EARLY ARGUMENTS ON EDUCABILITY

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The People

Alfred Binet was born in Nice on July 11, 1857 (Wolf, 1973). He died in Paris on October 18, 1911. His father was a physician, and his mother an artist of sorts. They separated during his childhood, and his father was hardly heard from again. Although not always considered a brilliant student, Binet was better than merely competent--winning three first prizes in French composition and lesser prizes in Latin translation. After completing work at a famed Lycée, he attended law school but eventually concluded that it was a " . . . career of men who have not (yet) chosen a vocation," so he began medical school but didn't complete his medical studies. Contrary to popular error, Binet never became a physician, and was one of the few early leaders in the field not so prepared. On present day American standards, he came into psychology in a curious manner, first finding it by himself, and then by beginning a self-instructional reading program around 1879 in the Bibliothéque Nationale. During the ensuing years, he developed wide interests, ranging from work in evolution, mental retardation, psychological measurement and education. He influenced generations of scholars and clinicians on both sides of the nature-nurture argument--and those in the middle. So-called "nativists"

from Goddard to Jensen and Herrnstein found evidence in Binet's scales for their ideas concerning the irreversibility of mental defect. So-called "environmentalists" such as Harold Skeels, Marie Skodak and their collaborators were profoundly influenced by Binet's work, as much so as Goddard himself--but of course with entirely different consequences. And as Goddard's study of the Kallikak family evoked great controversy during the second decade of this century, the later work of Skeels and his associates generated possibly more controversy; however, Skeels et al. came out of the "battle" with reputations eventually intact, even enhanced, while Goddard's work was discredited scarcely ten years after its publication and continues to be severely criticized. It would be exceedingly provocative to know how Binet himself would comment on today's discussion of the long continuing nature-nurture controversy.

The Arguments

It should come as no surprise that Binet and Simon's test of intelligence--both inexpensive and accurate (i.e., reliable)--would soon become for social scientists what the thermometer is to physicians. Consequently, a sea of studies were published purporting to examine questions connected with changes in levels of tested intelligence (what may be called "educability"), comparisons of various racial and other groups, and correlates of intelligence, each of these assuming for purposes of such studies that the intelligence quotient was analagous, if not synonymous, to native intelligence. Most of those studies were retrospective, not planned interventions, although a few were set up more or less as experiments utilizing specific pedagogical

procedures or environmental manipulations. We discussed many of these studies in our book, The Educability of Intelligence: Preschool Intervention with Disadvantaged Children (Blatt & Garfunkel, 1969). However, one particular group of studies, those by Skeels and his associates, deserve mention here, first because they were interesting, and secondly because they more than others powered what later became the Head Start and compensatory education movement of the 60's. It may also be to our advantage to dwell here because there may not be an area of investigation in all of social science research which has attracted more zealots, ill prepared investigators, and out and out charlatans. It's a commentary on that unfortunate state of affairs, as well as a reflection of the general pessimism concerning the possibility that capability is educable, which "taints" the work and the persons--unfortunately, also the many honest and competent persons--involved in efforts to enhance educability. And, Skeels and his team stand up well among that group of honest and competent scholars who have engaged in this research.

Skeels and his colleagues did not of course escape the "taint". In 1939, Skeels and Dye reported that, after placement in an institution for the feebleminded, the I.Q.'s of two infants went up drastically. These infants, both illegitimate and of feebleminded mothers, were placed in the state institution for the mentally retarded in the hope that they would find a nurturing environment in the company of the older women residents of the facility. Skeels and Dye were surprised

to learn that, six months later, the children had increased their I.Q.'s remarkably, and that a year later their measured I.Q.'s were found to be in the normal range. However, despite several other studies which supported the educability hypothesis, it was many years before the work of Skeels and his collaborators received the recognition they deserved. For every victory of the environmentalists there were bitter and depressing defeats, none more bitter than the rampant disillusionment resulting from the once-promising work of Bernadine Schmidt (1946).

Galton (1869), Goddard (1912), Jervis (1954), Wallin (1956), and a host of others during the decades lined up in the literature as "nativists" in what became a polemical, ideological, and political battle with "environmentalists" around the educability issue. Can a human being change substantially? If he can, what promotes such change? If he can't, why? What is the role of environment in shaping development and behavior? What is the role of inheritance? Alfred Binet (Binet & Simon, 1916) was pivotal to the argument on two counts, first because he helped to develop the technology to measure intelligence, and secondly because he expressed strong (sometime conflicting) viewpoints on the issue. And although Binet did vascillate on what his test was designed to accomplish, the following comment is astonishingly similar to the current position of most modern environmentalists:

> Our purpose is to be able to measure the intellectual capacity of a child who is brought to us in order to know whether he is normal or retarded. We should therefore study his conditions at the time and that only. We have nothing to do either with his past history or with his future; consequently we shall neglect his etiology, and we shall make no attempt to distinguish between acquired and congenital idiocy; for a stronger reason we shall set aside all consideration of pathological anatomy which might explain his intellectual deficiency. So much for this past. As to that which concerns his future, we shall exercise the same abstinence; we do not attempt to establish or prepare a prognosis and we leave unanswered the question of whether this retardation is curable, or even improvable. We shall limit ourselves to ascertaining the truth in regard to his present mental state. (p. 90)

The educability issue seems to permeate the literature as a nagging unresolved major question. We've pondered the importance assigned to it by our most distinguished scholars in the field--indeed, by society in general. It's occurred to me that one additional reason it may hold such importance is because it gets at the most fundamental theological question: free will versus predestination. Think about the human being as a machine--an automobile, a ship, an airplane, a dynamic machine. Machines shift gears, but they don't change radically; that is, machines don't change their shapes, their habits, their purposes, their appearances, their character. Is the human different from the machine? Can a person not only shift gears but change radically? How much free will does a person have? How far can the human race progress?

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