Alfred binet

Among the most prominent persons in mental testing is Alfred Binet, who was born July 11, 1857, at Nice, France, and died in Paris on October 18, 1911. Binet completed a licence in law in 1878 and then pursued, but did not complete, a medical degree. Binet's early interest inpsychologywas influenced by Charcot's work in hypnosis. Binet then pursued other experimental topics, eventually arriving at his interest in mental testing. For much of hiscareer, Binet served as director of the Laboratory of Physiological Psychology at the Sorbonne.

Following a period of experimental research with Victor Henri, he accepted a collaborative research arrangement with Theodore Simon. Simon's proximity to mentally retarded subjects and Binet's membership with the Society for the Psychological Study of the Child formed the basis for significant research. Binet's active involvement with the society led to his appointment to a study commission of the Ministry of Public Instruction " from the vantage point of which he saw the compelling need to find a way to differentiate those children who could learn normally from those who could not" (Wolf, 1973, pp. 21–22).

After failing to obtainacademicpositions at three French universities, Binet produced with Theodore Simon, in 1905, the first intelligence scale " oriented to ' tasks or behavior' rather than to so-called faculties" (Wolf, 1973, p. 29). The scale was part of a more comprehensive process for differentiating normal and retarded children, and it was revised in 1908 and 1911. His test was introduced in America by Henry Goddard, who developed his own revision. The most popular American revision was that of Louis

Terman in 1916. Binet’s scales ingrained the concept of mental age in testing for decades.

The first experiments to catch his fancy involved the two-point threshold: the simultaneous stimulation of the skin by two compass points, and the determination of the conditions under which they were perceived as one or recognized as two. This procedure had already been the subject of much experimental investigation, and early psychologists had learned that the separation of points required to produce a sensation of " twoness" varies greatly with the part of the body stimulated—for example, it is some thirty times greater for the small of the back than for the tip of the index finger.

Several theories had been proposed to account for these variations, focusing on the presumably varying distribution of nerves in different parts of the body. (Thorndike, R. M. , and D. F. Lohman, 1990). Binet conducted a few simple two-point threshold experiments on himself and some friends, and concluded that the theories he had read about were wrong in some of their details. He quickly wrote an article describing his experiments and offering a " corrected" theory. Always a graceful and persuasive writer, he succeeded in getting this published.

Any pleasure at seeing his words in print was soon curtailed, however, because his article caught the critical attention of one Joseph Delboeuf (1831-1896), a Belgian physiologist who had done some important work on the two-point threshold which had been overlooked by Binet. Delboeuf published a critique stating that his own much moresystematic experiments did not agree with several of Binet's findings, and showing that he had

already published a much more sophisticated version of Binet's theory long before.

Binet had obviously rushed prematurely into print, and Delboeuf publicly humiliated him for it. (Thorndike, R. M. , and D. F. Lohman, 1990). Even Delboeuf's attack could not diminish Binet's ardor for psychology, however, and his next passion became the associationist psychology of John Stuart Mill, whom he would later call " my only master in psychology. " Binet was persuaded by Mill's arguments about the potentially unlimited explanatory power of associationism, and said as much in his second venture into psychological publication. (Joy A. Palmer, Liora Bresler, David E. Cooper, 2003) Yet Binet was once again treading upon dangerous ground.

Associationism as a psychological doctrine clearly had its merits, but by 1883 much evidence had already accumulated to show that it could not stand as a complete explanation of mental phenomena, even after any possible innate factors were placed aside. In particular, associationism was ill equipped to account for varying motivational influences on thought, or for many of the unconscious phenomena that were coming to increasing attention at that time.

Thus the laws of association were hard pressed to explain, by themselves, why a particular starting thought can lead to totally different trains of associations, depending on the motivational state of the individual. Phenomena such as post-hypnotic amnesia posed another difficulty for exclusively associationistic theory. When a recently hypnotized subject was asked what happened while he was hypnotized and failed to remember, he provided an example of disassociation of ideas.

The stimulus of the question failed to bring in its train the associated ideas andmemories, including the answer, which one would normally expect. Mill's laws of association had nothing to say about how ideas could become disconnected, or " dissociated," from each other. (Joy A. Palmer, Liora Bresler, David E. Cooper, 2003) This time Binet recognized the deficiencies in his psychology without help from a Delboeuf, and took steps to remedy them. But even though he was soon to augment his associationism, he never lostrespectfor its great though incomplete explanatory power.

Years later, when he attacked the problem of assessing intelligence, he would not be restricted, as Galton and Cattell had been, to the consideration of presumably innate factors such as sensory acuity or neurological efficiency. Instead, Binet would argue that " intelligence" whatever else it was could never be isolated from the actual experiences, circumstances, and personal associations of the individual in question. (Joy A. Palmer, Liora Bresler, David E. Cooper, 2003) Among Binet’s achievements was the founding (with Dr. Henri Beaunis) of the first French psychology journal, L’Annee psychologique, in 1895.

He was a significant figure in early French psychology, and the studies of his two daughters likely influenced the subsequent research of Jean Piaget. Though Binet was neither trained nor served as a school psychologist, he has had an enormous impact on the practice of school psychology.

References:

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