



## What does Hans Eysenck mean for young researchers?



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### ABSTRACT

In some people's eyes, Hans Eysenck holds a mixed legacy with remarkable achievements alongside engagement with some, apparently, futile research areas. I suggest that rather than perceiving his career as having successes and failures, an alternative way to understand Eysenck is to appreciate that he had an underlying willingness to push the boundaries and explore new frontiers, and the outcome of this is unsurprisingly some less productive areas as well as achievements. He was willing to seek the truth despite the perceptions of his peers. A lesson for young researchers from Eysenck's biography is a choice of whether to play it safe and engage in relatively incremental research or aim for big picture research, which may change a whole field but may – to use a football analogy, which because of his interest in the sport, Eysenck may have approved – put people offside.

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At the time of his death in 1997, Hans Eysenck was the most cited living psychologist in the world, yet Britain did not recognise this achievement with any honours (Corr, 2016a). He had an unusual career with phenomenal achievements, yet also courted controversy and engaged in topics that, for most psychologists, were too fringe. In this article, I outline some of the key points young researchers can learn from Eysenck, which includes aspects where he excelled and some of the consequences of pursuing unorthodox areas. It would be unwise to criticise Eysenck for his choice of research areas and stubbornness, because this way of approaching science may have been critical to his achievements even if it also led to some less successful scientific adventures. Occasionally, science needs a maverick to shake things up and explore new frontiers.

The first aspect to note about Eysenck is simply his sheer productivity. He wrote over 1000 journal articles, headed toward 100 books, established a highly successful Department of Psychology, supervised hundreds of doctoral students, spoke at numerous events, and regularly provided media appearances. He had an ability to understand a whole new field of psychology relatively quickly and become an expert in it. Few researchers are experts in two areas, yet Eysenck was an expert in many.

Eysenck also engaged not just an academic audience but the general audience through popular books and media engagements. He, therefore, educated not just students but the general population on psychological findings and increased the importance of psychological research to general society. This may also have had an effect on public policy. There is now much more emphasis generally on forming policy based on research evidence, and Eysenck's specific campaign to show

that psychoanalysis was not research-based is one very good example of his impact. If young researchers would like their basic or applied research to become known and in some cases influence public policy then engaging with the mainstream through media appearances, articles, and books may be important. However, it also has dangers, such as being perceived as too showy or an attention seeker.

Eysenck was certainly an 'academic entrepreneur' (Corr, 2016a) because unlike most academics he did not restrict himself to only one, or a few, research areas. A legitimate question is whether this is possible today? One reason why nowadays it is more difficult is simply the degree of specialisation required to become an expert in any research area, so even someone of Eysenck's considerable talents may not be able to gain sufficient familiarity with different research areas in order to become, and be seen as, an expert. This situation is compounded by the increase in managerialism within academia (Goodman-Delahunty & Walker, 2010) with key performance indicators, rankings of journals, and the increase of communication requiring response through technologies such as email and, increasingly, social media. The pressure to publish in particular journals increases the propensity to engage in incremental rather than radical research and to focus only on particular topics that editors of these few journals deem to be worthy. Nobel prize winning biologist Randy Schekman now only publishes in non-top tier journals because he says journal editors have too much power (Sample, 2013). Nobel prize winning physicist Peter Higgs notes that his achievements would not be possible in today's academic climate because of the lack of freedom compared to the 1960s. He worked on big picture projects and produced few papers. As noted by Higgs (quoted in Ackerman, 2013), "Today I wouldn't get an academic job. It's as simple as that. I don't think I would be regarded as productive enough." Today's academics have multiple demands and are expected to continuously publish articles, which may be at the cost of big picture research.

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Eysenck similarly benefited from enormous academic freedom compared to current academics (Corr, 2016a). Therefore, for several reasons emulating Eysenck's achievements is much more difficult today — Roderick Buchanan comes to a similar conclusion (this special issue).

Another important issue is that Eysenck prioritised data, even if it offended people — arguably, sometimes, *because* it offended people. Many current researchers would be concerned about gaining jobs and promotions so would be unlikely to explore controversial areas. At the time, Eysenck's criticism of psychoanalysis was controversial, but history has shown him to be right and the psychoanalysts wrong (Corr, 2016a). Patients and the government were spending vast amounts of time and money on treatments that were shown to be no better than a placebo, and in some cases worse. Eysenck advocated research-based behaviour therapy, which is the forerunner to the most widely used current therapy of cognitive-behavioural therapy — this changed the world of psychotherapy for good, and for the good.

Compared to Eysenck's criticism of psychoanalysis, in hindsight some of his other research areas where he emphasized the data may appear less apt. This is especially seen in his most controversial book, *Race, Intelligence and Education* (Eysenck, 1971), where he discussed the mean differences in intelligence between white and black people. Eysenck was keen to educate the public and show the findings. This book understandably riled the public considerably, which led to demonstrations and even a punch to the face (Corr, 2016a). Eysenck stayed firm in advocating the book's principles though. While some may perceive Eysenck's foray into this area as misguided, it may be part of the same principle of upholding the data no matter what the cost, which is admirable even if one disagrees with his perspective on this particular topic.

Eysenck was also controversial in advocating weaknesses in the causal link between smoking and cancer. He suggested the story was more complicated than 'smoking kills', and according to the data he is correct. Many people have died from smoking-related causes so similar to the race and intelligence issue this research interest appears misguided. Eysenck on principle wanted to be intellectually accurate and true to the data. So again, the principle of seeking scientific truth no matter what the consequences is noteworthy.

Young researchers could utilise Eysenck's emphasis on the data, but they should be aware that it may come with significant costs. It is a high risk strategy, because it may gain enemies as well as supporters, as Eysenck's failure to gain any British honours attests. A recent example of a young researcher entering a controversial area is Adam Perkins, who in *The Welfare Trait: How State Benefits Affect Personality* (Perkins, 2015) suggests that generous welfare payments provide incentives for people with low conscientiousness and low agreeableness to have children, which increases the number of low conscientious and low agreeableness people in society, which has further consequences for welfare, crime, and employment. While others have criticised Perkins' interpretation of the available data and believe that reducing welfare payments will lead to worse outcomes, Perkins clearly believes in his interpretation and is unusually courageous in today's academic climate in proposing a controversial perspective in a book aimed at the general public. This perspective has already caused some difficulties for Perkins with a talk at the London School of Economics (LSE) being cancelled because of negative social media and a possible demonstration (Grove, 2016). Incidentally, LSE was the same place Eysenck was assaulted in 1973 and Perkins has said "data will always win in the end" (Perkins in Harding, 2016) which is similar to Eysenck's "truth will out" (Eysenck in Butler-Bowden, 2007).

Eysenck's research into astrology and parapsychology is perhaps the most surprising and 'fringe' of his research areas, and he did not gain any major results in this area. With the benefit of hindsight, the futility of this research area seems obvious, but during the early days of any new area of scientific research it is hard to know which fields will bear fruit. Eysenck's underlying willingness to forego mainstream respect arguably helped shape his other victories. Young researchers should have

intellectual freedom to explore any areas because there may be found the scientific wonders of the future. In current academia though, straying too far from mainstream topics is high risk and is likely to cause difficulties in gaining jobs and promotions.

Eysenck's emphasis on the data included advocating statistical summaries of the literature. He conducted one of the first such summaries in an evaluation of psychotherapy (Eysenck, 1952), and methodological criticism of the study led to the development of the meta-analysis, designed to provide a systematic summary of the literature (Smith & Glass, 1977). Since Eysenck's death in 1997, meta-analysis has become common and now is accepted as the most accurate understanding of the literature. Some researchers even specialise in conducting this form of statistical summation, which has resulted in them gaining highly cited publications in top journals — although at the risk of fewer people collecting new data. However, a term that Eysenck used also needs to be re-engaged in the literature, which is 'mega-silliness' (Corr, 2016b). Many meta-analyses have grouped together too many disparate studies to be meaningful. The problem is compounded if the meta-analysis includes badly designed studies. Young researchers should prioritize meta-analyses as closer to scientific truth than individual studies, but they deserve more critique than currently given. They should also know that new data are essential to collect, and statistically reheating old data has its limits to advancing scientific knowledge.

For multiple reasons, it is harder for young researchers to emulate Eysenck's success in today's academic climate. Many more people have now completed a PhD, which dramatically increases the competition for academic positions and for publications in good journals. In previous eras, it was possible to gain an academic position without publications, but this is almost impossible now given that potentially hundreds of applicants apply for every position. If a PhD graduate achieves their dream job, it does not always turn out as good as expected. Much is demanded of current academics, including teaching, applying for grants, engagement with the community and business, and chasing those prized publications — universities increasing value, and evaluate, academics in terms of their standing on the subjective criterion of 'good citizenship' (something which errs dangerously on the side of conformity).

Academics who teach undergraduate classes can be responsible for over 1000 students in a semester, and because of the rise of electronic communication can be overly burdened with administration. As Nobel prize winner Peter Higgs (quoted in Aitkenhead, 2013) said: "It's difficult to imagine how I would ever have enough peace and quiet in the present sort of climate to do what I did in 1964." Despite the online era and the increase in research, many journals persist with a fixed number of publications per year, which encourages researchers to be conservative and only engage in incremental research that is likely to be approved by editors. The difficulty in publishing also encourages researchers to engage in research that is only marginally different than their previous work to increase the chances of success. For these reasons and many more, it is increasingly difficult for current researchers to follow Eysenck's example and pursue multiple big picture projects on controversial topics.

In this article, I have attempted to provide an overview of some of the key areas of Eysenck's life that are still relevant for young researchers. Eysenck has much to be admired including his research productivity, engagement with the general public, prioritising of the data, and his willingness to take non-conformist perspectives. His less successful endeavours should perhaps be understood as two sides of the same coin where his willingness to enter new areas will inevitably lead to mixed results. Truly important scientific advances may necessarily upset 'Establishment' thinking and not all research will be rewarded, but if young researchers are willing to engage in (at least some) high risk research then they may impact a whole field — something that is hard to do but well worth it in the longer run where true research impact is judged.

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