21.

gifted inductees did not reach their full potential in the military either. “Not all the intellectually superior recruits were able to fulfill the promise of their potentialities. Some were so seriously undereducated before they entered the service that wartime training could not make up for past neglect. Some were further handicapped by habits and attitudes which prevented them from responding to new opportunities for either performance or learning.”⁴⁶ Rather than conclude that the relative lack of achievement by those identified as gifted called into question the validity of the testing, the notion of gifted potential prevailed over doubts about methodology. Indeed the report concluded that utilizing intelligence tests meant that an “unmeasured amount of human talent was salvaged.”⁴⁷

While the report used intelligence tests as evidence of giftedness, it also expressed doubts about the reliability of testing. The report admitted, for example, that intelligence tests might contain cultural bias and therefore be less useful in assessing intelligence of individuals from different cultures. In an admission that came close to conceding that any measurement of intelligence would be culturally relative, the report states:

Tests from which all ‘cultural bias’ has been eliminated can be presumed to predict educational achievement only if cultural bias is also eliminated from the curriculum and the means of evaluating educational achievement. These considerations indicate the size of the job ahead if the potential abilities of children from low-income families are to be more fully developed and utilized as well as more accurately identified.⁴⁸

Even as the means to identify giftedness seemed less than certain, the reality of the supposed untapped reservoir of talent remained.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 22.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 40.

Along with the uncertainty over the reliability of intelligence testing, the report admits that the category of gifted itself was somewhat of an arbitrary distinction. For example, while discussing what exacting constitutes giftedness, the definition of “highly gifted,” those with IQs 170 or higher, was presented as one definition while the definition of 140 or higher is more common simply because most schools do not have any students who fit in the former category.⁴⁹ The report goes on to admit that the line of giftedness a “purely arbitrary designation” and “largely a matter of convenience.” “It is chiefly a question of how large a portion of a given population it is desired to include in the category of ‘gifted’.” It goes to relate that “in theory, the principles that should govern the education of the gifted apply in varying degrees of giftedness and no arbitrary dividing lines need to be established to separate the ‘highly gifted’ from the ‘moderately gifted’ or the ‘gifted’ from the ‘non-gifted.’ In practice, however, rough groupings into categories are necessary for the purpose of analysis, administration, and instruction.”⁵⁰ Giftedness and the distinctions within may have been largely arbitrary, the report suggests, but it was nonetheless necessary to find and develop young people with unseen potential.

Even though the distinction between the gifted and non-gifted and the inviolability of intelligence testing were regarded as increasingly uncertain, the report still advocated for increased investment in developing gifted young people, comparing investment in talent to buying stock. In language that mirrored Conant’s insistence that

⁴⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 43.

talent be developed according to the needs of highly competitive economic system, the report characterizes gifted talent as a commodity to invest in:

Funds invested in the education of different individuals yield dividends at different rates. In general, the rate of return is roughly proportionate to the different levels of ability possessed by different individuals. The largest dividend come from those shares of the total investment that provide adequate education for learners with the greatest talents. Although these shares may cost somewhat more per learner educated, the dividends are many times as large as those returned for other parts of the total investment. It is, of course, true that all parts of the social investment in education yield an important social product. Relatively small returns *per individual* educated amount to large totals when many individuals are concerned. Relatively large returns *per individual* also amount to large totals even if the number of individuals is small.⁵¹

The potential the gifted represented was not unlike the reality of the market with the potential imagined as real and thereby coming into existence, much in the same way investing in the gifted promised “social fluidity” without resorting to redistribution.

Comparing International Approaches to Talent

Conant resigned as president of Harvard in September 1953 to accept a position as United States High Commissioner of Germany – a position that would become Ambassador to West Germany in 1955. That same year Conant published *Education and Liberty*, a work that furthered his argument for developing the talented American students in the name of Cold War security and drew explicit comparisons with education systems of other countries. As one review quoted Conant, “If the battle of Waterloo was won on

⁵¹ Education Policies Commission, *Education of the Gifted*, 82-3.

the playing fields of Eton it may well be that the ideological struggle with communism in the next fifty years will be won on the playing fields of the public high schools of the United States. For Conant, the “public” aspect was crucial – as committed as he was to developing the most talented students, he also consistently defended the educating of the most able students within a public system. Conant saw links between the class divisions in other nations and their schools’ divisions of students based on ability, and he insisted those divisions left a society more vulnerable to communist appeals.

Conant argued for the American model of educating all students in a comprehensive setting rather than establishing specialized schools for academically able students. Specifically, Conant compared education in the United States to that in Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand. Education, Conant wrote, was a “social process” – a product of “politics, history, and national ideals.”⁵² The British tradition, Conant maintained, had always been to reserve academic training for the elite few – noting that in 1952 less than a third of sixteen year olds in Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand were still in school while in the United States seventy-six percent of this age group attended high school. While in countries operating under the British system, the only students attending high school were those bound for universities – almost exclusively young people from wealthy families, in the United States, high school was open to all. Conant likened the American system to a “wide funnel” compared to the “cylinder” of the British-based systems – both produced a small number of highly trained professionals, but the American system began with a wider pool which implied it was

⁵² James B. Conant, *Education and Liberty: The Role of Schools in a Modern Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 2.

more fair.⁵³ These differences, Conant argued, were a product of each nations' history. Invoking Thomas Jefferson and his desire to "cull a natural aristocracy of talent and virtues" Conant argued that educating the most talented in a general setting meant striking a balance between aristocracy and democracy: "For the future, we must endeavor to combine the British concern for training the 'natural aristocracy of talents' with the American insistence on general education for all future citizens. If we can do that, then our industrialized society will prosper and the same time the necessary degree of instruction will be provided for all people so that in their hands our liberties remain secure."⁵⁴ In advocating for a "natural aristocracy" limited to a talented few but ostensibly open to anyone, Conant sought to lessen the effects of inevitable economic divisions and class divisiveness that could threaten American security.

In comparing U.S. education system to its global counterparts, Conant asserted that educating students of all abilities in a comprehensive setting allowed for greater cohesion and less division. Conant noted that while some larger cities in the United States had specialized schools for the gifted as well as vocational schools, Conant considered this kind of specialization unnecessarily divisive, asserting that these schools "fail to provide a basis for the growth of mutual understanding between different cultural, religious, and occupational groups." The existence of comprehensive schools in the United States, Conant went on to say were "the principal reason that I for one have confidence in the future of this nation."⁵⁵ For Conant this reasoning also extended to

⁵³ Conant, *Education and Liberty*, 2.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁵ Conant, *Education and Liberty*, 62-3.

private schools, which he believed should not receive public funding – a position that drew considerable criticism. Conant saw public education and comprehensive high schools as central to building a cohesive democracy, “The greater the proportion of our youth who fail to attend our public schools and who receive their education elsewhere, the greater the threat to our democratic unity. To use taxpayers’ money to assist private schools is to suggest that American society use its own hands to destroy itself.”⁵⁶ To Conant, the “social process” of education meant supporting the comprehensive public school above all alternatives while still emphasizing the necessity of developing the most able and gifted students to justify this approach in the name of security and survival in a Cold War context.

Government Service in Germany and Return

On December 22, 1953, President Eisenhower, Conant’s former colleague on the Educational Policies Commission, offered the then Harvard president the opportunity to become the United States High Commissioner in Germany. Conant accepted and was eventually confirmed by the Senate. He arrived in Bonn to begin his duties on February 12, 1953.⁵⁷ Conant’s four years in West Germany as the representative of the United States government came after the Berlin Airlift and preceded the construction of the Berlin Wall placing him in the center of a contentious Cold War struggle. In June of 1953, a strike of construction workers in East Berlin escalated into a mass protest known

⁵⁶ Quoted in Sidney Hook, “The Place of the Public School in American Life,” *New York Times*, February 15, 1953.

⁵⁷ James B. Conant, *My Several Lives*, 540.

as the East Berlin Uprising, to which the Soviet Union responded by deploying the military, including tanks, to disperse the crowds.⁵⁸ On another occasion, two visiting U.S. congressmen were detained in East Berlin. Conant lodged a formal protest with the Soviet authorities, only to be told by a Soviet general that he could not receive the protest because the German Democratic Republic was a sovereign nation.⁵⁹ While Conant's role in these developments seems to have been mostly as a diplomatic bystander, his experience on the front lines of the Cold War would only add to his prestige when commenting on the issue of educating the talented as a national security imperative.

While Conant's time in Germany was taken up principally with his duties as ambassador, he nonetheless found occasion to comment on education and the development of the most talented students. Speaking to the National Citizens Commission for the Public Schools in January of 1956, Conant urged more attention to gifted students, including greater efforts at identification and encourage those identified to take challenging courses especially in science and foreign languages. Noting that European schools only educated an elite few in high school and university, while the United States offered near universal secondary education, Conant admitted that the U.S. arrangement might presently sacrifice quantity for quality, but Conant also insisted that the correct course was not to copy the European model but to identify talent early and provide stimulating teaching so that these students were motivated and prepared for college. To this end, Conant urged fostering a "spirit of competition" similar to that found

⁵⁸ Ibid., 601.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 604.

in sports to encourage talented students to reach their potential.⁶⁰ The central themes Conant had promoted since the end of World War II were still present in Conant's speech only now they came from a public official on the front lines of international conflict with the Soviet Union.

Upon retiring from the post of ambassador in 1957, Conant began his study on American high schools with funding from the Carnegie Foundation. According to historian Ellen Lagemann in *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy*, the Carnegie Corporation since World War II focused much of its study and advocacy on improving public education in the United States.⁶¹ Facing the postwar environment that included rising enrollments, teacher shortages, and attacks on public schools and teachers based on alleged sympathy with communism, the Carnegie Corporation, like Conant, sought to defend the institution of public education while promoting improvements especially for the most talented students.⁶² Entering into what Lagemann calls a "mutually beneficial relationship" with Conant, Carnegie President John Gardner originally let the ambassador know that his board of trustees would fund any study Conant might want to pursue.⁶³ Conant chose the topic of a high school survey because, he later wrote, in Germany he had spoken with many German

⁶⁰ Benjamin Fine, "Conant Urges Aid to Gifted Pupils," *New York Times*, January 10, 1956.

⁶¹ Ellen Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989), 8.

⁶² Lagemann, *Politics of Knowledge*, 196.

⁶³ Conant, *My Several Lives*, 615.

officials on their secondary school system but did not have direct knowledge of the American system.⁶⁴

Gardner in particular shared Conant's concerns on the issue of developing America's gifted and talented students. Although nineteen years Conant's junior, Gardner had much in common with the retiring ambassador and university president. Raised by a single mother in Los Angeles, Gardner like Conant, did not come from a wealthy family, but through academic ability managed to gain admittance to an elite university – in Gardner's case, Stanford. Gardner earned his PhD in psychology in 1938, served as an intelligence officer during World War II, and after the war joined the Carnegie Corporation to work on issues related to education.⁶⁵ Like Conant, he was especially concerned with the problem of promoting the talented within a democracy. In his own 1961 book, *Excellence: Can we be Equal and Excellent Too?*, Gardner sought to ascertain, “the social context in which excellence may survive or be smothered.”⁶⁶ Like Conant, Gardner saw the public school system as the instrument to identify and promote the talented from all backgrounds and undo the benefits of hereditary privilege, but Gardner like Conant was also wary of what he called the “strict equalitarianism” associated with communism and the Soviet Union.

In keeping with Conant's commitment to developing the most talented students in a public and general setting, the study focused on “comprehensive” public high schools

⁶⁴ Conant, *My Several Lives*, 614.

⁶⁵ Robert D. McFadden, “John W. Gardner, 89, Founder of Common Cause and Adviser to Presidents, Dies,” *New York Times*, February 18, 2002.

⁶⁶ John W. Gardner, *Excellence: Can we be Equal and Excellent Too?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), xiii.

rather than specialized schools. Beginning in October of 1957, Conant or his research assistant would visit a total of fifty-five high schools in eighteen states. Conant chose to examine schools that were large enough to offer a range of courses for different ability levels. The study would evaluate the schools on both on their general curriculum and on their policies for identifying the most able students and guiding those students to take appropriately demanding and rigorous academic coursework.⁶⁷ The focus of Conant's study, the "comprehensive high school" – a public school model that educated students of all abilities together – reflected his insistence that talent in the United States should be developed in a democratic manner.

Coincidentally, only three days after Conant began his study on American high schools, a technological breakthrough by the Soviet Union would bring new urgency to debates over educating the talented. On October 4, Sputnik I, the world's first artificial satellite, successfully launched and orbited the earth – along the way emitting an audible "beep" that could be picked up on short wave radios across the United States. While Sputnik increased national attention to the issue of public education and was the impetus for the 1958 National Defense Education Act (NDEA), as historian Wayne Urban argues in his study of the NDEA, the response was a result of advocacy by a wide range of interest groups, including southern progressives, educators, and scientists, who used the launch as a pretext to push their own longstanding priorities regarding federal investment

⁶⁷ James B. Conant, *The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens* (New York: McGraw Hill and Company, 1959), 14.

in education.⁶⁸ As the passage of the NDEA did not end national debates over how best to develop talented young people. Conant's report on American high schools would be published at particularly opportune time.

Before the publication of Conant's report, a publicity campaign coordinated by the Carnegie Corporation in conjunction with the Educational Testing Service and the National Citizens Commission for Public Schools, built anticipation for the book's release.⁶⁹ Throughout 1958, papers across the country reported on Conant's study and his recommendations for the "academically talented student," the top fifteen percent of students who, in Conant's words, were able to "study effectively and rewardingly advanced high school mathematics, a tough course in physics, and three or four years of a foreign language."⁷⁰ News of the upcoming report ran in the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Look* magazine.⁷¹ A *New York Times* education report a week before the publication date claimed that the "Conant Report," had "already stirred up more excitement than many Government White Papers."⁷² The actual release of Conant's report would engender equal enthusiasm.

Published in February of 1959, *The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens*, also referred to simply as the "Conant report," generated

⁶⁸ Wayne Urban, *More than Science and Sputnik: The National Defense Education Act of 1958* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2010).

⁶⁹ Lagemann, *The Politics of Knowledge*, 200.

⁷⁰ "Conant Asks Challenge for Talented: Better Students Should Get Harder Courses, He Declares," *The Sun*, March 30, 1958.

⁷¹ See "Eliminating Small High Schools No. 1 Problem, Says Dr. Conant," *Daily Boston Globe*, October 5, 1958; Mary Kelly, "Schools Told to Tap Individual's Ability: Generalization Shunned Language Lack Cited," *The Christian Science Monitor*, November 13, 1958.

⁷² Fred M. Hechinger, "Five Basic Problems of Education: Our Classrooms Are the Launching Platforms of the Nation's Future," *New York Times*, January 25, 1959.

considerable interest and publicity. The cover of *Time*, featured an artist's rendering of Conant under the headline, "U.S. Public Schools: Can They Produce Quality in Quantity?" The article referred to Conant reverently as the "Inspector General of U.S. Education." Most of these articles welcomed Conant's recommendations invoking his experience in world politics and elite education. "His views have first page importance," wrote Edgar Jones in a review for *The Sun*, "because he is a former president Harvard University, who had the opportunity, as Ambassador to West Germany, to study European education systems."⁷³ Reviewers also praised Conant's practical suggestions for improving the public education system. The *New York Times* praised Conant for a "first things first approach" that avoided hot button educational debates over public education. The Conant report according to the review did not advocate a scrapping of the American system nor was it a "whitewash of the status quo," and concluded, "The reform is as pragmatic as the system it sets out to save."⁷⁴ Reviewers embraced both what they saw as Conant's personal expertise and his practical policy recommendations.

In the report itself, Conant balanced what he viewed as the shortcomings in American comprehensive high schools with an optimism that they could indeed adapt and implement his recommendations – a course he framed as necessary to national security and Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. At the outset, Conant again made clear that educating the talented in a general public setting was superior to the European method of elite schools for the few, which in his view risked solidifying class differences.

⁷³ Edgar L. Jones, "Dr. Conant's Reports On High Schools," *The Sun*, February 1, 1959.

⁷⁴ Fred Hechinger, "'Most Bright Pupils Are Not Working Hard Enough': THE AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL TODAY: A First Report to Interested Citizens. By James Bryant Conant," *New York Times*, February 15, 1959.

“No one has estimated,” Conant wrote, “how much potential talent goes undeveloped in Germany, France, Italy, and Switzerland because of early selection often influenced by the class system of European lands.”⁷⁵

Under Conant’s plan, the essential elements of the Taylorite system would be in place – the efficient identification and development of student ability processed through comprehensive free public schools. The greatest possible yield of a precious resource ensured by the systematic national development of the entire mass of raw material. While Conant did not go into great detail concerning how talent should be identified, he clearly envisioned that mental tests would play a role. Conant advised high schools employ at least one counselor for every 300 students and that these counselors should be familiar with “tests and measurements of the aptitudes and achievement of pupils.”⁷⁶

Significantly, Conant did not recommend that these counselors rely on mental tests alone identify student ability – a clear shift from his earlier professed faith in the value of the SAT. Instead, Conant endorsed a “testing-plus” model more in line with the thinking of Paul Witty and Martin Jenkins. Working with students and parents, Conant advised for high school counselors that “an attempt should be made each year to work out an elective program for the student which corresponds to the students interests and ability as determined by tests of scholastic aptitude, the recorded achievement as measured by grades in courses, and by teachers’ estimates.”⁷⁷ Conant was as certain as ever that these

⁷⁵ James B. Conant, *The American High School Today: A First Report to Interested Citizens*, 2.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

naturally talented students existed, but he now favored a wider set of criteria for locating them among the mass of American high school students.

Crucial for Conant too was ensuring that the most able students take courses that were sufficiently challenging. For example, Conant noted that in only one school of the fifty five schools surveyed did a majority of academically talented boys study at least three years each of foreign language, science and math and at no school did a majority of talented girls do so.⁷⁸ Echoing Taylor on “soldiering” workers, Conant concluded, “The academically talented student, as a rule, is not being sufficiently challenged, does not work hard enough, and his program of academic subjects is not of a sufficient range.”⁷⁹ To ensure that talented students were sufficiently challenged, Conant recommended larger high schools that could offer a range of courses, that each school create an academic inventory to identify and track talented students, and that schools employ guidance counselors to encourage these students to take rigorous course work. Toward the same end Conant recommended that students be grouped according to ability in each subject so that the highest ability students could progress at a faster rate.⁸⁰ Finally, Conant urged schools to not rank their students on the basis of overall grade point average for fear that bright students would avoid harder courses.⁸¹ For Conant, an education system that developed students according to the innate capabilities was of national importance.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 40.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁸¹ Ibid., 66.

“The loss to the individual from not selecting a suitable program is clear. So too is the loss to the nation.”⁸²

Conant advocated for a public education system dedicated to the systematic and efficient development of students’ abilities. He also specifically called for special provisions for “highly gifted students.” For these students, Conant recommended a special guidance counselor be assigned to “keep in close touch with these students throughout their four years of senior high schoolwork.”⁸³ This counselor would not only see to it that the highly gifted were challenged by their coursework but see to development of their special interests as well.⁸⁴ Conant recommended that the identification of the highly gifted begin in the seventh or eighth grade. Conant’s combination of sober assessment, clear prescriptions, and optimism that reforms could be implemented were key to the report’s impact and reception.

The Conant Report sold 150,000 copies in its first year with another 100,000 given away free to principals and school superintendents across the country.⁸⁵ The *Chicago Daily Tribune* ran an extensive seven-part series evaluating Chicago schools, and the *Christian Science Monitor* quoted the local school superintendent of Newton, Massachusetts, embracing the report as, “A blueprint for the American high school for the next few years.”⁸⁶ Even a critic of Conant’s admitted the report was, “one of the most

⁸² *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Benjamin Fine, “Conant Report Sharply Revises U.S. High School,” *Toledo Blade*, November 22, 1959.

⁸⁶ Clay Gowran, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 1-7 1959; Emily Weston, “High School Study Gets Critical Eye: Conant Skill Noted,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 7, 1959.

influential documents in the history of American education”⁸⁷ Conant’s status as an authority on education and its relationship to national security, his confident and optimistic tone, and the specific political climate in which the report appeared all combined to bolster the impact of the report.

Conant was far from the only voice for calling for increased attention to the gifted and talented in the 1950s, but his unique background in elite academia and international politics made him arguably the most prominent. The fact that his Carnegie study appeared in wake of Sputnik’s launch also meant that his calls for improving the training of talented young Americans would find an especially attentive audience. Beyond these factors, it is worth considering the belief that talent and gifted potential existed in an elite few but could be found in an individual from any background fit particularly well with Cold War goals by attempting to reconcile hierarchy and democracy. The fact that this notion of talent – of the reality of untapped potential – persisted (and indeed persists) even as the original method for proving its existence, the intelligence test, was regarded with increasing uncertainty as to its reliability was a testament to the power of the idea in American culture.

⁸⁷ James Koerner, “The Tragedy of the Conant Report,” *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 1960, 121.

CONCLUSION

Early in Horatio Alger's 1894 *Only an Irish Boy*, the title character, Andy Burke, having just arrived in United States, gets into a fight with a wealthy and arrogant young man named Godfrey Preston. The altercation begins when Andy asks Godfrey and his servant John if they might know where his mother lived and Godfrey replies that he does not associate with "such low people."¹ Andy demands that Preston take it back and calls him a "blackguard" and "no gentleman" when he refuses. Incensed by the Irish boy's impudence, Preston rushes at Andy to deliver a beating only to find himself sprawled on the sidewalk and his own nose bloodied by the Irish boy. Godfrey tries to attack Andy again when his father, Colonel Preston interrupts:

"What's all this, Godfrey?" he called out, in a commanding tone.

Godfrey knew that when his father spoke he must obey, and he therefore desisted from the contemplated attack. He looked up at his father and said, sulkily:

"I was punishing this Irish boy for his impertinence."

John grinned a little at this way of putting it, and his father said: "It looked very much as if he were punishing you."

"I didn't get fair hold," said Godfrey, sulkily.

"So he was impertinent, was he? What did he say?"

"He said I was no gentleman."

Andy Burke listened attentively to what was said, but didn't attempt to justify himself as yet.

"I have sometimes had suspicions of that myself," said his father, quietly.²

¹ Alger, *The Collected Works of Horatio Alger: 57 Novels Complete in One Volume* (Kindle Locations 56372-56373).

² *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 56399-56404.

Remarkably, despite coming upon the scene of his own son bloody from a scuffle with an unfamiliar immigrant boy dressed in rags, Colonel Preston is first inclined to take Andy's side over his son's.

Godfrey, unsurprisingly, is offended that his father has declined to side with him over a stranger of lower social status:

"I didn't think you'd turn against me, and let a low boy insult me," complained Godfrey.

"Why do you call him low?"

"Because he's only an Irish boy."

"Some of our most distinguished men have been Irish boys or of Irish descent. I don't think you have proved your point."

"He's a beggar."

"I'm not a beggar," exclaimed Andy, speaking for the first time.

"I never begged a penny in all my life."

"Look at his rags," said Godfrey, scornfully.

"You would be in rags, too, if you had to buy your own clothes. I think I should respect you very much more under the circumstances," returned his father.³

In this scene we have three familiar types in Horatio Alger stories: the poor boy whose rags mask his "sterling qualities," the wealthy boy whose character makes him unworthy of his position, and the wise upper class male character who can tell the difference. There exists in these stories the clear assumption that an innate hierarchy of worth exists apart from the recognized hierarchy of social status. Later in the *Only Irish Boy*, Colonel Preston becomes Andy's benefactor giving the boy eight hundred dollars after he saves the older man from a criminal intent on robbing him. Andy also gets the opportunity to attend school, and even though he can only attend for half-days he is, like a twentieth century gifted child, "naturally bright." As a result, he makes rapid progress

³ Ibid., Kindle Locations 56411-56414.

and is promoted to a higher class after his first three weeks.⁴ In just a year he goes from illiterate to being on the same level as other boys his age proving he possessed the innate qualities that Colonel Preston discerned almost immediately despite Andy's outward appearance.

As we have seen, the idea of the “gifted child” represents a continuation of this Algeresque project of identifying and developing children – replacing the discerning Colonel Preston with a systematic, “scientific” process that claimed to identify these innately intelligent children in an objective and efficient manner. The concept originated in the change in scale brought about by massive immigration, urbanization, and industrialization of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that created the conditions for the acceptance of the idea of gifted children and “objectively” measured intelligence. While the initial method for identifying the gifted, the IQ test, has come to be seen as an inherently limited tool, giftedness continued relying still on systematic criteria experts developed for identification along a Taylorite model. This Taylorite system valorized and naturalized the rise of individuals from humble backgrounds – an especially appealing notion for individuals such as Lewis Terman who nevertheless depended on Algeresque assistance to achieve their professional status and who in turn often played the role of kindly benefactor in the lives of their gifted subjects.

The veneer of numerical objectivity – its criteria initially a neutral number on a “scientific” test – had the effect of opening the door for gender- and race-blind claims to giftedness. Leta Stetter Hollingworth and Martin Jenkins saw in the idea of gifted children an

⁴ Ibid., Kindle Locations 56863-56865.

opportunity to counter prevalent sexist and racist claims about mental ability. At the same time, the creation of a “gifted” group at the top of a mental hierarchy necessitated that individuals exist at the bottom. These individuals variously and historically classified as the “intellectually disabled,” “mentally retarded,” or the “feeble-minded” have been understood as the other end of this hierarchy. While the gifted have been cast as a hidden natural resource to be develop, the individuals in these groups have tended to be depicted under a medical language of diagnosis and quarantine. In both cases, gifted and intellectually disabled may be hidden among the normal and unidentified by amateurs such as teachers and even parents. Gifted advocates who asserted the need for systematic identification and development of these children have even claimed that the gifted would be “disabled,” “retarded,” or “handicapped” without the appropriate expert intervention. At the same time, gifted advocates demand more resources to be allocated to attend to the special needs of the gifted often placing funding for the gifted in context of funding for the disabled. Thus, while the notion of giftedness has opened possibilities of achievement and status to individuals regardless of their race, gender, or class, it also necessarily limits who might be considered to possess potential worth developing.

A cursory review indicates that gifted children became a truly national concern in the second half of the twentieth century as the development of innate talent and ability as a natural resource became a driving force for U.S education policy as James Conant prescribed. In 1972, the U.S. Office of Education issued a report to Congress on the state of gifted children, known as the Marland Report. The report provided the first formal federal definition of “gifted children” encouraging schools to define giftedness broadly.

Along with academic and intellectual talent, the definition included leadership ability, visual and performing arts, creative or productive thinking, and psychomotor ability (psychomotor ability was subsequently dropped).⁵ It was a definition very much in line with Paul Witty's 1940 characterization of a gifted child being one "whose performance is consistently remarkable in any potentially valuable area."⁶ The Marland Report warned that if gifted children were not identified and developed properly they were in danger of losing their exceptional abilities, "Intellectual and creative talent cannot survive educational neglect and apathy," intoned the report.⁷ Additionally the report echoed the concerns Witty and Martin Jenkins introduced in the 1930s adding that the problem of neglect of the gifted was especially critical among minority children, "The loss is particularly evident in minority groups who have in both social and educational environments every configuration calculated to stifle potential talent."⁸ In response to this report, the Office of Gifted and Talented was given official status within the U.S. Office of Education in 1974.

A myriad of nonprofit institutions have also been created to advocate for gifted children. The National Association for the Gifted was founded in 1954 to advocate for the identification and development of gifted children, and now has association chapters in

⁵ S. P. Marland, Jr, Education of the gifted and talented: Report to the Congress of the United States by the U.S. Commissioner of Education and background papers submitted to the U.S. Office of Education, 2 vols. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. (Government Documents Y4.L 11/2: G36)

⁶ Paul A. Witty, "Some considerations in the education of gifted children.," 516.

⁷ Marland, 1.

⁸ Ibid.

forty-seven states.⁹ The World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, headquartered in the United States, was founded in 1975.¹⁰ Following these, the American Association for Gifted Children was founded in 2001 and the National Society for the Gifted and Talented was founded in 2004.¹¹

Given the decentralized nature of public education in the United States it is difficult to accurately assess the totality of efforts to aid the gifted. Most states have their own provisions for gifted children and each school district has significant leeway to design their own programs.¹² Publications on gifted children has also grown dramatically. According to the World Library Catalog, almost 23,000 books have been published relating to gifted children, the vast majority since 1950.¹³ Many of these are guides for parents on how to raise their gifted children. The importance of ensuring that gifted children be developed to their full potential, therefore, can be found in almost every library and bookstore, many homes, in nonprofit institutions, as well as in government policies at the local, state, and national level.

⁹ “A Brief History of Gifted and Talented Education,” National Association for Gifted Children. <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/resources/gifted-education-us/brief-history-gifted-and-talented-education>

“Gifted by State,” <http://www.nagc.org/resources-publications/gifted-state>

¹⁰ “Headquarters History,” World Council for Gifted and Talented Children. <https://www.world-gifted.org/about-us/history/headquarters-history/>

¹¹ American Association for Gifted Children. <https://aagc.ssri.duke.edu>; National “Society for the Gifted and Talented,” GuideStar Nonprofit Report. <https://www.guidestar.org/profile/16-1688811>

¹² “2014-2015 State of the States in Gifted Education: Policy and Practice Data” National Association for Gifted Children <http://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/key%20reports/2014-2015%20State%20of%20the%20States%20%28final%29.pdf>

¹³ World Library Catalog <https://www.worldcat.org/search?q=kw%3Agifted+children&fq=yr%3A1950..2017+%3E&qt=advanced&dblist=638#x0%253Abook-%2C%2528x0%253Abook%2Bx4%253Aprintbook%2529format>

The three main assumptions that underpin the idea of giftedness remain in effect today. First, the assumption persists that “the gifted” exist as a distinct type in possession of a superior quantity of talents and abilities. Second, in addition to real type that exists only in a limited quantity, the gifted are also like gold and silver in that they are assumed to be hidden and must be actively identified by expert-designed method. Finally, the third assumption of giftedness is that it represents a resource that must be developed for the good of the nation.

This attention to gifted children and resources devoted to their identification and development is considerable, but the assertion that the gifted are not being sufficiently developed has persisted as well. In 1993, the United States Department of Education released a report entitled “National Excellence: A Case for Developing America’s Talent.” The report began:

The United States is squandering one of its most precious resources — the gifts, talents, and high interests of many of its students. In a broad range of intellectual and artistic endeavors, these youngsters are not challenged to do their best work. This problem is especially severe among economically disadvantaged and minority students, who have access to fewer advanced educational opportunities and whose talents often go unnoticed.

The gifts that were not being properly developed in 1933, 1953, and 1973 were still neglected in 1993. These high ability, gifted students are not challenged in school. They are like Taylor’s “soldiering” workers, and as a result, their gifts, national resources, go to waste. The project to systematically and scientifically raise up the Algeresque diamond in the rough from every social and racial background has still not been realized, it seems.

It seems quite possible that the enduring appeal of giftedness comes in part from this notion of how gifts function. As anthropologists such as Marcel Mauss and David

Graeber have noted, gifts come with obligations — moral obligations to reciprocate a gift of similar value. The moral — and even spiritual — obligations that come with receiving a gift can be seen as an alternative to the modern world and the amoral market. This connection between gifts and obligation parallels the perceived need to develop the gifted for the good of the nation — especially in the face of fears that a mass society of anonymous individuals has lost its sense of mutual obligation.

Gift economies can be tenuous, Graeber notes, as these giver-recipient relationships must be “constantly created and maintained.”¹⁴ It is possible to see here an analogy to “gifted” children — hope that there are superior individuals among the masses who can be taught to use their abilities for the common good. The persistence of the gifted-as-neglected may mean that the present gift cycle simply does not work — perhaps those considered gifted can not or will not reciprocate in the manner expected. Perhaps too the project of reconciling hierarchy and democracy is too massive an undertaking for “fortunate deviates” to achieve.

At the same time, recent scholarship suggests that the idea of an innate mental hierarchy has a powerful salience for those who see themselves at the top. Anthropologist Karen Ho has shown how, beginning in the 1980s, investment banking firms have recruited almost exclusively from elite institutions like Harvard and Princeton trading on the cultural cache of working with “the brightest people in the world.”¹⁵ Ho argues that this culture of smartness informs how these investment bankers understand and justify

¹⁴ David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*, Brooklyn (NY: Melville House, 2014 ed.), 105.

¹⁵ Karen Ho, *Liquidated: an ethnography of Wall Street* (Duke University Press, 2009), 39.

their position as individuals who are innately capable of making decisions involving the allocation of an enormous amount of financial resources with impact on a global scale – all based not on acquired knowledge or experience but on the ability to process information quickly.¹⁶ Ho makes clear that race and gender shape how this “smartness” is performed, and yet it is still striking that the justification for the power and wealth that come with these jobs is based on appeal to neutral and “objective” smartness. These elite few, at least, can be considered “fortunate deviates” in every possible sense.

¹⁶ Ibid., 49.

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