

Terman Study of the Gifted

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The Terman Study of the Gifted (originally known as Genetic Studies of Genius) is one of the most famous longitudinal studies in the history of psychology. In 1921, Lewis M. Terman, professor of psychology in Stanford University, initiated the study and its sample was comprised of 1,528 children (11 years old, on average), all with IQs of 135 or above—placing them in the top 1% of the population at the time. Its participants (Termites) were systematically followed for over 80 years: Comprehensive surveys and interviews investigated all aspects of their lives, including educational and occupational achievements, mental and physical health, marital and parental status, and mortality.

The results of Terman's study provide important insights into the long-term, real-world influence of intelligence as defined and assessed by standardized tests. Terman's work also inspired subsequent studies of the gifted (e.g., Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth), which have replicated and extended many of his findings. This entry describes the genesis and rationale for the study, summarizes the general trends of its findings, and concludes with brief descriptions of some of the study's most notable members.

Origins

Terman's interest in intelligence long predated his Study of the Gifted: His 1905 dissertation compared the mental and physical abilities of boys identified as being of very high and very low intelligence. In 1916, Terman and his colleagues published their translation of the original Binet–Simon intelligence test. They relied primarily on Stanford–Binet, one of the most widely used IQ tests, to identify children for the Study of the Gifted.

Nearly all the children identified for the study lived in California cities (where the search was largely limited to) and the majority came from middle- to upper-class households. A major impetus for the study was to disprove the stereotype that highly intelligent children were physically frail, socially incompetent, and emotionally maladjusted; “early ripe, early rot” was a phrase often used to describe them. Terman believed that gifted children were in fact superior in many ways to children of average intelligence and that by identifying them early on, they could be given the appropriate opportunities that would allow them to develop into society's leaders. (Like many of his contemporaries, Terman was a proponent of eugenics, although his views were not as extreme as those many others held at the time.)

Summary of Findings

The study produced an avalanche of data: five books, one monograph, and hundreds of articles. When they were initially assessed, the Termites put the lie to the early ripe, early rot

stereotype: Compared to children of the same age, but of average intelligence, participants were taller, heavier, and stronger; had the same rate of contagious diseases; better nutrition; and were equally emotionally well adjusted. Gifted children were as interested in sports as children of average intelligence, reported spending an average of over 2 hours per day with children outside of school, and did not report being teased significantly more than “normal” children. The gifted did, however, evince slightly less interest in competitive games, were rated as somewhat less sociable, and reported playing alone slightly more than children from the general population.

As they matured, the Termites obtained numerous positive outcomes at many times the rate of individuals of average intelligence: two thirds earned bachelor’s degrees (10 times the rate of the general population at the time) and 8 times as many earned doctoral degrees as typical college graduates. Their occupational attainment was similarly impressive, with 95% of men working in jobs categorized as “professional” or “high-level business” by the U.S. Census Bureau and receiving income that was 4 times greater than that of the general population. (Owing to the lack of opportunities at the time, women’s career outcomes were less impressive.)

Over 90% of participants married and over 80% had children. The gifted remained healthier than the general population as they aged, lived an average of approximately 10 years longer, and retained their place in the top 1% of intelligence, as evidenced by IQ tests they were given later in life. The gifted did not exceed the general population in all ways, however, and they fared no better in terms of alcoholism, suicide, and divorce.

Notable Participants

Many Termites were remarkably successful. Lee J. Cronbach and Robert R. Sears were two eminent psychologists—and their own subjects, as they were highly involved in the study in its later years. Ancel Keys invented the K-ration. Jess Oppenheimer created, produced, and wrote *I Love Lucy*. Edward Dmytryk directed 23 films, one of which (*Crossfire*) earned Academy Award nominations for Best Picture and Best Director. L. Sprague de Camp was an award-winning fantasy and science fiction writer. Norris Bradbury was director of Los Alamos National Laboratory. Shelley Smith Mydans was a novelist and reporter for *Life* and *Time*. William A. P. White, writing under the pen name “Anthony Boucher,” was one of the original editors of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. Douglas McGlashan Kelley was the chief psychiatrist during the Nuremberg trials.

Despite the incredible accomplishments of an elite sample of Termites, and the study population as a whole, the Study of the Gifted did not produce any “indisputable geniuses,”

and none of its members won a Nobel Prize. (It is worth noting that the two winners of the Nobel Prize in Physics, William Shockley and Luis Alvarez, were tested but failed to qualify for the study.) Terman was very pleased with the extraordinary accomplishments of his Termites—but also concluded that the relationship between intelligence and achievement is far from perfect.

See also [Ability Tests](#); [Aptitude Tests](#); [Giftedness](#); [Intelligence Quotient](#); [Intelligence Tests](#); [Standardized Tests](#)

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