Hans Juergen Eysenck
1916-1997
German-born British psychologist whose unorthodox views generated controversy.

Hans Eysenck's obituary in the New York Times called him "one of the most distinguished, prolific, and maddeningly perverse psychologists of his generation." This accurately sums up a long career that Eysenck claimed he entered almost by accident. As a personality and behavior theorist, he popularized the terms "introvert" and "extrovert," and he created a personality inventory test based on his many years of research in London. He published more than 80 books and 1,600 journal articles. Yet he also generated enormous controversy during his career. He argued that psychotherapy had little if any value; that smoking did not cause lung cancer, and, most contentious, that there was a correlation between race and I.Q. scores. While he made many enemies in many circles, he also had many supporters who claimed that his ideas had been taken out of context.

Born in Berlin on March 4, 1916, Hans Juergen Eysenck was the son of Eduard Anton and Ruth Werner Eysenck. Both his parents were actors; his mother appeared in silent films. They divorced in 1918 and young Hans was primarily raised by his grandmother. He attended school primarily in Berlin and had planned to go to the University there when he graduated high school in 1934. When he found out that acceptance into the University of Berlin was contingent on joining the Nazi party, he found this unacceptable and left Germany. He studied literature and history at the University of Dijon in France and later at University College of Exeter in England. He moved to London and had planned to study physics there, but he did not qualify for admission into the program. When he tried to register as a science student, he was told that he could only take psychology. Initially disenchanted with the subject, he soon warmed to it, particularly statistical analysis and research. He received his bachelor's degree in 1938 and his Ph.D. in 1940.

Begins career in behavior research

Turned down for British military service because he was still a German citizen, Eysenck was later allowed to join Britain's civil defense program. In 1942, he took a position as a research psychologist at the Mill Hill Emergency Hospital outside London. Many of the staff were from London's Maudsley Hospital, a psychiatric training institution that had been closed because of the war. When it re-opened in 1946, Eysenck took a position there as a senior research psychologist. He became director of the psychology department there a year later. In 1950 the University of London established its Institute of Psychiatry at Maudsley, and Eysenck established its psychology department. He also became a professor of psychology at the University.

Personality was what most intrigued Eysenck, and he conducted expensive research on different personality types. He was influenced in part by scientists such as Ivan Pavlov, famous for his experiments with conditioned reflexes. But he also placed considerable importance on statistical research. Genetics, too, played a role in Eysenck's research. He came up with a series of personality "dimensions" to explain different behaviors. These include neurosis, introversion-extroversion, and psychosis. He used his theories and his statistical research to explain in part what made shy people shy, for example, or what made people engage in criminal behavior. He also developed the Maudsley Personality Inventory (used widely in Britain), a test that determined a person's basic personality type.

Invites controversy on several fronts

Along with the research results that were lauded by both his colleagues and the public at large, however, he made numerous conclusions that for many called into question his abilities as a serious scientist. As early as the 1950s, Eysenck was claiming that psychotherapy had no beneficial effect on people. He believed that behavior therapy yielded much better results because it dealt with the present rather than some deep dark past. Although in later years he did grow somewhat more accepting of certain types of psychotherapy, he remained for the most part skeptical of its true worth.

His theories on smoking and lung cancer were hardly popular (except, perhaps, with tobacco companies). He believed that certain personality types were susceptible both to taking up smoking and to the diseases it could cause.

By far his most controversial views were those on race and intelligence. The American psychologist Arthur Jensen claimed in the late 1960s that race was a factor in I.Q. scores, with blacks scoring about 15 points lower on the tests. Eysenck came to Jensen's aid and said that the difference in scores was based on genetic as well as physiological factors. Not surprisingly, the negative publicity generated by a statement like this was so strong that when he was visiting the University of California at Berkeley in 1971, he had to be escorted about the campus by armed bodyguards. Eysenck claimed that his conclusions were purely scientific and were not based on racism. His detractors were invariably surprised when they found out he had voluntarily left Nazi Germany.
Over the next several years Eysenck continued to conduct research, as well as keeping up his usual output of books and articles. Even after he retired from the University in 1988 he continued to write. His second wife, Sybil Rostal Eysenck, had been a psychology student. Because of this connection, the Eysencks often collaborated on different projects. The Eysencks, who married in 1950, had four children. (Eysenck’s first to Margaret Davies produced a son.)

In 1996, Eysenck was diagnosed with a brain tumor. He continued to work as much as he could, up until almost the time of his death. Death came on September 4, 1997, at a hospice in London.

See also Intelligence quotient

Further Reading