

---

## Can IQ determine your quality of life

**Author: Alistair Duff**

In a previous article the ubiquitous presence of online IQ testing was both noted and questioned. The obvious conclusions were that the validity of any findings are likely to be less than entirely accurate, along with the fact that this will not dissuade people from telling you about their newly acquired gifted status. The unfortunate tale of William Sidis was also related. It was certainly a much-cited case study for the “early ripe, early rotten” belief – the notion that high IQ at an early age would dissipate over time. The article concluded with the mention of Lewis Terman, a psychologist who believed, and publicly hypothesized, that an early identified high IQ could predict the quality of life for the individual involved and that it would be noticeably superior to those less intellectually fortunate. To prove this point, he began a study in 1926 which still continues to this day.

In honour of the experiment’s creator, the subjects chosen for this extraordinary experiment became known as “Termites” and they have been the topic of intense interest and debate since inception. Obviously, as the research was aimed to last an entire lifespan beginning at an early age, it was necessary to gather a large number of unique youngsters. To accomplish this, Terman had teachers across California nominate children they thought were intelligent, who would then undergo IQ testing. Ultimately 1 500 pupils were selected, each with an IQ of 140 or more. While 80 of these had IQs above 170, the final group of Termites averaged an outlandish IQ of 151.

An IQ between 90 and 110 is considered average; over 120, superior. The average range lies between 70 and 130, and represents about 95% of the population.

The first formal findings took place as the subjects reached mid-life approximately 35 years later and Terman was delighted with the results. It was calculated that the average Termite’s salary was twice that of the norm for a white-collar job. Less predictably, it was also noted that they were taller, healthier, better physically developed, and highly socially adept. As described in his 35-year follow-up, Terman’s group had an impressive list of accomplishments, most notable of whom Jess Oppenheimer, the writer of the classic 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy*. While this first report seemed to concentrate on the male subjects, it still made for extremely impressive reading with 70 earned listings in *American Men of Science*, while three were actually elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Ten had entries in the *Directory of American Scholars*, and 31 appeared in *Who’s Who in America*. To really drive his point home, Terman would publicly summarise the accomplishments of his elite group as follows: “Nearly 2 000 scientific and technical papers and articles and some 60 books and monographs in the sciences, literature, arts, and humanities have been published. Patents granted amount to at least 230. Other writings include 33 novels, about 375 short stories, novelettes, and plays; 60 or more essays, critiques, and sketches; and 265 miscellaneous articles on a variety of subjects. The figures on publications do not include the hundreds, if not thousands, of radio, television, or motion picture scripts.” He seemed very pleased and certainly unaware that he had already set in motion the events that would later discredit his findings.

It is highly likely that Terman had no memory of William Shockley. He would have been one face among thousands as the “Termites” were selected. His IQ was not high enough to be a “Termite”, so he was shut out of the experiment and was not deemed “gifted”. Apparently, Shockley managed to overcome this early setback as he went on to Harvard and got a Ph.D. He began work at Bell Laboratories where his work on semiconductors and the transistor effect not only earned him the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1952, it also acted as the initial catalyst for the creation of Silicon Valley. As a professor at Stanford University, Shockley renewed his interest in the Termite project and could not help but notice that none of the Termites had matched his success. In fact, none of the Termites would even make a list of pre-eminent scientists of the time. It was recently estimated that while the list of accomplishments by the Termites was undoubtedly impressive, they did not come close to the true scientific elite of the same nation and era.

---

Further analysis showed that a more predictive measure of both the scientific community and the accomplishments of the Termites would be more aligned if their socio-economic status was considered instead. The gallery of mostly white middle to upper middle class men with opportunities and resources for success seems to suggest that it wasn't even necessary for Terman to analyse the IQ dimension; he could have just picked a good neighbourhood. Most experts now agree that his initial data was shaped by his pre-existing beliefs and his determination to prove that precocity matters and that IQ is synonymous with genius.

Despite evidence to disprove his assertion, Terman's thinking about giftedness has had a profound effect on gifted education in the United States and continues to have an impact. Subsequent studies suggest a critical need to reconsider. While early reading was associated with academic success, it was less associated with lifelong educational attainment and was hardly related to a successful life at all. Early school entry is now more associated with less educational attainment, worse midlife adjustment, and even an increased mortality risk

Under increased scrutiny it was evident that many of the initial 1 500 had pursued more "humble" professions such as police officers, seafarers, and typists. Smarts had failed to ensure personal happiness and that over the course of their lives, levels of divorce, alcoholism and suicide were about the same as the national average. This would lead even Terman to conclude that "intellect and achievement are far from perfectly correlated". As the remaining Termites continue into old age, the moral of their story is vastly different from the one initially perceived. It seems clear that intelligence does not equate to a better life. Most often, a great intellect makes no differences to your life satisfaction at all, and if any skew does exist it is now suggested that it can often mean you will be less fulfilled.