

Wechsler, David (1896–1981)

John D. Wasserman¹ and Alan S. Kaufman²

¹*American Institute of Psychology, U.S.A. and* ²*Yale University School of Medicine, U.S.A.*

David Wechsler (1896–1981) authored the dominant intelligence and memory tests in the U.S.A. in the second half of the twentieth century. According to test usage surveys, Wechsler's intelligence scales have led the practice of psychological assessment from the 1960s to the present, and his memory scales have become leading instruments among neuropsychologists.

Biographical Overview

Wechsler was the youngest of three boys and four girls born to Moses Wechsler, a merchant, and Leah (Pascal) Wechsler, a shopkeeper. The Wechsler family emigrated from a virulently anti-Semitic Romania to New York when David was 6 years of age, and he lost both parents to cancer within 5 years of his arrival. He was effectively raised by an older brother, a physician who would become his role model as a practicing clinician, academician, and author of scholarly professional texts. Wechsler was married twice. His first wife, Florence Helen "Freda" Felske, was tragically killed in a 1934 automobile accident within a year of their marriage. In 1939 he married Ruth Ann Halpern, who survived him. The couple raised two sons, Adam and Leonard.

After completing primary and secondary school in the New York City public school system, Wechsler attended the College of the City of New York (CCNY) from 1913 to 1916, graduating with an AB degree at the age of 20. He subsequently began graduate studies in psychology at Columbia

University where he completed his master's degree in 1917 and a doctoral degree in 1925 under the mentorship of Robert S. Woodworth (1869–1962). He counted pioneering psychologists Woodworth, James McKeen Cattell (1860–1944), and Edward L. Thorndike (1874–1949) at Columbia among his primary influences. His graduate education was interrupted by World War I, during which he learned the mental tests, including the Army Alpha, Army Beta, Stanford–Binet, and Yerkes Point Scale. Toward the end of his World War I military service, Wechsler studied with Charles E. Spearman (1863–1945) and Karl Pearson (1857–1936), becoming familiar with Spearman's work on general intelligence and Pearson's correlation statistics. With Woodworth's support, Wechsler was awarded an American Field Service fellowship from 1919 to 1921, which he used to study emotional reactivity with Henri Piéron (1881–1964) and Louis Lapicque (1866–1952) at the University of Paris.

Based on his education, training, and practice, Wechsler may be considered one of the first clinical psychologists at a time before accredited graduate programs. Woodworth described the Columbia University psychology department from which Wechsler graduated as teaching "experimental abnormal psychology," and for his 1917 master's thesis, Wechsler spent two and a half months testing six patients in depth at the Manhattan State Hospital on Wards Island, conducting the first psychometric examination of memory dysfunction in alcoholic Korsakoff's syndrome. After his World War I military induction and training in mental tests, he was stationed at Camp Logan in Houston, Texas, where he gave individual psychological assessments to recruits who had failed the Alpha and/or the Beta because of limited English proficiency, illiteracy, or suspected malingering. From 1922 to 1924 Wechsler practiced as a psychologist with

the New York Bureau of Children's Guidance, where he administered intelligence, achievement, and personality measures as part of a multidisciplinary team. From 1925 to 1932 Wechsler established a private clinical practice, later describing himself as "one of the first psychologists in private practice." From 1932 to 1967 Wechsler served as psychologist (and later chief psychologist) at New York's Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital. He was also a clinical professor at New York University College of Medicine from 1942 to 1970.

Wechsler's Legacy

As one of the first practicing clinical psychologists, Wechsler's orientation was more *applied* than academic, and more *practical* than theoretical. Wechsler long served as chief psychologist at Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital in New York, and his tests had the imprimatur of a clinical practitioner. In the words of Lee J. Cronbach (1916–2001), "His scale represents the highest flowering of the pragmatic mental testing initiated early in this century, rather than a break into any new understanding of intellectual processes" (Cronbach, 1958, p. 1133).

Wechsler wrote over 50 journal articles and two books, *The Range of Human Capacities* and *The Measurement of Adult Intelligence*, both going through multiple editions. Wechsler's intelligence tests began with the Wechsler-Bellevue (1939), followed by the Wechsler-Bellevue Form II (1946), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC; 1949), the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS; 1955), and the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence (WPPSI; 1967). The Wechsler Memory Scale (WMS) was first published in 1945. After Wechsler's death in 1981, his test publisher continued to issue test revisions guided by staff test specialists and external expert advisors; the most recent versions are the WISC-IV (2003), WAIS-IV (2008), WMS-IV (2009), and the WPPSI-IV (2012), respectively.

Wechsler's conceptualization of intelligence evolved over time while remaining practical

and ecumenical. In a 1974 address, Wechsler explained that intelligence is a multifaceted concept that can only be considered relative to sociocultural context: "[I]ntelligence cannot be equated with cognitive or intellectual ability. ... To be rated intelligent, behavior must not only be rational and purposeful; it must not only have meaning but it must also have value, it must be esteemed" (Wechsler, 1975, p. 136). He offered his best-known definition of intelligence in 1939:

Intelligence is the aggregate or global capacity of the individual to act purposefully, to think rationally and to deal effectively with his environment. It is global because it characterizes the individual's behavior as a whole; it is an aggregate because it is composed of elements or abilities which, though not entirely independent, are qualitatively differentiable. (Wechsler, 1939, p. 3)

Wechsler later specified that this definition was intended to reflect Charles Spearman's general intelligence factor ("global capacity"), L. L. Thurstone's group factors ("elements or abilities"), Lewis M. Terman's capacity for "abstract thinking" ("to think rationally"), and Alfred Binet's emphasis on adaptation ("to deal effectively with one's environment").

Wechsler's major contributions to the practice of intelligence testing include popularizing the deviation IQ summary score; offering clusters of both verbal and nonverbal/performance tests in a single normed test battery; integrating clinically informative and psychometrically sound procedures in his test batteries; emphasizing interpretation of clinical observations, qualitative indicators, and ability profiles; and remaining cognizant of the limitations of intelligence tests in predicting individual life success. Before Wechsler advanced use of the deviation IQ in 1939, the concepts of *mental age* and the mathematically flawed *ratio IQ* were widespread in clinical practice. Wechsler's idea to include both verbal and nonverbal/performance content in his intelligence tests first occurred to him while serving as an army mental examiner, and the convenience of having both types of test content balanced

and normed together in a single test was one of the major reasons for the Wechsler-Bellevue's popularity. Wechsler considered verbal and nonverbal tasks as equally adequate measures of general intelligence, and he emphasized the importance of assessing people “in as many different modalities as possible” (Wechsler, Doppelt, & Lennon, 1975, p. 55). Many of the assessment tasks appropriated by Wechsler for his intelligence scales ranked among the top tests used by psychologists at the time the Wechsler-Bellevue was published. Wechsler streamlined his subtests into 5–10-min tasks, making item scoring rules uniform and easy to apply. A reading of Wechsler's books and tests makes it clear that even while he advanced the psychometric practice of test interpretation, he favored a clinically informed, qualitative style of interpreting test performance.

One of the most significant limitations of intelligence tests, observed Wechsler, was that they fail to systematically capture the *non-intellective factors*, such as drive, persistence, and interest, that substantially influence test performance. Wechsler became convinced of the importance of nonintellective factors after recurrent findings that factor analyses of his intelligence tests never extracted more than 60–70% of the total variance, leading him to try (unsuccessfully) to develop tests for the remaining 30–40%.

Wechsler's legacy is highlighted by the continued worldwide popularity of the Wechsler scales and—just as significantly—by his key role in transforming psychometric testing into clinical assessment.

SEE ALSO: Binet, Alfred (1857–1911); Cattell, James McKeen (1860–1944); Cronbach, Lee J. (1916–2001); Intelligence Testing; Terman, Lewis M. (1877–1956); Wechsler Intelligence Scales (WAIS, WISC, WPPSI)

References

- Cronbach, L. J. (1958). [Review] *The Measurement and Appraisal of Adult Intelligence* (4th ed.) by David Wechsler. *Science, New Series*, *128*(3332), 1133.
- Wechsler, D. (1939). *The measurement of adult intelligence*. Baltimore, MD: Williams & Wilkins Co. doi:10.1037/10020-000
- Wechsler, D. (1975). Intelligence defined and undefined: A relativistic appraisal. *American Psychologist*, *30*(2), 135–139. doi:10.1037/h0076868
- Wechsler, D., Doppelt, J., & Lennon, R. (1975). *A conversation with David Wechsler* (Transcript, Archives of the Psychological Corporation). San Antonio, TX: The Psychological Corporation.

Further Reading

- Kaufman, A. S. (2009). *IQ testing 101*. New York: Springer.
- Matarazzo, J. D. (1981). Obituary: David Wechsler (1896–1981). *American Psychologist*, *36*, 1542–1543. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.36.12.1542
- Wasserman, J. D. (2012). A history of intelligence assessment: The unfinished tapestry. In Dawn P. Flanagan & P. L. Harrison (Eds.), *Contemporary intellectual assessment: Theories, tests, and issues* (3rd ed., pp. 3–55). New York: Guilford Press.
- Wechsler, D. (1974). *Selected papers of David Wechsler*. New York: Academic Press.