



Testing at Ellis Island

Some of the assessments and tools used today in schools and elsewhere—including the IQ test—can be traced to practices and ideologies steeped in racial and cultural bigotry. Many of the founders of the modern testing industry advocated eugenics. Eugenics is a movement concerned with the selective breeding of human beings; the eventual goal of eugenics is to create a better human race. Henry H. Goddard, an American psychologist, was one of the pioneers of the eugenics movement (see the essay “Buck vs. Bell” on this website for more information on the eugenics movement).

Goddard, best known for his work on the area of inheritability of intelligence, believed that “feeble-mindedness” was a threat to society. He felt that it was dangerous for “feeble-minded” people to have children as they were, in his view, responsible for many social problems and would surely pass negative behaviors on to their offspring. Goddard stopped short of supporting a mandatory sterilization program, but he did suggest that certain individuals should be segregated from society and housed in self-contained colonies.

Beginning in 1913, Goddard advocated and demonstrated the use of mental testing on newly-arriving immigrants. He sent two young women to Ellis Island with instructions to “pick out the feeble-minded by sight.” The women followed a two-step procedure. One assistant would stand at the immigration processing checkpoint and scan the crowd for those who appeared to be “feeble-minded.” This was done by looking at the immigrants. These individuals would then be directed to another location where the other assistant would test them in English.

The women tested dozens of people from a range of ethnic groups including Jews, Hungarians, and Italians and found that a startling number of these individuals were indeed “feeble.” In fact, these tests “found” that entire ethnic groups were smarter or duller than others. Goddard appeared to ignore the possibility that the low scores could be due to the fact that many did not know English or that most, if not all were unfamiliar with the cultural norms reflected in the test items. In addition, he did not seem to consider the fact that the immigrants were undoubtedly tired, confused, and fearful upon arriving in America after long voyages and were far from home.

Goddard concluded that other countries must be sending “the poorest of each race” to live in America. As a result of this conclusion, Goddard successfully advocated for tighter

immigration laws in this country; the number of immigrants who were deported increased dramatically as a result of these assessments.

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