

1916

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Recommended Citation

J. E. Wallace Wallin, Who Is Feeble-Minded, 6 J. Am. Inst. Crim. L. & Criminology 706 (May 1915 to March 1916)

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WHO IS FEEBLE-MINDED?

J. E. WALLACE WALLIN.²

[This is the first of a series of articles bearing upon the applicability of psychological methods of diagnosis to delinquents, both juvenile and adult. The second contribution will appear in March and will be in the nature of a reply to this.—ED.]

During the last three or four years, thousands of social and scholastic misfits of every description have been classified as feeble-minded because Binet tests have shown (that is, by standards which, as we have seen, are not accurate) that they possess mentalities of only X, XI and XII years. Now if we are justified in pronouncing older-adolescent or adult prostitutes, murderers or other criminals, or grade and high school retardates as feeble-minded on the basis of these standards, then, by a parity of reasoning, we must be equally ready to call law-abiding, respectable and successful farmers, laborers or business men who have had no more school training than most prostitutes and criminals are claimed to have had, feeble-minded on

¹Excerpts from a chapter on "Who Is Feeble-Minded" in a forthcoming monograph on "Problems of Subnormality," in which facts are presented which show the unscientific nature of the attempt to differentiate high grade feeble-minded, borderline and backward children and adults purely by a rule-of-thumb procedure based on mental tests and arbitrarily assumed psychological standards. The more we learn of psychological diagnosis the more evident it becomes that psychological tests are just like many of the tests of the physician (temperature, pulse, Wassermann, Noguchi, etc.): they are simply one means for aiding the clinician in arriving at a guarded diagnosis. They do not constitute an automatic diagnostic, which will enable the examiner to dispense with a thorough clinical examination or to disregard other clinical findings, nor do they obviate the need of technical training on the part of the examiner. After four years of general medical training the physician requires one or more additional years of specialized work in order to become a competent specialist, say as an oculist, pediatrician, neurologist or psychiatrist. The clinical psychologist cannot qualify as a specialist on mentally and educationally deviating children, in the sense that a physician qualifies as a specialist in one of the medical branches, without an equally thorough preparation. There can be no field for the clinical psychologist as a specialist on mental and educational deviates so long as boards of education, courts and institutions are encouraged to believe that the mental and educational differentiation of children or adults can be satisfactorily done by any intelligent person who will learn to administer a few tests and to apply a few hypothetical formulas. Psychological diagnosis is no easier than medical diagnosis and the consequences of a blundering psychological diagnosis may be as unfortunate as the consequences of a blundering physical diagnosis. Read, in part, before the American Psychological Association, Chicago, December, 1915. Published concurrently in the January number of the *Ungraded*.

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precisely the same standards. The logic of this conclusion is inescapable. If we are justified in branding every Binet X-, XI- or XII-year-old prostitute of limited scholastic training as feeble-minded, logical consistency demands that we so brand every successful Binet X-, XI, or XII-year-old housewife of limited scholastic training. If we are justified in branding every X-, XI- and XII-year-old murderer, robber or thief of limited scholastic training as feeble-minded, common fairness demands that we brand every X-, XI- or XII-year-old successful farmer, laborer or business man of limited scholastic training as feeble-minded. We cannot consider X-, XI- and XII-year-old criminals as feeble-minded because they happen to be criminals and refuse to consider X-, XI- and XII-year-old housewives, farmers, laborers and merchants as feeble-minded simply because they are law abiding and successful. If the rule works in the one case, it must work in the other; if it breaks down in the one case it must break down in the other.

During a brief visit in the state of Iowa I had occasion to study a few successful farmers, a business man and a housewife. Each subject was given all the 1908 and 1911 Binet-Simon tests above age IX, except the opposites test (Subject F, however, was given all the tests above age VIII). The 1908 scale was administered according to my own Guide³ and the 1911 according to Goddard's version, which is usually used in this country for diagnosing feeble-mindedness. The subjects were generously rated in the tests; *i. e.*, full credit was given for some responses that did not quite meet the technical passing requirements. Measured by the standards of one of the best rural communities of the country, socially and industrially considered, and by my own intimate knowledge of the subjects tested during the greater part of my life, not a single one of these persons could by any stretch of the imagination be considered feeble-minded. Not a single one has any sort of record of delinquency, or crime, petty or major, or indulges in alcoholic beverages. All are law-abiding citizens, eminently successful in their several occupations, all except one (who is unmarried) being parents of intelligent, respectable children. The heredity is entirely negative, except for a few cases of minor nervous troubles and alcoholic addiction. No relative in the first or second generation, so far as it was possible to get the facts by inquiry, was ever committed to a penal institution or an institution for the mentally defective or disordered.

The following are the records of the half dozen whom I found time to test.

³As given in *Experimental Studies of Mental Defectives*, 1912, p. 116f.

Mr. A, 65 years old, faculties well preserved, attended school only about 3 years in the aggregate; successively a successful farmer and business man, now partly retired on a competency of \$30,000 (after considerable financial reverses from a fire), for ten years president of the board of education in a town of 700, superintendent or assistant superintendent of a Sunday school for about 30 years; bank director; raised and educated a family of 9 children, all normal; one of these is engaged in scientific research (Ph. D.); one is assistant professor in a state agricultural school; one is assistant professor in a medical school (now completing thesis for Sc. D.); one is a former music teacher and organist, a graduate of a musical conservatory, but now an invalid; one a graduate of the normal department of a college; one is a graduate nurse; two are engaged in a large retail business; one is holding a clerical position; all are high school graduates and all except one have been one-time students in colleges and universities.

Mr. A failed on all the new 1911 tests except the six digits and suggestion lines (almost passed the central thought test). In the 1908 scale he passed all the X-year tests and the following higher tests; absurdities, 60 words (gave 58 words), abstract definitions, and repetition of sentence. B.-S. age, 1908, 10.8; retardation 54 years; intelligence quotient .17. According to the 1911 scale, 10.6 years.⁴

This man, measured by the automatic standards now in common use, would be hopelessly feeble-minded (an imbecile by the intelligence quotient), and should have been committed to an institution for the feeble-minded long ago. But is there anyone who has the temerity, in spite of the Binet "proof," to maintain, in view of this man's personal, social and commercial record, and the record of his family, that he has been a social and mental misfit, and an undesirable citizen, and should, therefore, have been restrained from propagation because of mental deficiency (his wife is still less intelligent than he)? No doubt if a Binet tester had diagnosed this man 45 or 50 years ago he would have had him colonized as a "mental defective." It is a safe guess that there are hundreds of thousands like him throughout the country, no more intelligent and equally successful and prudent in the management of their affairs. Had he been a criminal

⁴The 1911 rating given the subjects does them more than ample justice, because everyone failed to make the 1911 X-year standard, and some would probably have failed to make the 1911 IX-year standard had the IX-year tests been given. Nevertheless all were credited with a basal level of IX years. The years of retardation and intelligence quotients of these cases are based upon the 1908 rating, which more adequately represents their mental level, as will be seen later.

when he was tested the Binet testers who implicitly follow these standards would have offered expert testimony under oath that he was feeble-minded and unable to distinguish between right and wrong, or unable to choose the right and avoid the wrong.

Mrs. B, 59 years old, nervously unstable but faculties quite well preserved, a successful housewife for a third of a century, a resident of Denver, Col., during the last 32 years, attended school about 5 years (5 or 6 months per year), the mother of 7 children, one deceased, one a mining engineer, one head engineer for a large telephone company, one a stenographer, one a bookkeeper, one daughter married and one daughter at home, all high school graduates.

Failed on all the new 1911 tests except the suggestion lines. In the 1908 scale failed on the sentence construction test in X and XI. Passed only the following tests above X; absurdities, 60 words (gave 59), abstract definitions, rhymes, and problems test. B.-S. age, 1908, 11; retardation 48 years; intelligence quotient .19. By the 1911 scale, 10.6 years. She is an imbecile, according to the intelligence quotient, but a very desirable imbecile! She has always lived a respectable life, has been a successful housewife and a kind mother who has raised and educated a family of respectable, law-abiding and self-supporting children.

Mr. C, 37 years old, a vigorous, healthy farmer, attended country school five or six months annually for about 7 years, two years in a town school and two terms in the business department of a "normal college." Owns real estate and personal property valued at \$10,000, and manages a farm of 240 acres. One dead child and two living children who appear perfectly normal from inspection.

He failed on all the new 1911 tests except the 6 digits. In the 1908 series passed all the X-, XI- and XII-year tests except 60 words and problems. Passed diamond test in XIII (drew two diamonds). B.-S. age, 1908, 12.2; retardation about 25 years; intelligence quotient .33; by the 1911 scale, 11.2 years. A high grade moron according to the mental age, or an imbecile according to the quotient! and yet a decent, law-abiding, prudent, successful farmer.

Mr. D, 42 years old, farmer, attended country school about 12 years, 3 months per year, going through Fifth Reader and Barnes' Arithmetic as far as percentage; the more intelligent of three bachelor brothers who jointly own, free of all encumbrance, a farm of 640 acres, valued at about \$125,000, mostly acquired through their own labors.

Mr. D failed on all the new 1911 tests except the suggestion lines (central thought given in part). Passed all the X-, XI- and XII-year old tests except 6 and 7 digits, rhymes and problems.

Passed test on difference between abstract words. B.-S. age, 1908, 11.4; retardation over 30 years; intelligence quotient .29. By the 1911 scale, 11.2 years. A very highly competent and successful imbecile according to the quotient, or moron according to the mental age.

Mr. E, 43 years old, farmer, attended country school 6 or 7 years about 5 months per year, the father of six normal children, the owner of 540 acres of land, valued at \$110,000, mostly free of encumbrance.

Failed on all the new 1911 tests except suggestion lines, and possibly the design test, and the following 1908 tests: 60 words, memory of seven digits and of sentences, reversed triangles, difference between abstract words, and possibly rearranged sentences (omitted "the" in one sentence). B.-S. age, 1908, 11.6; retardation over 31 years; intelligence quotient .27. By the 1911 scale, 11.4 years (including credit for two questionable responses). This man, one of the most affluent farmers in the neighborhood, should, according to the theory which is being propounded, be made a permanent ward in a state colony!

Mr. F, 41 years of age, farmer, attended country school about 7 years, 4 or 5 months per year, and a "normal college" about 3 months; has two normal children, owns 120 acres of land valued at about \$23,000, with an indebtedness of only \$3,000.

Of the new 1911 tests he passed only the suggestion lines (two correct), six digits and the design test (mostly correct). In the 1908 series passed age IX and the following higher tests: months, money, absurdities, definition of abstract words, seven digits, reproducing cut diamonds (one diamond) and reversed triangles. B.-S. age, 1908, 10.4; retardation over 30 years; intelligence quotient .25. By the 1911 scale, 10.8 years. A hopeless imbecile according to the intelligence quotient! A middle grade moron according to the B.-S. age! If this man, instead of being an eminently successful farmer and respectable citizen, with no vices (except the use of tobacco), had committed a crime and had been examined at the order of the Court, or if he had been the father of a feeble-minded child, those who diagnose by rule-of-thumb on the basis of unproved assumptions, would immediately have pronounced him "unquestionably feeble-minded" and recommended his life-long commitment to a colony for mental defectives at the expense of the state. In the light of a record of successful living, unquestioned in the community where he lives, who will venture to brand this man feeble-minded, in the technical meaning of the word? When subjected to the acid test of fact, the theories and hypotheses which have been the mainstay of the

Binet testers, and the diagnoses based upon them, suffer immediate collapse.

According to the arbitrary and hypothetical B.-S. XIII-year standard of normality every one of the above individuals would be feeble-minded. According to life's crucial test of economic and social success not a single one could be regarded as feeble-minded.

After testing the above group of poorly schooled individuals it seemed wise to test a parallel group of individuals who had enjoyed the best educational advantages in a modern city school system. Five freshmen girls in the Harris Teachers College and one boy, a junior in the Central High School, of St. Louis, were selected. One of the college students had already had two years of training in a state normal school. The other four girls were admitted to the college without examination on the strength of their high school records (those ranking in the upper two-thirds are admitted without examination), while the boy has always been excused from written examinations in the high school on the strength of his daily class record. All these subjects would be rated as superior students, with possibly one exception. The B.-S. tests were given to this group under precisely the same conditions as they were given to the other group, except that the opposites test was included. In the age rating by the 1911 scale I have followed literally the rule that "all questions under any age must be answered to pass that age," and "a year is added to the intelligence age, if he has succeeded in passing five additional tests belonging to superior age groups." It is, of course, quite inadmissible to apply such a rule to the upper part of the scale, owing to the fact that no tests are supplied for ages XIII and XIV, but the fact is that the rule is being constantly thus applied in practice by those who are diagnosing adolescent and adult delinquents by the 1911 scale. We are trying to determine how a group of well-schooled adolescents, whose mental status is unquestioned, will grade when diagnosed by exactly the same standards which are used in diagnosing delinquents and assumed defectives.

The following is the record of each examinee.

Miss H, age 17.16; ranked eleventh in a high school graduating class of 97. Failed on five tests: memory of sentence, picture interpretation, clock hands, code test and reversed triangles. Failed to pass any 1911 age standard above XI (*i. e.*, one or more failures in each age). Mental age according to the 1908 scale, XIII+ (based on two passes in XIII); and according to the 1911 scale, 12.8. Mental retardation, 5.0 years;⁵ intelligence quotient, .70.

⁵Based in each case on the highest age according to 1911 scale.

Miss I, age 18.83; ranked twenty-sixth in a high school graduating class of 82. Failed on six tests: memory of digits, problems, suggestion lines, picture interpretation, clock hands and code test. Failed to pass age XII and XV, but passed the "adult" age. Mental age according to the 1908 scale, XII (XI plus 5 advance points), or XIII, depending on the basal age used; and according to the 1911 scale, 12.6 (IX plus 8 advance points) or "adult" (= "over fifteen years").⁶

Miss J, age 19.08; high school rank twenty-fourth in a class of 82. Failed on two tests: suggestion lines and central thought. Failed to pass age XII and the adult standard in the 1911 series, but passed age XV. Mental age according to 1908 scale, XIII+;⁷ and according to the 1911 scale, 13.4 (XI + 12) or 15.8 (XV+4). Mental retardation, 3.28 years; quotient, .82.

Miss K, age 17.66; ranked fifty-first in a high school graduating class of 97. Failed on 6 tests: construction of simple or complex sentence, memory of sentence, suggestion lines, picture interpretation, clock hands, and code test. Barely passed the reversed triangle test. Failed to pass any 1911 age standard above X. Mental age according to 1908 scale, XIII (although the reversed triangle and diamond tests were not quite correct); and according to the 1911 scale, 12.4. Retardation, 5.26 years; quotient, .70.

Miss L, age 27.08. Failed on five tests: problems, clock hands, reversed triangles, central thought and code test. Barely passed test on difference between abstract words. Failed on all 1911 age standards above XI. Mental age according to 1908 scale XII (XI+5) or XIII; and according to the 1911 scale, 12.8. Retardation, 15. years; quotient, .44.

Mr. M, age 17.16; ranks in the upper third of his class. Failed on five tests: memory of digits, problems, reversed triangles, picture

⁶The claim that there will be less scattering in the 1911 than in the 1908 scale does not seem to be borne out by these normal adolescents.

⁷All the subjects were credited plus on the diamond test, although only H drew 3 diamonds. I, J, L and M drew 2 diamonds, while K drew five. It is interesting to note that all the subjects passed this test under the conditions presented in my Guide. Tests which have been supposed to be easier than this proved to be more difficult: the code test, suggestion lines and picture interpretation, each of which was passed only by two subjects. This confirms the conclusion long ago reached in the regular clinic work, that these tests are of little value. Only half of the subjects passed the central thought test and reversed triangle test (one more almost passing the latter. My explanations are very complete on this test), while four passed the design test. The number of words uttered in three minutes by the students in the order given was as follows: 130, 74, 97, 93, 120, and 118. The number given by the poorly schooled persons was: 58, 59, 33, 69, 45 and 48. The best subject did not even approach Binet-Simon's maximum: "Some children have named more than 200 words, which is perfectly true."

interpretation and difference between a president and a king. Given full credit on estimation of two suggestion lines as equal. Failed on all 1911 age standards above age XI. Mental age according to 1908 scale, 11.8 (XI+4) or XIII; and according to 1911 scale, 12.8. Retardation, 5.08 years; quotient, .70.

Attention may now be called to a few general facts:

1. Not a single subject passed all the individual Binet tests. The average number of failures per subject in the student group was 4.8 and 12.3 in the group of poorly schooled subjects. Whether the students' superiority is due to better and more extended schooling or better native intelligence cannot be determined with certainty from our data. But the results at least suggest that the factor of schooling cannot be ignored in estimating the intelligence age.

2. All the subjects except one in the poorly schooled group and possibly all except two in the student group graded higher by the 1908 scale according to my Guide than by the 1911 scale according to Goddard's revision. This confirms a conclusion previously reached from varied clinical experience that the 1908 scale grades more accurately and fairly in the upper years than the 1911 scale, at least so far as Goddard's version is concerned. It follows that the 1911 scale throws more people into the feeble-minded category than the 1908 scale.

3. Every one of the subjects in the poorly schooled group graded feeble-minded by both the 1908 and the 1911 scales on the basis of the assumed Binet XII-year upper limit of feeble-mindedness or on the basis of XIII years as the lower limit of "normality." By the 1908 scale three of the students rate as feeble-minded when the advanced credits are counted from the lower base of rating, while no one rates as feeble-minded when the rating is based on the highest age passed irrespective of failures in lower age levels. On the other hand, by the 1911 scale, all the students except one would be rated as feeble-minded when the rating begins with the lower base, while all except two would be feeble-minded when the rating begins with the upper base. Only two possess the indispensable "three-quarters intelligence." By the usually accepted arbitrary standard, four of the students would be high grade morons, although all except one have been found by years of testing in the schools to be superior to the average in scholastic ability.

If we are not justified in regarding the above law-abiding and successful citizens and the four students with the worst records as fee-

ble-minded,⁸ what justification would there be in so regarding the following malefactor, who grades higher by the Binet than half of the poorly schooled individuals.

Mr. G, 31 years old, a resident of St. Louis, Mo., who, in December, 1914, murdered a 12-year old girl with whom he had become infatuated and whom he slew, according to his story, so that he might save her from a life of moral degradation toward which she was headed. Examination of the prisoner showed that he had had about one year of schooling, that he did fourth to fifth grade work in spelling, and third to fourth grade work in reading and arithmetic. His B.-S. rating was 11.2. He graded about 10 years mentally by the modified Seguinian form-board, but did the more difficult of the Healy construction boards. Testimony was offered before the court to the effect that the prisoner was possessed of an infantile type of mind, that he was subnormal but not feeble-minded, and that, so far as intelligence was concerned, he was able to distinguish between right and wrong, and correctly judge the quality of his acts.⁹ Three neurologists and psychopathologists, also, by whom he was examined, concurred in the opinion that he was mentally inferior but not feeble-minded, and that he was able to judge the quality of his acts. The jury took the ground that the intellectual defect was not sufficient to render this criminal irresponsible, and other juries have, I believe, invariably taken precisely the same stand with respect to XI-year B.-S. mentalities.¹⁰ What greater justification is there for freeing XI-year criminals from responsibility for their criminal acts than for freeing XI-year successful farmers, laborers and merchants from responsibility for their acts, whether legal or illegal?

Do not these results¹¹ demonstrate the untenability of the stand-

⁸Not one of them reaches the intelligence quotient by which persons are now being diagnosed a la wholesale as feeble-minded: "The feeble-minded group includes those whose mental ages are less than three-fourths of their chronological ages,"—an utterly indefensible standard, as shown earlier in the chapter from which this paper is taken by an analysis of the intelligence quotients for 776 cases.

⁹There were other factors of a serious nature affecting this case which seemed to justify the opinion that he was irresponsible at the time when he committed the crime.

¹⁰Thus the following request of the defendant in a murder case was properly refused by the Court: "Defendant requests your Honor to charge the jury that if it finds that the defendant is of a mental age of under twelve years, he is presumed to be incapable of crime, and that presumption is not removed by proof that he had sufficient capacity to understand the act charged against him and know its wrongfulness."

¹¹It is true that the results are based only on a few cases, but a larger survey would in all probability merely emphasize the same fact. For example, I personally know hundreds of men and women in the same section of Iowa who are equally successful, although no more intelligent than those tested, as I also know several who are equally intelligent but less successful, a few of whom are given to excessive alcoholic indulgence.

ards by which adolescent and adult delinquents and older school children are constantly being diagnosed as feeble-minded? Do not these results force us to abandon the XII- and XI-year standards and the concept of the high grade moron, and possibly also the X-year standard and the concept of the middle grade moron, as determined by the present B.-S. scale? Do not the facts enforce the conclusion that high grade morons should be designated as backward and not as feeble-minded, while most middle grade morons should be classed as backward or borderline? At any rate the X-year level (and certainly the XI-year level) represents debatable ground. We certainly are not now in a position to affirm dogmatically that persons who have stagnated on the X-, XI- and XII-year mental levels are feeble-minded. Before we are justified in considering such a conclusion to be scientifically established, we must prove that all the persons in the community who are not recognized as bright and who have had meagre educational advantages but who have made a success in industry, agriculture, business and commerce, possess mentalities above Binet X, XI and XII. The burden of proof is on the affirmative.

The present-day tendency to play fast and loose with such vague and undefined concepts as "defective children," "mental deficiency," "mental defect," "defectiveness," "subnormality," and "feeble-mindedness," "morosity" and criminal imbecility," when applied to mentalities of X and over and to base vital practical action on diagnoses based on such vague concepts is not only inexcusable but it constitutes a positive bar to sane progress in the study of the problem of mental deviation. A recent writer recommends that adequate provision be provided "by the State for the permanent custodial care of all committed cases of mental defect, whether or not they have a court record." Another recent writer maintains that "there is little doubt that the majority of criminals are mentally defective." It would be difficult indeed to find any person who is free from every kind of "mental defect," or who is not to some extent "mentally defective." On the basis of the sweeping recommendation and generalization above it would be possible to report almost any person as a case of "mental defect," and thereby secure his life-long incarceration in a custodial institution. What do our contributors mean by "mental defect" or by "mentally defective?" Do they use the words in the generic or specific sense? Let us place the most lenient construction possible upon these words and only assume that the words are used as synonymous with feeble-mindedness. What, then, do they mean by feeble-mindedness? Do they include all persons who fail to go beyond Binet XII? If so, our results indicate that many millions of our citizens, law-

abiding as well as miscreant and criminal, would be unable to qualify as not-feeble-minded on the basis of this widely used standard. It is necessary to emphasize that there are all kinds and all degrees of "mental defect," ranging from a specific defect of memory or from a slight degree of retardation down through backwardness, dullness, "borderlinity" and the various degrees of feeble-mindedness. The fact that a person is classed as "mentally defective" or as one who has a "mental defect" neither proves that he is genuinely feeble-minded¹ nor irresponsible.

NOTE—A tentative attempt is made in our forthcoming book, "The Problems of Submorality," (Houghton, Mifflin Co.), to fix the upper limit of feeble mindedness in the sense that that term should be technically employed.