

Hans J. Eysenck

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Hans Juergen Eysenck (1916-1997) was one of the most influential personality psychologists of the 20th century. He was a champion of the scientific approach to psychology in general and to personality in particular. His approach emphasized the integration of basic psychological theory with an experimental approach to the study of individual differences. During his life, his work on behavior genetics, ability, dimensions of personality, and a biological basis to personality went from being disbelieved and controversial to accepted wisdom for the field.

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Eysenck was born in Germany to parents both of whom were renowned actors. Because they were frequently on tour, the young Eysenck was raised mainly by his maternal grandmother. After finishing secondary school in 1934, he realized that an academic career would require joining the Nazi party, which he despised. Thus, at age 18, he emigrated to the UK where he did his undergraduate and graduate work at the University College of London. Although most interested in physics, he did not have the necessary course work for the entrance exam for physics and instead pursued an undergrad-

uate degree and subsequent Ph.D. in psychology.

In contrast to the emphasis on experimental psychology at Cambridge, the so called “London school” of psychology emphasized individual differences. UCL had been the home of Charles Spearman and subsequently, Cyril Burt. Both were talented psychometricians heavily influenced by Francis Galton’s emphasis on the study of individual differences and the inheritance of personality and ability. Despite some initial language difficulties, Eysenck fit in very well at UCL and took a first class undergraduate degree working with Burt before continuing on for his Ph.D. also under Burt’s supervision.

His first appointment after his Ph.D. was as a research psychologist at the Mill Hill hospital, the war time home of the Maudsley Hospital which eventually became the Institute of Psychiatry (IoP). His subjects were primarily soldiers diagnosed with various psychiatric disorders. Working at the IoP provided him with a golden chance to analyze the data already collected on the numerous patients. In contrast to other practitioners of factor analysis of personality ratings or self reports, Eysenck used behavioral ratings, psychiatric diagnoses, and experimental measures such as those of hypnotic suggestibility. His goal was to marry the best of experimental psychology with the best of psychometrics. His first book, *Dimensions of Personality* (1947) did just that. Based upon the factor analytic results, Eysenck proposed support for a general factor of neurosis with a second, bipolar factor that he considered introversion-extraversion.

Eysenck continued to integrate what he perceived to be the best theories from experimental

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psychology with his factor analytic results. A subsequent book proposing a biological basis of personality based upon classic learning principles, *The dynamics of anxiety and hysteria* (1957), met with serious criticism, however a later model based upon individual differences in arousal, *The biological basis of personality* (1967) was much better received and continues to be well cited. It was an ambitious attempt to relate introversion-extraversion to the arousal dimension being studied by experimental psychologists such as Donald Broadbent. Reflecting the current physiological thinking, the proposed biological mechanisms were the ascending reticular activating system and other parts of the limbic system. Introverts were thought to have higher resting levels of cortical arousal than did extraverts. With the assumption of an optimal level of arousal, the sensation seeking behavior of extraverts was explained as an attempt to compensate for their lower resting levels.

This and his later theories influenced and were influenced by Jeffrey Gray whose theories of anxiety and impulsivity reflected individual differences in sensitivities to cues for reward and punishment. As is true of any developing scientific theory, many of Eysenck's ideas have been shown during the subsequent 40 years to be wrong or to be oversimplifications, but his general emphasis upon integrating genetic and biological principles within the study of individual differences has become the standard model of personality.

Eysenck and Gray took a very different approach to the study of personality than was common in the United States. They both emphasized a "bottom up" approach, going from basic physiological principles and looking for behavioral correlates and consequences. This was in contrast to the lexical approach favored by many in the U.S. In addition, both Eysenck and Gray emphasized that personality had to have a biological basis which then interacted with social experience to lead to the surface traits observed by others. Eysenck's continued emphasis upon biological and genetic mechanisms were in stark contrast to the general attack on trait theory that swept the US in the 1970s.

Eysenck believed that science was a self-correcting process and that good ideas would supplant weak ones. His 1985 book *Personality and individual differences: a natural science approach* (written with his son, Michael) reviewed evidence in fa-

vor and opposed to his theories and suggested that personality was indeed moving towards becoming a paradigmatic science.

In cooperation with a number of other individual differences psychologists interested in the study of intelligence, the biological basis of personality, and behavior genetics, Eysenck founded the *International Society for the Study of Individual Differences* and was its first president. In addition, he was the founding editor of the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*. As evidence for his trust in the scientific process, at the first ISSID meeting after he critically reviewed the differences between his and Gray's models of personality he cheerfully announced that Gray would be his successor at the Maudsley.

In addition to his theoretical contributions to the study of personality, Eysenck was also notorious for his strong critique of conventional psychoanalytic therapy and his advocacy for what is now known as behavioral therapy. Although mild-mannered interpersonally, his writings could be bitter critiques of the works of others. He wrote not just for the scientific community but also wrote several very influential critiques for the general public. He did not avoid controversy. From his political analysis of the similarities of the far right and the far left, to his critiques of psychotherapy, to discussions of racial differences in intelligence, he was always willing to take unpopular views.

Eysenck has had a lasting impact upon the field of personality not just because of the number of students trained at the IoP, nor because of his particular theoretical models, but due to his emphasis upon personality as a paradigm-driven scientific endeavor that needs to integrate biological and social mechanisms to understanding individual differences.

See also

Correlational Designs; Eugenics; Raymond Cattell; Francis Galton; Intelligence Testing; Charles Spearman

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Further Reading

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