

The history of IQ

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It can be quite difficult to unravel the history of the notion of IQ and its assimilation into our everyday lives. The now ubiquitous IQ test was first used on a large scale to assess the capabilities of candidates for the American military during World War I. The topic quickly became the subject of great interest as it was correlated with everything from business success to life fulfilment. People wanted to know if they were gifted, how they could become gifted, and certainly how to treat their children who were, somewhat subjectively, very likely to be gifted.

The sudden need to understand the efficacy of the individual mind took a serious and sinister detour shortly after IQ fever hit. On 11 January 1924, the New York Times published an editorial under the title “Precocity doesn’t wear well”. The subject of the piece was, according to folklore at the time, the most intelligent man in history. Born on 1 April 1898 in New York City, William James Sidis was the prototype child prodigy who was apparently able to read The New York Times with ease at a tender 18 months old. By age eight, William not only had eight languages under his belt, he also demonstrated exceptional mathematical abilities. His parents, overcome with pride, believed much of this was attributable to their philosophy of nurturing “a precocious and fearless love of knowledge”. This was to become an exceedingly unfortunate quote that the New York Times would refer back to in due course. The child’s unbelievable intellectual acumen inspired his father to attempt to enrol him at Harvard as soon as possible. Initially, the university refused to enrol him at age nine because, they reasoned perceptively, he was still a child. Sidis would still set a record in 1909 by becoming the youngest person to enrol at Harvard. The much-vaunted institution decided to hold out and only accept him at age 11, which proved timely as in early 1910 he began lecturing to the prestigious Harvard Mathematics club on the topic of four-dimensional objects.

Suffice to say the years following this remarkable feat were far less salubrious than may have rightly been expected. Shortly after graduation, Sidis gave an interview in which he described his yearning for an ideal life that would be spent in utter isolation. He rejected the idea of marriage or a relationship as women held no interest for him and continued to describe himself as a socialist, a pacifist and an atheist. None of these beliefs were particularly popular in 1920s America. Sidis was also not one to merely ‘talk the talk’... in 1919, he was arrested for participating in a socialist May Day parade in Boston. He was sentenced to 18 months in prison under the Sedition Act of 1918. The arrest featured prominently in newspapers as his early graduation from Harvard had garnered significant interest from the media. This may well have contributed to his father managing to prevent the serving of time by assuring the court that he would be held and rehabilitated in the family sanatorium for a year. According to statements about this time, it was deemed necessary to frequently threaten him with transfer to an insane asylum.

After securing his freedom in 1921, he would move back to New York City and take on a number of menial jobs including, ironically enough, entry level financial positions reliant on adding machines. His premature death due to a brain haemorrhage in 1944, at age 46, went by largely unnoticed, although his astonishing decline became a preoccupation for many. Gradually, he slipped into the realm of myth with the aid of material like his sister’s unverifiable claim that his IQ was “the very highest that had ever been obtained” and that he spoke every language in the world fluently. It was later acknowledged that determining the truth was simply not possible. Despite a plethora of lies, untruths, misconception and myth it is still widely believed that Sidis was certainly one of the inspirations for the lead character in the Oscar-winning film “Good Will Hunting”.

The rollercoaster fortunes of William Sidis gave rise to an entirely new concern regarding the treatment of gifted individuals. To this day, his name is synonymous with a theory aptly named “early ripe, early ruin”, based on the belief that overemphasis on early development leads to a form of intellectual burnout. His parents ultimately endured marked

criticism for actions that were deemed to have ruined their son's life. There can be little doubt that Sidis sparked a great deal of debate and his tale would act as inspiration for work that followed. The topic of IQ and its long-term effects would continue to cause controversy and gave rise to one of the longest experiments of all time. Beginning in the 1920s, Lewis Terman's "Termite project" continues to this very day. Its aim is to prove that determining a person's IQ is a guaranteed predictor of the life they will lead.