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Hans Eysenck: Sex and violence on television, the paranormal, graphology, and astrology

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ABSTRACT

The views of Hans Eysenck and how they have fared in the light of subsequent research are presented for four controversial topics: (1) In the case of pornographic films, and violence as shown on television (and in the media generally), he interpreted the early evidence as indicating social effects that were predominantly harmful and anti-social, especially for predisposed and vulnerable individuals—as predicted by learning and personality theories. Further research has reinforced these views, unpopular at the time, and so they appear to have definitely stood the test of time. (2) In the case of the paranormal, he continued to see the experimental evidence as promising. However, rigorous testing has found that the demand for replicability is simply not met, at least not replicability commensurate with the claims. (3) For graphology, he found there was no evidence of a useful correlation between handwriting and personality, a conclusion that has since been confirmed. (4) For astrology, he found that there was only one replicable finding (the Mars effect), which urgently required an explanation (none were in sight at the time). After much thought and detective work a likely explanation has been forthcoming in terms of social effects that can bias birth times as reported to registry offices—the raw data. In the context of Eysenck's broad interests and his influential role as a teacher and writer, the progress of research into these topics helps to throw light on his approach to controversial issues.

1. Introduction

Hans Eysenck from the start of his career took an enthusiastic interest in applying psychological theory and research to controversial issues. An early example of wanting to apply academic psychology to everyday life came from works such as *The Psychology of Politics* (1954). He loved confronting controversial issues and evaluating what he thought the evidence actually indicated. The emphasis was very much on evaluation because of a procedural fact of life: many studies that originally seem acceptable are later found to have limitations including design faults that lead to faulty conclusions. His Penguin paperbacks starting with *Uses and Abuses of Psychology* (Eysenck, 1953) were designed to involve the general public as well as students in thinking about and debating psychological topics. Quotes from his autobiography to illustrate how he perceived his duty include "It does not make for popularity, but I think the scientist owes the public one thing above all, and that is honesty in telling the truth as he sees it" (Eysenck, 1990, p. 4). Acting on this stance, he grasped opportunities to evaluate the evidence in popular and fringe areas such as the paranormal, graphology, and astrology. These interests together with strongly felt concerns about the effects of sex and violence as portrayed in the media are outlined below in an attempt to understand his approach to controversial issues and how he reacted to critics.

2. Effects of sex and violence in the media

In the 1970s, Eysenck was not surprised by film producers wanting to defend the portrayal of violence as relatively harmless (especially when fictional), but he was surprised by how many academic psychologists took a similar view. This despite the evidence, both theoretical and empirical, that appeared to contradict their views. To illustrate the two sides of the argument, violence in Punch and Judy shows is often cited as entertainment and so obviously different to real life violence as understood by both children and adults. On the other hand, advertising on television obviously works commercially so why should such "advertising" of violence be any different?

In view of these contradictions, he proposed this topic as a joint project with my first task being to visit the British Museum Library in Great Russell Street to consult and evaluate the various USA Presidential Commission reports on media violence and pornography along with other evidence. As it happened, Maurice Temple Smith, who had already published other Eysenck books, was also based in Great Russell Street and was expressing an interest in a book to present the evidence. (He has since retired and the British Library has been relocated to a new building

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in Euston.) The book was published under the title *Sex, Violence and the Media* (Eysenck & Nias, 1978), predictably attracted media (but not political) attention, and was soon translated into several languages.

The Presidential Commission studies indicated that witnessing violent acts did result in harmful and anti-social effects. They also provided many examples of the importance of individual differences, such as finding that the same violent portrayals can produce distress in some people and excitement in others. As a result, the two effects can act to cancel each other out, leading to the misleading conclusion that the overall effect is nil (seemingly supporting the null hypothesis), unless, of course, studies take individual differences into account. After careful analysis, each study was seen to contradict widely held views about the portrayal of violence being relatively harmless. These studies served a useful purpose in adding substantial weight to the better known literature that already existed, although it was not being accurately reported in many of the textbooks. Since this research was conducted, depictions of sex and violence have become more and more extreme, especially in videos that are now available on the Internet. Had such extreme material been available at the time of the Commission's research, its findings and recommendations might well may have been even stronger.

Eysenck has always emphasised the importance of a theoretical basis for research when designing studies, when predicting outcomes and when attempting to explain and understand the results. In our book, theories of imitation, disinhibition, and desensitisation were seen as particularly relevant. Why should these theories apply to other areas of learning and not to the effects of violence and pornography? This question was often discussed around the coffee tables at the Institute of Psychiatry. The tendency to imitate is well illustrated in Bandura's original experiments (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963) with children copying an adult who they had witnessed punching and kicking a Bobo Doll (a large inflatable toy), as well as by statistical survey evidence such as an increase in suicides in the days following the death of a celebrity (e.g., Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley). Other examples discussed included alleged copycat crimes following the release of violent films such as *Clockwork Orange* and *Straw Dogs* (as reported in the media).

One of the best known examples of disinhibition is alcohol, with many violent crimes including rape being committed while under its influence, and of course it is often used as an excuse for unacceptable behaviour. In a study on the effects of alcohol, Briddell et al. (1978) presented male students with different versions of an audio recording in which a female vividly described consenting and non-consenting sex, which included rape and sadistic aggression. Levels of sexual arousal with and without alcohol were measured by penile responses and self-report. The main finding was that alcohol was most associated with high sexual arousal after listening to the extremely aggressive versions, of which the students would normally have disapproved. Even without alcohol, there can be disinhibiting effects from such depictions of sex. Donnerstein and Berkowitz (1981) showed male students a film of a girl being tied up and raped by a group of men, with one version depicting her as enjoying the experience. The subjects were then given the opportunity to administer electric shocks using the Milgram "aggression machine" to a female confederate of the experimenter, who had earlier angered them. Those who had been most sexually aroused by the "consenting" rape were found to give her higher levels of shock. An everyday parallel example of acting "out of character" can occur when aroused and disinhibited individuals lose their temper.

Desensitisation was believed by Eysenck to be even more important than imitation and disinhibition because with experiences of violence it can happen repeatedly and tends to increase in graduated steps, as when television and films cater for different age groups. Army training on how to use a bayonet provides a specific example of graduated exposure. Recruits start by being shown drawings and videos and then progress to attacking a bale of straw before it is made to look lifelike and dressed in the enemy's uniform. A parallel example is medical training with junior doctors studying illustrations of surgery before watching a surgeon in action from a distance before getting closer and then practising on a model and, finally, a flesh-and-blood patient. For ethical reasons, it is difficult to design experiments in this area when trying to address cause-and-effect relationships. However, an attempt was made by Reifler, Howard, Lipton, Liptzin and Widmann (1971) with volunteers being provided with a selection of (relatively mild) pornography for fifteen days. Relative to a control group, their attitudes to sex became more permissive as a result of this desensitising experience, and this is after only a few days.

The importance of debriefing subjects had already been highlighted in the Presidential Commission reports as helping to make sure that subjects appreciated the ethical distinction between violence at the fantasy versus the real life level. In addition, some studies include debriefing in order to obtain additional information. When watching violent pornographic videos, many subjects would admit to adding their own favourite fantasies to what they were seeing. As a result, it is these fantasies rather than the video content (or at least an interaction of the two) that is interpreted as mainly responsible for their arousal, yet another example of the importance of individual differences.

Surveys with questions such as "Would you commit rape if you were guaranteed not to get caught" have revealed disturbing attitudes to sex. In a series of studies in North America almost a half of young adult males were found to answer "yes" to such questions, and it was this sub-group who were most likely to have watched a lot of violent films (e.g., Malamuth, Heim, & Feshbach, 1980). Other studies were designed to find out if subjects claimed rape scenes to be more exciting than romantic ones. Many did (as also measured by anatomical changes in arousal), which helped to show that they would contemplate rape if only at the fantasy level—or, in the case of some individuals, if there really was no risk of being caught. Debriefing interviews revealed other disturbing attitudes to rape such as believing that it might be exciting for the victim if carried out in a sufficiently assertive or persuasive manner. Similarly, some subjects admitted to enjoying the sexual encounters they were being shown only when non-consensual and violent. As expected this preference tended to apply to those with tough-minded attitudes (Barnes, Malamuth, & Check, 1989)—not to mention those with sociopathic/psychopathic traits. These and similar studies were summarised in a book chapter by Nias (1983) and by Eysenck and Eysenck (1989) in the second edition of *Mindwatching*: *Why We Behave the Way We Do*.

More recent evidence has been provided in a meta-analysis by Anderson et al. (2010) on the effects of violent videos. Consistent with previous film and television research they concluded that "exposure to violent video games is a causal risk factor for increased aggressive behaviour … and for decreased empathy and prosocial behaviour". Using more sophisticated methodology they also conducted several sensitivity analyses which "revealed the video effects to be robust, with little evidence of selection (publication) bias". As for the degree of such effects, a literature review by Saleem and Anderson (2012) led them to conclude "Media violence effects on aggression are larger than many other aggression risk factors such as low IQ and child abuse."

Eysenck would often draw attention to bell-shaped normal distributions, as pioneered by Sir Francis Galton, to indicate aggressive personality dispositions being on a continuum. At the very high end people are likely to commit violent acts come what may—with or without any media influence. By contrast, those at the other extreme are instead likely to be sensitised and so put off by witnessing violence. Viewed in this way, it is those who are borderline at the high end who are most at risk of being tipped over into real-life violence. In other words, it is a rather small sub-set of the general population who are most at risk of being affected in a noticeable way by witnessing sex and violence. Such thoughts were consistent with Eysenck's often expressed criticism of British Law for being "either/or." This can be seen as creating a dilemma for the Courts when faced with the inherent difficulties in defining what constitutes rape. Offenders often claim in mitigation to have thought at the time that they were doing nothing seriously wrong,