

# Lewis Terman

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 1, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Lewis Terman*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=31839>

## Lewis Terman

**Born:** 1877 | **Died:** 1956

**Nationality:** American

**Primary Field(s):** Educational Psychology, Psychometrics, Intelligence Testing

### 1. Summary

Lewis Madison Terman was a prominent **American psychologist** whose groundbreaking contributions profoundly shaped the fields of **educational psychology** and psychometrics during the early 20th century. Born in rural Indiana, Terman's academic journey led him to Indiana University and later to Clark University, where he studied under the influential G. Stanley Hall, a pioneer in developmental psychology. After a brief period as a high school principal and professor, he joined the faculty at Stanford University in 1910, where he remained for the rest of his distinguished career. It was at Stanford that Terman established himself as a leading authority in the measurement of intelligence, dedicating his life to understanding individual differences in cognitive abilities and their implications for education and society.

Terman's most enduring accomplishments include the revision of the Binet-Simon intelligence scale, resulting in the widely adopted **Stanford-Binet IQ test**, and the initiation of the monumental **Genetic Studies of Genius**. This pioneering longitudinal study, which tracked a cohort of intellectually gifted children from childhood into adulthood, challenged prevailing stereotypes about genius and provided unprecedented insights into the life trajectories of high-ability individuals. Beyond his research, Terman was a significant figure in the professional psychological community, serving as president of the American Psychological Association in 1923. His work, while advancing the scientific study of intelligence, was also controversially intertwined with the eugenics movement, reflecting a complex legacy that continues to be debated in academic circles.

### 2. Key Contributions

Lewis Terman's most significant contributions lie in his efforts to operationalize and measure intelligence, particularly through his development of the Stanford-Binet IQ test. Building upon the foundational work of French psychologist Alfred Binet and his colleague Théodore Simon, who developed the first practical intelligence test in 1905 to identify children needing special educational assistance, Terman recognized the need for a standardized American version. His 1916 revision, the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, not only adapted the test for the American context but crucially introduced the concept of the **Intelligence Quotient (IQ)** as a ratio of mental age to chronological age, multiplied by 100. This numerical score provided a seemingly objective measure of an individual's intellectual ability relative to their age group, making intelligence testing more accessible and interpretable for educators, clinicians, and researchers. The Stanford-Binet

quickly became the standard for intelligence assessment for several decades, profoundly influencing educational placement, vocational guidance, and military selection.

Beyond the Stanford-Binet, Terman embarked on an even more ambitious undertaking: the **Genetic Studies of Genius**, initiated in 1921. This was an unprecedented longitudinal study designed to investigate the characteristics and life trajectories of intellectually gifted individuals. Unlike previous studies of genius that relied on retrospective accounts of eminent adults, Terman's project aimed to identify gifted children early in life and follow their development prospectively. His team meticulously selected approximately 1,500 children, primarily from California public schools, who scored in the top one percent of intelligence on the Stanford-Binet test. These participants, affectionately dubbed "Termites," were subjected to extensive data collection, including detailed questionnaires, interviews, medical examinations, and psychological assessments, tracking their educational progress, career paths, personal relationships, and overall well-being throughout their lives.

The initial findings of the Genetic Studies of Genius, published in the first volume of the series in 1925, challenged prevailing myths that gifted children were socially awkward, physically weak, or prone to mental instability. Instead, Terman's research indicated that his gifted cohort was, on average, healthier, taller, better adjusted socially, and more successful in school than their peers. This study demonstrated that high intelligence was generally associated with overall positive development, providing empirical evidence that significantly informed and shaped the emerging field of **gifted education**. The groundbreaking methodology of tracking individuals over their entire lifespan set a new standard for longitudinal research in psychology and remains one of the longest-running psychological studies ever conducted, continuing even after Terman's death, with follow-ups extending to the present day through the efforts of his successors.

### 3. Intellectual Context and Impact

Lewis Terman's work emerged during a pivotal era in psychology, characterized by a burgeoning interest in individual differences and the application of scientific methods to human behavior. He was deeply influenced by the burgeoning field of psychometrics, particularly the early efforts of Francis Galton in England and Alfred Binet in France, who sought to measure mental abilities quantitatively. Terman's decision to revise Binet's scale was driven by a practical need for a robust and standardized instrument suited for American educational and military contexts, reflecting the broader societal shift towards efficiency and scientific management. This era also saw the rise of compulsory education and the need for tools to differentiate students, leading to the rapid adoption of his intelligence tests across schools, the military during World War I, and even in immigration screening processes.

Terman's intellectual context was also inextricably linked to the early 20th-century eugenics

movement, a social philosophy advocating for the improvement of the human race through selective breeding. Like many prominent scientists and intellectuals of his time, Terman was a proponent of eugenics, believing that intelligence was largely inherited and that certain "races" or social classes were intellectually superior. He was a member of the Human Betterment Foundation, an organization dedicated to promoting eugenic policies, including forced sterilization. This aspect of his work, while reflecting the regrettable scientific and social norms of his era, casts a complex shadow over his otherwise significant scientific achievements, demonstrating how scientific tools can be misused to support discriminatory ideologies.

The impact of Terman's work on subsequent generations of psychologists and educators cannot be overstated. The Stanford-Binet test, in its various revisions, remained a cornerstone of intelligence assessment for decades, influencing the development of numerous other standardized tests. His *Genetic Studies of Genius* not only provided invaluable data on giftedness but also served as a paradigm for future longitudinal research, demonstrating the power of studying human development over extended periods. His research spurred the growth of **gifted education programs** and fostered a greater scientific understanding of high ability. However, his strong emphasis on the hereditary nature of intelligence and his association with eugenics also sparked ongoing debates about the role of genetics versus environment in intelligence, the ethical implications of intelligence testing, and the potential for such measures to perpetuate social inequalities, issues that continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about intelligence and human potential.

#### 4. Major Works

***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*** (1916): This foundational text provided the rationale and detailed procedures for Terman's seminal revision of the Binet-Simon intelligence scale. It introduced the concept of the **Intelligence Quotient (IQ)** as a ratio of mental age to chronological age, multiplied by 100, a formula that would become standard for decades. The book not only described the test's construction and standardization on American children but also outlined its potential applications in education, clinical diagnosis, and vocational guidance. Its publication marked a pivotal moment in the history of psychological assessment, making intelligence testing accessible and widely adopted across various institutions.

***Genetic Studies of Genius*** (multiple volumes, beginning 1925): As editor and primary author of the initial volumes, Terman launched this monumental multi-volume series to document his pioneering longitudinal study of intellectually gifted individuals. The first volume, ***Mental and Physical Traits of a Thousand Gifted Children*** (1925), presented the initial findings, characterizing gifted children as, on average, healthier, better adjusted, and more successful than their peers, thereby challenging popular misconceptions of genius as bordering on abnormality.

Subsequent volumes, co-authored with various colleagues including Melita H. Oden and Maude A. Merrill, tracked the participants ("Termites") through adolescence and adulthood, examining their educational achievements, professional careers, personal lives, and overall life satisfaction. This series became a cornerstone of gifted education research and a landmark example of longitudinal methodology in psychology.

***The Intelligence of School Children: How Children Differ in Ability, the Measurement of Intelligence, and How to Secure the Best Type of School for Each Child*** (1919): This work further elaborated on the practical implications of intelligence testing for educational practice. Terman argued for differentiated instruction and educational pathways based on intellectual ability, advocating for specialized programs for gifted students as well as those with lower intellectual capacities. The book aimed to bridge the gap between psychological theory and pedagogical application, asserting that an understanding of individual differences in intelligence was crucial for optimizing educational outcomes and preparing children for their respective roles in society.

***Psychological Factors in Marital Happiness*** (1938): Co-authored with Catherine Cox Miles, this book represents a significant foray by Terman into the study of adult social behavior and relationships. Although distinct from his core work on intelligence and giftedness, it applied rigorous psychometric methods to understand the factors contributing to marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction. The study utilized extensive questionnaires and interviews with married couples, attempting to identify psychological traits, attitudes, and background variables predictive of successful marriages. This work demonstrated Terman's broad research interests and his commitment to applying scientific methods to complex human phenomena, even beyond the realm of intelligence testing.

## 5. Criticisms and Debates

Lewis Terman's legacy, while marked by significant scientific advancements, is also subject to considerable criticism and debate, primarily revolving around his involvement with the **eugenics movement** and the interpretation of his intelligence research. Terman was a vocal proponent of eugenics, believing in the scientific basis for improving the human gene pool through selective breeding. He advocated for policies that would limit reproduction among individuals deemed "feeble-minded" and restrict immigration based on perceived intellectual inferiority, views that reflected the prevailing, but now widely discredited, racist and classist ideologies of his time. His membership in the Human Betterment Foundation underscores this commitment, linking his scientific work directly to a social and political agenda that has since been condemned for its ethical violations and pseudo-scientific underpinnings. Critics argue that his intelligence tests, particularly in their early applications, were used to justify social inequalities and discriminatory practices, rather than merely measuring innate ability objectively.

Another major area of criticism concerns Terman's strong emphasis on the **hereditary nature of intelligence**. While acknowledging some environmental influence, Terman largely viewed intelligence as a fixed, inherited trait, a perspective that fueled the "nature versus nurture" debate. This viewpoint has been challenged by subsequent research demonstrating the profound impact of environmental factors, such as education, nutrition, and socioeconomic status, on cognitive development. Critics contend that by focusing heavily on genetic predispositions, Terman's work implicitly downplayed the potential for individual growth and the societal responsibility to provide enriching environments for all children. This "fixed intelligence" mindset, critics argue, could lead to self-fulfilling prophecies and limit educational opportunities for those deemed less intelligent based on early test scores, potentially hindering their development and social mobility.

Furthermore, the methodology and generalizability of Terman's pioneering **Genetic Studies of Genius** have faced scrutiny. While lauded for its longitudinal design, the study's initial sample was predominantly composed of white, middle-class children of European ancestry from California schools, raising questions about the generalizability of its findings to more diverse populations. Critics also point to potential **researcher bias**; Terman himself was deeply invested in proving that gifted individuals were well-adjusted and successful, and his close, almost paternalistic, relationship with his "Termites" might have subtly influenced data collection or interpretation. Although he strived for scientific objectivity, the personal involvement of the primary investigator in such a long-term study presents inherent challenges to complete impartiality. These criticisms highlight the importance of considering the historical, social, and ethical contexts in which scientific research is conducted and underscore the ongoing need for rigorous, unbiased methodologies in the study of human intelligence and potential.

## Further Reading

[Lewis Terman - Wikipedia](#)

[Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales - Wikipedia](#)

[Genetic Studies of Genius - Wikipedia](#)

[Eugenics in the United States - Wikipedia](#)

[American Psychological Association \(APA\) Official Website](#)

[Intelligence Quotient - Wikipedia](#)

[Alfred Binet - Wikipedia](#)