

## Just the way things were or malicious intent?: One professor's attempt to facilitate truth

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Mansfield, K.C. (2007). Just the way things were or malicious intent?: One professor's attempt to facilitate truth. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 2 (2).  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/194277510700200202>

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### **Abstract:**

My professor placed a quote on the overhead by Lewis Terman, former Stanford professor, APA president, and vicar of IQ testing and gifted education in America. The passage stressed that Mexicans and Blacks are born morons, not capable of learning, and should be segregated from Anglos in special classes. In addition, in Terman's view, these people were dangerous because of their fertile breeding and should be sterilized.

**Keywords:** racism | eugenics | Lewis Terman | IQ testing

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

**“Just the Way Things Were” or Malicious Intent?:  
One Professor’s Effort to Facilitate Truth**

**A JRLE Student Voices Essay**

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**Introduction**

My professor placed a quote on the overhead by Lewis Terman, former Stanford professor, APA president, and vicar of IQ testing and gifted education in America. The passage stressed that Mexicans and Blacks are born morons, not capable of learning, and should be segregated from Anglos in special classes. In addition, in Terman’s view, these people were dangerous because of their fertile breeding and should be sterilized.

With pounding heart and veins turned icy, I scanned my surroundings to read the effect of this declaration on my fellow classmates. Dignified neutrality permeated the space until my professor probed: “What is happening within you? Is anyone experiencing a visceral response?” I cried out, “I’m enraged! My heart is racing . . .” My professor answered, “I’m pissed off! He’s talking about my momma . . .” Subsequently, a pair of students expressed general uneasiness with the racist discourse, but most quickly dismissed the intentions of the author as malicious. The general consensus seemed to be “that’s just the way things were back then” and that a very “minute percentage” of the human population is truly motivated by hatred in ideology or action. I protested passionately by sharing past human indiscretions as well as the current trend in anti-immigration dialogue and the surge in Klan activity. My passionate declaration was answered by a composed stillness that suggested uneasiness, not serenity. At dismissal, feeling moody and nauseous, I quietly exited.

### **The Search for Truth**

Sleepless for several nights thereafter, I began to wonder what it would be like to creep into the skull of Lewis Terman. My children and I were currently reading, "The Time Machine" by H. G. Wells, which fueled fantasies of traveling back in time to encounter Terman in the flesh. What would I see? What would I hear? Would I empathize with Terman and better understand his words by spending time with him? Or would my convictions be reified? Practicality dictated my next move. With the help of my professor, I literally searched the world for Terman's writings, as well as first-person accounts of interactions with this Stanford scholar. My professor also encouraged me to share my findings in a class presentation at the end of the semester. This excavation for verity unearthed signed artifacts from eugenics organizations, editorials from Terman's contemporaries, an oral history of a well-known former student, Terman's autobiography, as well as scholarly publications that disclosed a portrait more malevolent than I had imagined or anticipated.

### **The Argument**

The case that one should approach Terman's work with the philosophical backdrop of "that's just the way things were back then" does not hold water. First of all, human beings always have a choice as to the way they approach life. "I was just following orders" is an excuse that has been over-used since time eternal. In addition, some professionals, scientific as well as popular, criticized Terman and his fake science. I argue that Terman approached his research and mentoring relationships with a clear socio-political agenda that included the segregation and tracking of American schools, as well as the annihilation of the "unfit" that was used to construct eugenics laws in the United States praised by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf* and used for courtroom defense in "The Nuremburg Trials." I agree with a recent *Stanford Alumni Magazine* that Lewis Terman's support of the gifted few was framed

by “a cold-blooded elitist ideology” and maintain that Terman played a major role in constructing “the way things were.”

### **The Evidence**

I begin by sharing the major tenets of the eugenics organizations in which Terman was active. Proponents believed that poverty, crime and immorality were evidence of poor genetics and successfully lobbied for negative eugenics policies including restrictive immigration, anti-miscegenation statutes, and the forced sterilization of the “unfit,” including people of color and poverty. They also believed in the dismantling of welfare, orphanages, and medical care that promoted reduction in infant mortality rates to ensure the dying out of unfit populations and secure the stability of the master race. In addition, Terman and his eugenics associates worked diligently to secure positive eugenics policies including education privileges and tax preferences for the eugenically vigorous. They considered intelligence to be the most valuable human quality and worked to construct what they referred to as an “aristogenic caste system” whereby born leaders would be identified early and cultivated for their rightful roles in society. The most rewarding jobs would go to the brightest citizens while the average and marginally educable would be made productive workers who submitted to the governance of the elite. Central to their utopian vision was a society that perpetuated white middle and upper class power that represented the new meritocracy that had a right to judge others in the name of progress.

During the 1919-1920 school years, immigration in the United States tripled. Schools were bursting at the seams. That, coupled with Terman’s eugenics ideology, fueled the testing and tracking craze of the 1920s. Interestingly, some fellow psychologists actually questioned the validity and reliability of the tests, as well as Terman’s claim to the degree of hereditary influence on intelligence. Some

academics also claimed that the norms of the Stanford-Binet were biased against people who were not from white, middle or upper-class backgrounds. Terman was also criticized for his rhetoric that IQ tests were infallible. Some critics suggested that a single test score was being used for determining the fate of an individual student's entire life smacked of unethical practice.

Unfortunately, pop writers, the daily news, and monthly magazines touted Terman's claims. As some had predicted, the media picked up the story, presented it to the public as scientific evidence, and the regular Joe on the street believed the quackery. Terman's quest for mental and moral measurement and subsequent societal controls then became common practice. Terman's promotion of tests as measures of hereditary capacity was used to classify and track students resulting in road blocks to opportunity for vulnerable populations, as well as pipelines of privilege for the praiseworthy.

After IQ testing and tracking was solidly in place in American schools, Terman turned his devotion to finding, studying, and nurturing the gifted. Meanwhile, some psychologists had recanted their earlier beliefs and disassociated themselves from eugenics organizations, most notably, Carl Brigham and Henry Goddard in 1928 and 1929. Despite the fact that most "real scientists" (geneticists) viewed eugenics as a vulgar and unproductive field for research, Nazi Germany utilized US eugenics "science" for their experiments and "solutions" beginning in the 1930s. After WWII, much of the American eugenics movement went underground, but the United States government continued the forced sterilization, marriage, and immigration laws put into place by eugenicists well into the 1970s. Ironically, during the Nuremberg trials for "crimes against humanity," the defense built their argument on California statutes as well as the opinion of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes about the civility and legality of doing away with the unfit.

As far as we know, Lewis Terman never recanted his views. In fact, in his autobiography first published by Carl Murchison, Terman admitted that he did not travel or associate with anyone professionally from 1910-1916, even refraining from applying for membership in the APA, because he was scorned by colleagues in the field. He adds that after WWII, he no longer felt isolated and returned to his work with dignity and drive.

In 1949, California eugenicists renamed their organization *American Society of Human Genetics*. Meanwhile, Terman was at the center of a network of school administrators and educational psychologists, aided by his graduate students, responsible for promoting "social opportunity" for the gifted who happened to be primarily from white, western European descent. Terman constantly thumbed his nose at anthropologists, claiming that his genetically-based "findings" debunked their commonly held environmental hypothesis for learning and behavior.

Terman's strong personality didn't just irk anthropologists and newspaper editors. His muscular stance came to the fore in his relationship with his students, as well. In his 1995 edited oral account, Kimball Young, 35<sup>th</sup> president of the APA and former doctoral student of Dr. Terman, remembers being fed up with Terman's so-called "facts" from his studies used to confirm his "racist doctrine" that was always foremost in his mind. Young adds that he quickly realized it was "hazardous" to express his contrary opinions so he kept his mouth shut. He believed if he did not play it "cool" he would not successfully defend his dissertation or go on to graduate.

## **Conclusion**

As I recently shared with my classmates, Terman was not a neutral inheritor of an ordinary prejudice. He was one of the chief architects of a Utopian project, whereby the heritably elite would govern the genetically inferior. Dr. Terman used

his privileged position to force his students to defer to his dogma and convince politicians and the public at large of the legitimacy of his pseudo science.

It may be convenient and comfortable to think the eugenics movement is dead, but the truth is that Terman and the earlier works of Brigham and Goddard are still quoted in popular “scientific” literature, such as the best-selling *The Bell Curve* by Herrnstein and Murray, as evidence of the link between cognitive ability and criminal behavior. I agree with best-selling author, Edwin Black, that the system carved out by so-called experts of the eugenics movement retains its strength and vitality. And that although most scientists dispute eugenics theories as counterfeit academia, school policy and practice, as well as laws and other systems, are firmly grounded in geneticists’ propaganda. In light of contemporary manifestations such as the cyclical IQ debate and anti-immigrant movement, it is dangerously naïve to read Terman’s legacy any less critically.

I have no idea if my search for truth and subsequent unveiling had any lasting effect on my peers. But it is imperative that those occupied in the praxis of leadership engage her/his students in critical thinking and provoke dialogue concerning the philosophical scaffolding of educational leadership in multiple fields and contexts. Just the way things were? No, it’s just the way things are, and will continue to be, as long as experts like Terman have their way. It is up to critically-conscious educators to ensure they don’t.

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