

## The Dark Side of Psychometry

As we came to understand human mental characteristics better, the obvious move was to apply this understanding to improve society. However, with every step towards practical application, sophistication was lost. Where the rubber meets the road, we see a twisted caricature of the concepts we use to understand the mind.

With the advent of intelligence tests, we fairly quickly see a sophisticated understanding of how intelligence is distributed in populations. In a 1916 paper on the diagnostic criterion for 'feeble-mindedness' -- the diagnosis that will be used to justify forcible sterilization in a landmark 1927 supreme court case -- we see a bell curve, with the leftmost tail cut off and labelled 'feeble-minded.'

If you're going to define a segment of the population that is mentally incapacitated, this 1916 paper is going about it the right way. However, we should note that we are already on much shakier ground than we were when we were simply noting how intelligence was distributed in our population! There is nothing in the science that tells you that the line should be drawn precisely where the author placed it, cutting off the bottom 3%. There is nothing in science that tells us that a performer who scores at the bottom 2.8th percent is significantly different from one who scores in the bottom 3.1st percent. There is nothing in science that tells us that we should consider the bottom 3% incapacitated, rather than the bottom 2%, or the bottom 5%. This is a statement of opinion, not something we are forced to acknowledge from evidence.

It is therefore a mistake to call this drawing of a line that cuts off the left tail of the distribution 'scientific.' It is a political statement based on the personal judgement of the person drawing the line. This is where criticism of scientists are justified - to move from fact to implication one must move from the truth to one's opinion, and in order to make a difference in the real world you are encouraged to gloss over this fundamental transition.

Leaving this aside, a world where the bottom 3% of the intelligence distribution are disenfranchised is hardly absurd. People in this range have great difficulty understanding much about the world around them. If you were to decide to remove people's freedom on any basis other than their own actions, this is one of the better proposals I have seen.

However, as we move from this fairly sophisticated notion of 'feeble-mindedness' to the state's actions that are ostensibly justified by this kind of understanding, we see a nightmare scenario. In actual practice this concept is used to get rid of inconvenient people, not the 'feeble-minded.' Institutions and individuals that are tasked with assessing whether someone is 'feeble-minded' (or the modern equivalent) MAKE THEIR LIVING by delivering positive assessments. There is an inherent conflict of interest in having the assessors paid in order to take people in, or in order to deliver a convenient diagnosis. If we were to properly use our understanding of psychometry to declare people incapacitated, we would have independent examiners examine everyone (IQ

tests are very cheap and very quick to deliver) and flag those we consider to be beneath threshold. This is nothing like how our system works.

What happens in practice is that someone does something, or many things, that are undesirable to their parents. Their parents go to a psychologist to get them diagnosed with a condition that will lend their parents more authority, and entitle their parents to get more help, or to put their charge away in an institution. This is obviously not how you would set up the system if you wanted to accurately carve off the bottom 3% of the intelligence distribution. Shockingly, no systematic effort seems to have been made at any time to ensure that this mode of operation would not be abused by negligent, malicious, or crazy parents.

Notes on a couple of cases where this seems to have gone wrong:

“Three Generations of Imbeciles Are Enough” supreme court justice Oliver Holmes, I seem to remember something fishy about that case. Want to nail specifics down.

- Involuntary sterilization case, 1927
- Never been overruled, rules that involuntary sterilization of mental incompetents is constitutional
- Carrie Elizabeth Buck was subsequently sterilized at the age of 18?
- Carrie Buck was committed to the State Colony for Epileptics and Feeble Minded, as was her mother
- Sterilization was through Salpingectomy, the surgical removal of one (unilateral) or both (bilateral) fallopian tubes.
- “The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the Fallopian tubes”

[After being raised by foster parents and allegedly raped by their nephew, the appellant, Carrie E. Buck, was deemed feeble-minded and promiscuous.](#)

[In the first half of the 20th century, a diagnosis of "feeble-mindedness, in any of its grades" was a common criterion for many states in the United States, which embraced eugenics as a progressive measure, to mandate the compulsory sterilization of such patients.](#)

[In 1920, the authorities deemed Buck's biological mother, Emma Adeline Harlowe Buck, a "low grade moron" and promiscuous for having a child out of wedlock](#)

[...the definitions of imbecile and feeble-minded were essentially arbitrary and meaningless...](#)  
(psychcentral)

[...Carrie had made the honor roll \(so did her daughter, Vivian\)...](#) (psychcentral)

[Carrie's younger sister, who was told that she was going in for appendicitis surgery, was also sterilized.](#) (psychcentral)

<https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1432&context=jclc>

Contains a graph implying -2sigma is feebleminded (IQ70)

1916 Psychological Basis for the Diagnosis of FeebleMindedness



Mrs. Alice Dobbs, the foster mother of Carrie Buck's daughter Vivian, holds Vivian while flashing a coin past the baby's face, in a test to assess her intelligence. The infant, perhaps distracted by the camera, didn't follow the coin with her eyes and thus was declared an imbecile. A.H. Estabrook, the person who initiated this test of the infant's intelligence and the photographer, took this picture the day before the *Buck v. Bell* trial in Virginia. Courtesy of M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections, State University of New York at Albany.

Arthur Estabrook, a trained field worker from the ERO, testified as an expert witness about assessments he made of Emma, Carrie, and Vivian, determining that at the age of six months, Vivian was "below the average," and likely as well to be feebleminded.

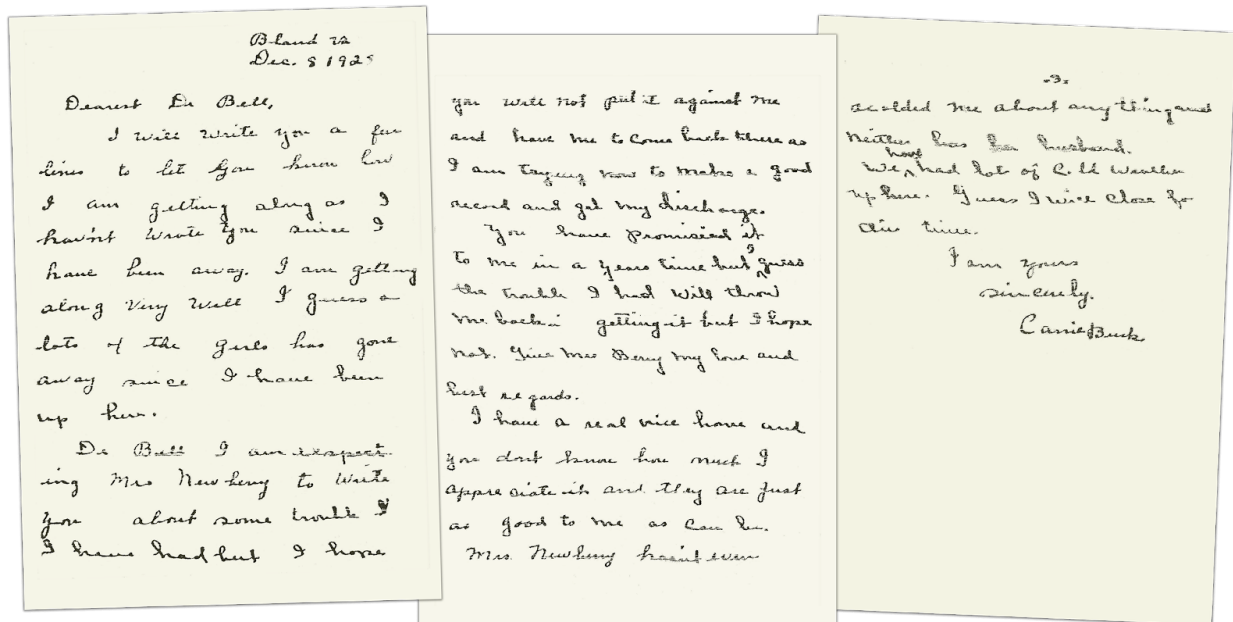
. But, when reporters and others interviewed Carrie in the 1980s, they found that she was a woman of probably average intelligence, a person who enjoyed working crossword puzzles and reading, someone who had just played the role of Mary in a Christmas pageant at the nursing home where she was living.

Carrie is in her 70s and not in good health when reporters and interested scholars start showing up. One of her visitors is Paul Lombardo, a law student at the University of Virginia. Lombardo arrives at the state-operated residence where Carrie is living just after Christmas in 1982. She and Charlie had been brought there after being discovered suffering from malnutrition and exposure in their Charlottesville home. Now, Lombardo finds Carrie reading newspapers and assisting a friend with crossword puzzles. Other residents consider her pleasant and intelligent.

Vivian, Carrie's daughter, died at 8, but reportedly got good grades:

Name	Dobbs, Vivian	1			
Parent or Guardian	" G.J.	2			
Residence	Charlottesville 1501	3			
Grade when enrolled	10	4			
Promoted to	Grade 20 (Month) May, 1931	5			
Remarks:	April Honor Roll	Exam.			
		Avg.			
		6	A B	C C B	
		7	A B	B C B	
		8	A B	C C B	
		9	A B	C C B	
		10			
		Exam.			
		Avg.			
		Fin. Gr.	A B	B C C	

## Carrie's Writing:



<https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/buckvbell/>

Source for documents on buckvbell case

<https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1085&context=buckvbell>

Dr. J H Bell claims:

<https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1082&context=buckvbell>

Carrie Buck age 17 had mental age of 9

Mother, Emma Buck, mental age of 7

<https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1086&context=buckvbell>

Vivian Buck Grade Book

For later: Look into more involuntary sterilization court cases!

JF at some point had a romance with a fan-girl (Jackie) who drove over to him, she was later declared incompetent and retained as a dependent past the age of 18. Want to investigate specifics of this matter:

Report was made by Rosa Gonzalez

<http://www.search.txcourts.gov/SearchMedia.aspx?MediaVersionID=f62ad865-d5f7-40c5-b7c9-f0d0ef5ba404&coa=coa09&DT=Brief&MediaID=cf3c652a-64d7-4ad7-a87b-30474651e634> pg47