



# Eysenck at work: The application of his theories to work psychology

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## ABSTRACT

This rather personal paper looks at the extent to which Hans Eysenck's research influenced work psychology presently and in his lifetime. Whilst he was interested in, and eager to apply his theory very widely from criminology to politics, he seemed less interested in the world of work. Yet his influence can be seen in correlational work psychology, which looks at personality and intelligence correlates of work beliefs and behaviours as well as experimental work psychology, which uses classic experimental psychology to test hypotheses. He "gave away" intellectually his measures and ideas to entrepreneurs preferring to test his ideas in the laboratory, classroom or clinic.

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## 1. Introduction

In a masterful overview of Eysenck's work, [Netter \(2007\)](#) pointed out various principles and practices promoted and developed by him in his career that, in part, explained his influence. These included his interest in theory development and hypothetical deductive reasoning; adopting a multilevel approach to research measurement; extrapolations from psychopathology to normal personality and back; an interest in how one could use drugs to test personality theory. His work influenced a generation of researchers and his legacy is profound. This legacy is primarily in differential psychology and to a lesser extent in biological, clinical and educational psychology. Despite his wide interests and eagerness to show how personality traits explained many phenomena and accounted for a significant amount of the variance in various outcomes and settings he was less interested in applied and work psychology. This paper considers his influence in this area.

Twenty years ago I wrote a chapter entitled 'Eysenck's personality theory and organisational psychology' in [Nyborg's \(1997\)](#) festschrift. In that chapter I noted that whilst he tested his theories particularly in clinical, educational, experimental, forensic and health psychology, he seemed much less interested in organisational, vocational or work psychology. It is not entirely clear why this was the case. He was an experimentalist interested in theory building and work psychology may be one of all the areas of psychology where good theory-derived experimental work thrives the least. Also he seemed less interested in, and sensitive to, the concerns of work psychologists and consultants. One good example lays in the names of factors. Psychoticism has always proved a difficult term even in academic circles, and is particularly problematic in selection contexts. To have to feedback the fact that one

scores highly on this scale presents all sorts of problems to the consultant, not least of which is the potential reaction of genuinely high P scorers.

The same problem even confronts work psychologists when talking about Neuroticism. Some have tried to avoid the problem by talking about Social Adjustment, where low Adjustment is high Neuroticism or Negative Affectivity. There is even a Big Four as opposed to a Big Five Inventory which simply drops Neuroticism because of the 'problems of feedback' ([Furnham, 1996](#)). One could imagine how Eysenck would have reacted to this. It was not only bad science but an example of the pusillanimity of those in selection who would not give honest feedback.

Paul Barrett who worked with him for many years noted:

"Hans just wasn't very interested in the appliance of his work/thinking to the organizational domain. He'd sign contracts with various 'entrepreneurs' to allow them to utilize his questionnaires (for the royalty benefits, etc.) but would pass any analysis/calibration/product norms/setup work onto myself or Glenn Wilson. Hans was first and foremost a scientist – in some respects like a Dick Feynman – who was only interested in substantive scholarship, and the thinking/explanatory theory, potential experimentation which went hand-in-hand with this. I/O psychology for Hans was simply an area which might provide an income via use of his name/questionnaires – without him having to do anything that would get in the way of his primary work/identity as a research scientist."

Even in his famous and very popular Penguin paperback series that attracted so many people to psychology: *Uses and Abuses of Psychology* (1953), *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology* (1957), *Fact and Fiction in Psychology* (1969) and *Psychology is About People* (1972), very few of his highly approachable and challenging essays concerned the world of

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work. *Uses and Abuses* had a section called “Vocational Psychology” and had four chapters, one about ability, two on selection and one on work productivity and motivation. Most of these chapters were reviews and comments on others studies. Few of the others had anything recognisably in the field of organisational psychology.

In the long foreword to my book *Personality and Work* (1992), it is clear that Eysenck’s understanding of what his work could contribute was mainly about selection: devising personality and ability tests to select better candidates. Interestingly there is evidence that Hans looked at industrial apprentices at the Ford Motor company in the 1960s investigating the consequences of the belief that performance is important to work success (Corr, 2016), though this work seems not to be published. Philip Corr’s (2016) important book indeed explains that Hans was approached by many organisations because of his reputation to help them with various research questions.

In my earlier chapter on this topic I observed a number of themes. First, the use of the Eysenckian questionnaires like the MPI and the EPI in business settings (Furnham, Eysenck, & Saklofske, 2008). Most of these studies were done in the 1960s and 1970s and were piecemeal from a theoretical point of view, probably reflecting more the fact that there were few personality tests to be used. Other sections of my chapter looked at attempts to use Eysenckian factors to examine job fit, accidents, training, job satisfaction and distractibility at work. I recall the same problem then as I have now in trying to understand why the Eysenckian ideas and use of scales is so piecemeal in work psychology.

A few factors may, in part, explain the relative low impact of Eysenck’s work to this area of psychology. First, he was a theory builder and interested in constructing powerful parsimonious theories to explain individual differences in affect, behaviour and cognition. Overall, work psychologists seem less interested in theory building and testing having either rather grand, but bland, theories like McGregor’s theory X and theory Y, or mini-theories which attempt to explain particular processes (Furnham, 1992). The theories that existed in work psychology, such as they were, tended to be almost untestable because of definitional issues (see Maslow’s concept of self-actualisation) or else it was (and still is) very difficult to obtain realistic performance data in order to assess them. That is, work psychologists seem primarily interested in prediction and description, and Eysenck in explanation. His books ‘fizz’ with ideas and possible explanations, not with “actionable” information of consultants and managers. Certainly some in the business world, particularly those from Human Resources seemed unwilling or unable to try to ‘translate good theory into practice’ as they tended to want things ‘spelled out’ for them.

Jeffrey Gray, a student of, and successor to, Hans Eysenck, once famously described his personality theory as akin to somebody finding St. Pancras Railway Station in the jungle. The station is an extremely impressive piece of highly elaborate, complex and beautiful Victorian architecture situated in central London. What Gray meant was that Eysenck’s theory stands out dramatically from all around it. This was particularly true for the period 1950–1970 when Eysenck was at his most intellectually productive.

Second, Eysenck was always interested in the biological basis of personality which has never been a concern of work psychologists, except those coming from an ergonomic background. Indeed, evidence of this can be seen in the relatively late, and limited, interest in neuroscience, even now, among the work psychologists. He was clearly ‘before his time’ battling with the environmentalists of many different persuasions who ideologically rejected the idea that a whole range of psychological processes and mechanisms had a clear biological basis. However, one could expect that Eysenckian theory should become more influential as biological accounts gain greater prominence in work psychology through things like neuroimaging. The 1960s and 1970s were a time of ‘situationism’ in applied and social psychology. It was nurture not nature that accounted for individual differences which were even considered to be a form of inequality which had to be dealt with. Things look very different now but Hans’s voice can be

clearly heard. He was often the outsider and the rebel and had the ability to withstand the criticism and rejection that he so often encountered.

More importantly there are those work psychologists who like to stress group, organisational and situational determinants over individual difference predictors of work place behaviour. This is the ghost of the person–situation debate that set personality theory back about 20 years and which Eysenck fought so powerfully to maintain the differential psychology tradition.

Third, Eysenck was interested in ‘outliers’ than those at the middle of the continuum. Indeed he was one of the first to formulate the now accepted ‘spectrum hypothesis’ which sees normal and abnormal behaviour on a continuum. The increasing interest in the dark side of behaviour and the use of the Hogan Developmental Survey in business settings speak essentially to his early interests (Furnham, 2015).

Fourth, in many ways he came ‘late to the party’ with regard to work psychology. The catalyst of the Second World war, in which the young Eysenck played a part in defending London against incendiary bombs, meant that a great deal of work had been done by differential work psychologist interested in selection. It was much the same for Cattell, an old adversary of Eysenck, though Cattell had probably more influence through his 16PF scale.

It is possible to divide work psychologists into differential work psychologists interested in individual differences and experimental work psychologists interested in environmental factors relating to work performance.

### 1.1. Two psychologies and Eysenck’s contribution

There is a great deal of tension in work psychology between those who come from an experimental psychological vs a personality psychology background (Cronbach, 1975). The latter accuse the former of neglecting individual differences that have powerful explanatory power, whilst the former berate the latter for ignoring the influential situational factors. This can best be seen in a very spirited debate in the journal *Personnel Psychology* between those powerful journal editorial figures who seemed to dislike differential psychology (Morgeson et al., 2007a, 2007b) and those who gave a spirited defence (Tett & Christiansen, 2007). To my knowledge, this signalled to some young and talented researchers to stop working and submitting to work psychology journals because of the fear of rejection not based on science but ideological differences.

It is the person–situation debate all over again (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981), and the disputes between the old Cronbachian ghost of the two psychologies. Eysenck always championed and demonstrated his desire to do both rigorous experimental psychology that was laboratory-based as well as good differential psychology which may rely more of self-report or observational measures.

#### 1.1.1. Correlational work psychology

Eysenck devised and validated around half a dozen inventories that are still widely in use. The paper which provides free access to the EPQ-R has been cited over 1400 times (Eysenck, Eysenck, & Barrett, 1985). The paper on Impulsiveness and Venturesomeness is Eysenck’s third most quoted paper with nearly 500 citations (Eysenck & Eysenck, 1978).

Furnham et al. (2008) suggested five reasons why these measures have stood the test of time.

- a. *Parsimony*. The PEN model offers a first-class conceptual foundation for the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (EPQ), which is one of the most parsimonious and psychometrically robust personality inventories. It compares favourably with the sixteen dimensions of Cattell’s 16PF or the Big Five, Six or Seven (there have been several attempts to expand Big Five models by adding allegedly new traits; and even reducing all of them to the Big One). The parsimony may, however, have led to the EPQ being less used in work psychology. Selectors simply cannot believe that their, or

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