

September 8, 1927

Doctor R.A. Vonderlehr
American Consulate
Irish Free State
Cobb, Ireland.

Dear Doctor Vonderlehr:

I congratulate you on your pleasant voyage and your serious grappling of the problem before you as indicated by your letter. I hope that I may be able to throw some light on the questions you ask but they have to do with a problem about which there must always be some vagueness of definition. This is because of the numerous factors that influence the performance of mental tests and of changing conceptions of what constitutes mental deficiency.

I am inclosing a sheet containing two sets of definitions. Our regulations governing medical inspection of aliens contain another set which is good.

"Moron" as used in America is synonymous with feeble-mindedness, that is with the grades above idiocy and imbecility, but "moron" should not be used in a certificate because the immigration law does not mention it. "Moron" is merely an American word applied to the higher grades of feeble-mindedness and it can be ignored, but it should be borne in mind that the word always means feeble-mindedness in contradistinction to ignorance or ingrained stupidity that is not so severe as to be classed as feeble-mindedness.

"Mental deficiency" when used in medical readings always means some grade of feeble-mindedness unless the words specifically refer to a deficiency brought about by deterioration, such as occurs in cerebral arteriosclerosis, senile dementia, paresis, etc. In these instances the deficiency constitutes a psychosis or one of the symptoms of it. However, the immigration law says that persons certified as mentally defective are to be excluded even though they do not come under the classification: insanity, idiocy, imbecility, or feeble-mindedness. This apparently adds a grade of deficiency comprising persons with more intelligence than those in the medically classified grades. If it does not do this it does nothing and the words are meaningless.

Although the immigration law apparently adds another grade of mental defectives more intelligent than the medically classified grades, it is probable that the framers of the law did not know what they were doing when they added this grade. In other words, they did not understand that any medically recognized mentally defective person must inevitably fall into one of the other excluded classes mentioned in the law.

So far as I know, our officers doing inspection work in this country did not certify immigrants as mentally defective unless these immigrants were actually feeble-minded. The certificate was then used for high grade cases somewhat near the borderline and its use obviated the necessity of saying whether or not the case certified was one that the steamship company should have detected and for which they should have ^{be} been fined. There was no fine for bringing in so-called mental defectives as there was for bringing in the feeble-minded, etc.

If you certify aliens as mentally defective as a class distinct from the feeble-minded the certificate should, I think, be limited to those who are quite dull mentally but about whom there is doubt as to whether they are actually so dull as to fall within the feeble-minded class. In other words, they would be borderline cases. Most of these cases would as school children have an intelligence quotient between 70 and 75. You will find by consulting Terman that about 2% of his cases fall within this range and he is doubtful about where to class them, some being feeble-minded and some not.

No injustice will be done if you reject as mentally defective many of those who actually have an intelligence quotient between 70 and 75. The law provides for it; these people are dull; they breed true and freely, and the country gains nothing of permanent benefit from them in spite of all of the talk about our need for persons content to do lowly work. The man who has brains can work either with his hands or his mind and he is a much safer individual in a Democracy than his brother who is short on brains.

In connection with what has been said about the intelligence quotient I want to strongly emphasize that the quotient is supposed to express native intelligence but that Terman's scale, and all others that use "intelligence quotient" as an expression of intelligence, were worked out on persons who had had some educational opportunities. The scales actually give you an approximate measure of native intelligence but only for persons who have had a reasonable amount of schooling. In other words, ability to pass the tests was enhanced by schooling and a certain environment enjoyed by those upon whom the scales were standardized. Therefore, in applying the scales to persons with less schooling and from

Vonderlehr, R.A.-3

environments less favorable to the development of certain abilities, the intelligence that is recorded is not the intelligence quotient that expresses native intelligence as standardized by the scales but something that is considerably lower. You are then not justified in using German's scale arbitrarily but you are justified in using the tests and revising the readings downward in any way that your judgment may dictate as proper. This, of course, throws the diagnosis back from arbitrary rules on to the examiner's judgment. Experience and reading will sharpen this judgment so as to make it just. I agree with you that one should not be either too radical or too lenient in this matter. We want to obey the law and keep in mind the desirability of barring from the country persons who because of their lack of native intelligence are or will continue in their posterity to be undesirable, but we do not want to keep out persons whose defect is only apparent and due to our ignorance or carelessness in searching for their basic merit.

I will venture the assertion, not intended to be final, that if you are rejecting $1\frac{1}{2}$ or 2% of applicants for various ^{grades} of mental deficiency your decisions are in the main just and if you are rejecting as many as 5% they are unjust.

The special Ellis Island tests that I gave you are valuable but are not standardized. Understanding of them will come with use. Remember that we only certified over here rather extreme cases and you should be more radical in Ireland. Our attitude here was forced by various unavoidable annoyances that do not harass the officers abroad.

When an alien by study improves in his ability to do the tests and the improvement has not been brought about by direct study of the given tests, it shows that the tests were at first unfair, or rather it shows that the standard reading of the tests was unfair to him. Any test is fair; the interpretation of them may, however, be unjust.

If you have an Irish immigrant who can repeat eight or nine digits forwards or can do correctly the reversal of the hours of the clock test, it may safely be assumed that he is not defective- but, of course, many who fail in both of these tests are also normal.

Give my regards to Mrs. Vonderlehr, and write again as to your impressions of Ireland and your reaction to the work.

Sincerely yours,

lk-mgl

Lawrence Kolb.