



Sick? Or slow? On the origins of intelligence as a psychological object[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the first moments of the emergence of “psychometrics” as a discipline, using a history of the Binet–Simon test (precursor to the Stanford–Binet) to engage the question of how intelligence became a “psychological object.” To begin to answer this, we used a previously-unexamined set of French texts to highlight the negotiations and collaborations that led Alfred Binet (1857–1911) to identify “mental testing” as a research area worth pursuing. This included a long-standing rivalry with Désiré-Magloire Bourneville (1840–1909), who argued for decades that *psychiatrists* ought to be the professional arbiters of which children would be removed from the standard curriculum and referred to special education classes in *asylums*. In contrast, Binet sought to keep children in *schools* and conceived of a way for *psychologists* to do this. Supported by the *Société libre de l'étude psychologique de l'enfant* [Free society for the psychological study of the child], and by a number of collaborators and friends, he thus undertook to create a “metric” scale of intelligence—and the associated testing apparatus—to legitimize the role of *psychologists* in a to-that-point *psychiatric* domain: identifying and treating “the abnormal”. The result was a change in the earlier law requiring all healthy French children to attend school, between the ages of 6 and 13, to recognize instead that otherwise normal children sometimes need special help: they are “slow” (*arriéré*), but not “sick.” This conceptualization of intelligence was then carried forward, through the test's influence on Lewis Terman (1877–1956) and Lightner Witmer (1867–1956), to shape virtually all subsequent thinking about intelligence testing and its role in society.

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"If we really want to help the intellectually disabled, the best thing we can do is complete the task begun by... Binet... and countless others of understanding exactly what general intelligence is." —D. K. Detterman (2010)

1. Introduction

The French psychologist Alfred Binet (1857–1911) is accepted today as the inventor of the first working test of intelligence. How this was accomplished has been widely discussed (see esp. Fancher, 1985; Foschi & Cicciola, 2006; Wolf, 1964, 1969a, 1969b; also Wolf, 1973, for a biography).¹ And thus, for example, it is generally accepted that Binet developed his test following the introduction of a law regarding compulsory universal education in France and his subsequent appointment to a government commission for the study and schooling of children afflicted by what we now call—as a result of his influence—"developmental delay". These historical works have been invaluable, in terms of situating our contemporary understanding of intelligence testing, but none have explained how intelligence *itself* came to be conceived-of as a *psychological object* (following Danziger, 2003). Indeed, given the emergence and spread of testing during the Progressive Era of social reform, it could easily have become *psychiatric* (see e.g., Burnham, 1960). Thus, a question remains: How did intellectually "abnormal" children become *slow* rather than *sick*? (How, in other words, was our present task set?)

To begin to address this question, we returned to the source: the broader context in which the original Binet test was constructed, in an attempt to capture some of the several French influences omitted from the secondary English-language literature (cf. Nicolas & Andrieu, 2005; Vial, 1990). As a result, the present article offers a new perspective—relying on the primary French-language texts from that period—and proposes that Binet created his intelligence test *with the explicit intent of legitimizing the role of psychologists in schools, while*

*simultaneously limiting the role of psychiatrists and their power to remove students from school.*² In doing so, Binet also thereby fired an early shot in what has since become a war of words regarding which profession ought to have dominion over the mind (see, in this connection, e.g., Herman, 1995; Lunbeck, 1994; Scull, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

The result here is not a biography in the usual sense, because what follows is not strictly speaking about Binet *as an individual* (following Ball, 2012). It is rather an examination of the collaborations and negotiations that collectively produced a material object: the Binet–Simon test of intelligence, which was then imported into American psychology—having been separated from its context of discovery—by Henry Goddard (1866–1957) and Lewis Terman (1877–1956). What we present here is therefore closer, as a result, to a "biography of a scientific object" (following Daston, 2000; cf. Burman, 2012).

In what follows, we trace three interconnected stories: Binet's interactions with psychiatry on behalf of psychologists, the justification for the government commission and what followed from its activities, and the collaborations that produced the test that came to be so influential. Aside for some brief comments in conclusion, however, we do not discuss the American indigenization of the test itself because this has been ably done elsewhere (see e.g., Carson, 2007; Castles, 2012; Chapman, 1988; DuBois, 1970; Gould, 1981, 1995; Minton, 1988; Zenderland, 1998).

The aims of this paper are thus: To (a) furnish a more detailed background in order to highlight the challenges navigated in producing the kind of test we all now take for granted, which had to that point not yet been invented and which has since come to be so influential that the resulting perspective seems now to have been inevitable. To (b) show that Binet built an original instrument to measure mental "retardation" scientifically because he wished to limit the role of psychiatrists—who used subjective measures (with little agreement regarding the definitions of categories with

¹ On Wolf, see McPherson and Popplestone (2000).

² For related discussions covering other aspects of Binet's career, see Fancher (1988), Nicolas (1994, 1997, 2011), Nicolas, Gounden, and Sanitioso (2011), Nicolas, Gras, and Ségui (2011), Nicolas and Levine (2012), Nicolas and Sanitioso (2012), Nicolas, Segui, and Ferrand (2000a, 2000b). For a full bibliography of his complete works, many entries of which include links to open-access full-text, see Andrieu and Nicolas (2012).

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