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A unique British psychologist: Why there can never be another Hans Eysenck

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ABSTRACT

Hans Eysenck was a compelling figure in British psychology. In many respects, his impact can never be duplicated. His astonishing output and way of doing science capitalized on his strengths, and was geared to maximal effectiveness. He became postwar British psychology's most visible researcher and most influential disciplinary voice. Eysenck's extraordinary personal qualities certainly amplified his impact. But the singular nature of this impact was made possible by the special contingencies of time and place. Eysenck arrived on the scene fully formed just prior to a period of great expansion in British psychology. He took full advantage of the circumstances he found himself in and the unprecedented opportunities with which he was presented. His exceptional impact can readily be gauged by contemplating the counterfactual effects of his absence. Hans Eysenck was a compelling figure, probably the most significant player in the history of British psychology. He is also likely to remain so for the foreseeable future precisely because he had a role and an impact that can never be duplicated. Eysenck was unusual: he had a rare combination of talent and ambition that both enabled and augmented his influence. But these personal qualities were not in themselves sufficient to make him the unique figure he was. Fate was the key. The circumstances and opportunities that marked his early career are unlikely, or simply cannot, take place again. In this sense history, and Eysenck's role in it, can never quite be repeated.

1. British psychology as Eysenck entered it

Eysenck came into psychology at a critical juncture. Fresh out of school in 1934, he left Germany to join his mother in exile in France. More familiar with English culture and language, he moved on to London. Eysenck's German school credentials were not recognized in England, so he was obliged to do the matriculation examination. Through the winter of 1934–35 he read mathematics, English, and several other arts subjects at Pitman's College, London. But after comfortably passing his exams – no small feat in such a short time frame – Eysenck found his choices for university study somewhat limited. He had his heart set on physics, but lacked the prerequisites. The nearest thing on offer was psychology. Ever adaptable, that is what he chose.

In must be remembered that at this time, British psychology was an exceedingly small and undeveloped discipline in comparison with its status on the continent, particularly in Germany, and in the New World. English psychology certainly lacked the expansiveness of the discipline in the US. American psychologists had got in on the ground floor of a rapidly expanding higher education system in the late 1800s. The first generation of American psychologists – such as G. Stanley Hall, Hugo Münsterberg and Joseph Jastrow – promoted their brash new science's potential to explain all aspects of the human condition and remake society. Their English counterparts were far less fortunate. Not only did they have find a place within entrenched institutional hierarchies, they had to cope with suspicious and dismissive attitudes both inside the academy and out. This distinctly English outlook could be summed up by the contradictorily notions that there was something slightly indecent about interrogating the deeper recesses of the human mind, and that these were mysteries that were not amenable to scientific investigation in any case (Vernon, 1965).

Up to World War II, only six chairs in psychology had been created within English universities. Three were in London — at King's College, Bedford College and University College. Outside the capital, the only other academic sites for psychological research were in Cambridge, Manchester, and at various times, Reading, Bristol and Liverpool. Only a subset of these could be described as fully-fledged teaching departments. At this stage there were no chairs in Wales. Up north, the Scots had been more receptive to psychology, with reasonably well-equipped and staffed departments in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Edinburgh, and later, St. Andrews. Nevertheless the total number of psychologists in British academia just prior to World War II numbered little more than 30.

2. The 'London School' of psychology

Of the handful of locations in England, there were probably only two that really mattered. They were a study in contrasts. One was in Cambridge. Charles S. Myers was allowed to set up laboratory in 1913, but only after he put up the money for it himself. Cambridge theologians saw the discipline as a menace, while the philosophers patronized it

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as some kind practical joke (Trist, 1993). Its distasteful empiricism was restricted to the relatively narrow investigations of the senses and perception — a purist English version of the Fechner–Wundt tradition. Myers soon resigned, handing the readership over to his assistant, the influential Frederic Bartlett. By the mid-1930s, Cambridge had become a leading site for experimental research on visual and auditory perception, and memory.

Meanwhile down in London, a genuinely indigenous version of the discipline had arisen at University College London (UCL), one that reflected the secular pragmatism of the founding ethos of the university itself. And it's here that Eysenck would learn the kind of psychology that framed his entire career. Enrolling at University College in the autumn of 1935, Eysenck thoroughly absorbed an approach based on the study of variation, a tradition that stretched back to Francis Galton in the late 1800s. Galton's cousin Charles Darwin had suggested that deviations from the typical or the average were hardly nature's mistakes but a pre-condition for evolution by natural selection. Galton was determined to follow the implications for human evolution, to naturalize human nature. For example, how were qualities like talent and character distributed, and how could they be measured? Moreover, how were they related from person to person, and from generation to generation? In the 'convenient jingle of words' he coined, Galton suggested it was *nature* rather than *nurture* that largely determined achievement. Most significantly, Galton proposed that the distribution of these unequal gifts could be modelled mathematically.

Galton's intellectual heirs at UCL — Charles Spearman and Cyril Burt — took up where he left off. The small psychological laboratory James Sully had set up at the turn of the century was built up by ex-army man, Spearman. Spearman was made Professor of Mind in 1911 and finally became Professor of Psychology in 1928. Burt took over this chair in 1932. Spearman and Burt became leading experts in a kind of correlational, individual differences psychology that was both quasi-naturalistic and firmly quantitative. While Galton was interested in a wide range of mental attributes, Spearman narrowed focused to intelligence. Noting how measures of intellectual function tended to vary together, Spearman suggested there was essentially one faculty of intelligence that each test was imperfectly assessing. He developed various statistical techniques for reducing the number variables necessary to account for a given correlation matrix, dubbing them 'factor analysis'. Even so, sympathetic critics at home — such as William Brown at King's College and Godfrey Thomson at Edinburgh questioned Spearman's assumptions. Thomson in particular wondered whether Spearman's general factor actually demonstrated the existence of a general cognitive structure or was merely a function of Spearman's technique (Buchanan, 2010) This critique gained more weight as factor analytic techniques were expanded and refined, making it possible to extract multiple factors and rotate them according to interpretative preferences. The *g* concept came to be vigorously attacked, with both Truman Kelley and L.L. Thurstone put up alternative schemes of specific abilities.

Cyril Burt – who would become Eysenck's principal mentor – steered a middle course between the warring factions. Unlike Spearman, Burt argued that factors were nominal, descriptive constructs. They merely confirmed that there was a dispositional structure to the mind without entirely prejudging what that structure was. Burt also had far more practical inclinations than Spearman. For example, his educational testing work at the London County Council (LCC) in the 1913–32 period combined clinical assessment of school children with test research and development.

London and Cambridge differed greatly in their attitudes to psychometric testing. Those at UCL made great use of tests, while those at Cambridge made practically none, and actually led attacks on testing in several instances (Chambers, 1932). Those in London also tended to be more inclusive. Facilities and training permitting, they were far more willing to entertain the methods and results of experimentation. Conversely, leading Cambridge figures were openly dismissive of the UCL approach. For example, Bartlett's position on factor analysis was that 'you only get out what you put in', while his successor Oliver Zangwill argued that such 'statistics could never show the structure of psychological reality' (Bartlett, 1930; Zangwill, 1951).

3. Eysenck and the foundation basis of *Dimensions of Personality*

Eysenck thoroughly absorbed all that was on offer at UCL, taking note of controversies and problems, but determined to steer his own course. After completing a factor analytic study of aesthetic preferences for his Ph.D. with the blitz as a backdrop, Eysenck found it hard to find employment. He was still a German national and narrowly escaped being interred. As restrictions eased, Eysenck got a career-shaping break. On the recommendation of Philip Vernon, he landed a job at the Mill Hill Emergency Hospital in June 1942, replacing Eric Trist who left to join the Tavistock group in the armed forces (Trist, 1993).

Mill Hill functioned as the relocated Maudsley psychiatric hospital and was headed by daunting Australian psychiatrist Aubrey Lewis. It was Eysenck's first and only job, providing a stable institutional environment until his retirement in 1983. After the war, the Maudsley was re-established in South London and merged with Bethlem hospital. A new Institute of Psychiatry (IoP) was added as a postgraduate training and research facility. Eysenck was given an unusual degree of bureaucratic freedom to organise the department around his research priorities, and he would take full advantage of this opportunity. Part of Eysenck's initial brief at Mill Hill was to help tabulate the expected increase in neuroses due to the war. Temperament and personality was one topic Eysenck had already ear-marked for attention as postgraduate student, well before he ever entered a psychiatric ward. But he would need expert ratings and psychometric measures, research assistants and lots of subjects. Eysenck's unusual position at Mill Hill provided him with something close to that.

It was relatively uncommon for a psychologist to be working in a psychiatric context in Britain in 1942. Applied psychological work was mainly undertaken in some kind of educational context or as part of child guidance services (Hearnshaw, 1964). Some academic British researchers used psychiatric patients as subjects nonetheless. For example, William Stephenson led a research group on a more general investigation of Spearman's factors in psychiatry (Stephenson et al., 1934). Wynn Jones performed similar research, and Burt's work with the LCC could also be included under the same heading. The remaining psychologists who worked in psychiatric hospitals and outpatient departments were a heterogeneous group. Many were women, with limited training and low status, part-time roles. For example, during the 1930s, the Maudsley also employed several psychologists on a part-time basis, including Grace Studman, Nancy Samuel and Gertrude Keir, either working in the children's department or doing part-time research in the adult sections of the hospital.

When Eysenck arrived at Mill Hill in the middle of the war, resources were understandably scarce. He had little in the way of research funds, equipment or laboratory facilities. Few psychometric tests were available and his reading material appeared to be somewhat limited. One may assume that most other English psychologists suffered from similar deprivations. Even before the war, university budgets were tight. The outbreak of hostilities also made scholastic exchange across international borders fraught. Staying abreast of research developments elsewhere on the Continents, and even in the US, was a problem.

Eysenck still had a number of key advantages over his colleagues, however. He was one of the first highly-trained psychologists in Britain let loose in an adult psychiatric institution — along with Philip Vernon, J. M. Blackburn, Eric Trist and John Raven. Vernon and Blackburn had worked at the Maudsley prior to the war, while Raven had been an assistant to Lionel Penrose at the Royal Eastern Counties Institution in Colchester, developing his famous progressive matrices test there before moving on to the Crichton Royal in Dumfries. In addition, Eysenck was given a priceless gift: he was able to do research full-time without any obligation to meet any service needs or do much teaching.