



Hans Eysenck's effort after unification in psychology: Could his work have benefited from a trimodal framework?



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ABSTRACT

For all Hans Eysenck's achievements in psychology, his attempt at integration in psychology by linking statistically derived data with biological theorizing is perhaps his boldest and potentially most important contribution. It is nevertheless flawed both by his limited conception of biology and, in particular, his attempt to quantify meaning. It is argued that meaning should be a crucial subject matter for psychologists. However, it has special properties such as being perspectival which render inappropriate measurement and the assumption of objectivity. Trimodal Theory is presented as a radically different way of conceptualizing the mind and human action. This postulates three modes underpinning human action — biological, symbolic and reflexive which have emerged over evolutionary and historical time. The latter two have emergent properties which make them epistemologically distinct. This is discussed as offering a more valid, even if methodologically problematic, approach to conceptualizing biology and meaning and their inter-relationship.

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1. Part 1. Eysenck's effort towards a unified psychology

In Part 1 Eysenck seminal contributions to the study of personality differences are discussed, as well as his useful exploration of many other topics and his boldness and his preparedness to explore the unorthodox. What is particularly noteworthy, it is argued, is his attempt to integrate psychology by linking psychometric data to psychophysiological ideas. This attempt to link 'meanings' with 'biology', however, is flawed by his conceptions of both.

1.1. Eysenck's achievement

When I was a student, the work of Eysenck stood out in the otherwise often stodgy world of fragmented and often trivial non-theory based experimental studies. I appreciated his hard-headed rational approach, particularly at a time of rampant behaviourism when psychologists so curiously ignored the significance of biology. And subsequently when my own interests moved in very different directions, I maintained my respect for him.

I had the pleasure of personal conversations with him perhaps only 4 or 5 times. On each occasion, I appreciated his charm, and openness even towards ideas he had strong reservations about. We didn't always agree of course but I would sometimes come away thinking about an issue differently. Although I can't be sure, I doubt somehow if our interactions had the same effect on him.

Eysenck was certainly an extraordinary person. His achievements were phenomenal — a man who published more papers than any other psychologist, the most cited living psychologist before his death in 1997.

On a theoretical level is his lasting contribution on the structure and what he regarded as the causes of personality and individual differences. This was unique at the time — it required 'thinking outside the box' in that it linked two quite different approaches — statistical analysis and biological theorizing.

On a practical level, he established behaviour therapy in the UK as a counterpoise to the dominance of psychiatric and psychoanalytic approaches of the time. This, of course, became the mainstay of clinical psychologists for many years. His critical analyses reduced the receptivity certainly of psychologists, and perhaps also the public, to psychoanalytic therapy and ideas and generally to what he regarded as loose thinking on psychological topics.

He utilized his approach and conception of personality in diverse areas, not only neurosis but the psychometric structure of political attitudes, criminal behaviour, educational attainment and individual differences in attitudes towards sex. He subsequently extended the scope of his interests to multiple areas including inequality, creativity, genius and to refining the scientific concept of intelligence; the latter strongly influencing the work of later psychologists such as Deary (1997).

Notable too was Eysenck's boldness in going where few psychologists fear to tread. He was open to new ideas and, armed with scientific method, prepared to investigate hot topics like race and intelligence and, so-called, fringe areas such as astrology, parapsychology and hypnosis. Much of his later work, in areas such as these, as well as smoking and personality, have been hotly disputed. Even so, many of his ideas,

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suspect at the time, have been later demonstrated to have substance – for example, the idea that personality traits may be related to the likelihood of developing cancer (see Corr, 2016).

This openness and pioneering, adventurous curiosity depended on his high level of self-esteem and his insensitivity to the criticisms of others. It is in marked contrast to so many other psychologists, for whom concern for career progression may restrict their interest and certainly involvement in any kind of unorthodoxy.

1.2. Grand theorizing and integration

What I particularly prize in Eysenck's work is his striving for *integration*. As Corr (2016) points out, this is one of the recurring major themes in his work. Even in his last paper towards the end of his life (Eysenck, 1997), he deplores psychology's failure to achieve unification and its tendency to fragment into different disciplines. His attempt to unify, of course, took the form of linking biological conceptions with correlational data. The effect of this in Eysenck's work has been to try to link attitudes, beliefs and feelings, our ways of viewing the world, with the physiological substrates that may facilitate or shape these. In other words, it can be seen as an endeavour to link across what might be regarded as the two very different spheres of biology and of meanings (the ways we make sense of the world). Curiously, such linkage was a major theme that runs through the work of Freud, albeit in a very different way. Freud's conception of the biological in his theory of psychosexual development and in his *Project* (1895) – where he attempted to find physiological processes to mirror the psychological ones he postulated – was as radically different from Eysenck's as was his method of accessing meanings. In contrast to Freud's methods of talking, free association and dream interpretation, Eysenck used questionnaires about attitudes and beliefs as well as behaviours. Both approaches I would argue have serious (albeit very different) limitations.

One of the major issues with questionnaires as a means of eliciting a person's awareness of themselves and their world (what we might call 'meanings') is that, quite apart from technical issues of honesty of response etc., much of such awareness is not easily quantified without seriously impairing its quality and richness. Both the history of attitude scaling and the work of Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum (1957), exemplify bold attempts to measure meaning but, though they may offer value for broad brush comparison between different groups, they yield relatively little capacity to reveal what an individual actually thinks or feels. I would argue that meanings (in the form of beliefs, thoughts and feelings) do not exist 'out there' as some physical stimulus to be measured but are essentially constructed and can only be interpreted rather than measured. What has sometimes been regarded as one of Eysenck's major contributions to psychology – his insistence that there is 'nothing special about the 'mind' ... ' that it can be measured and classified as other biological phenomena' (see Corr, 2016) is, I would argue in contrast, a fundamental flaw rather than an achievement in his approach.

Freud went to the opposite extreme to Eysenck. He made no attempt at measurement but the kind of interpretative methods he developed such as analyzing dream work and faulty actions are highly questionable to say the least and offer no effective means of validation. (As an aside it might be worth speculating whether such contrasting approaches relate to the different personalities of the two men, Eysenck being decidedly non-introspective in contrast to Freud who drew many of his ideas from his own self-analysis. Yet another example, perhaps, of the influence of personality! Eysenck's insensitivity to the impact of his ideas on others and his disregard for their attitudes towards him might also suggest a lack of awareness to the complexities of meaning in personal and social life.)

When we turn to Eysenck's approach to the *biological*, although this was in the tradition of behavioural analyses of the conceptual nervous system such as Donald Hebb had popularized in 1955, on reflection it seems abstract and decidedly oblique.

Only in his later work, did Eysenck utilize *direct* knowledge of anatomical or physiological processes that might underlie psychological ones. Also, despite his interest in twin studies and setting up the Maudsley Twin Register, nor did he actually use information from behavioural genetics to any great degree. Still less did he use insights from ethology or sociobiology. In part, this may have been due to the paucity of understanding in these fields at the time or, possibly, a residue of the long-standing reluctance of psychology to incorporate information from biology after the early virulent rejection of instinct theories by the behaviourists.

What Eysenck does is to draw on theoretical conceptions, initially from Pavlov and later from Clark Hull, that are somewhat obscure and not always easy to relate to tangible physiological processes. Although Eysenck does later provide a useful trail through his ideas about arousal, he could have profitably drawn more directly on psychophysiological studies and on behavioural genetics. As his son Michael (Eysenck, 2010) subsequently remarks 'if only my father had focused his research more on behavioural genetics rather than wasting his time tilting at an endless succession of windmills'. Although it was not yet developed at the time he was doing his major work, he might also have benefited from a concern with evolutionary psychology, or at least its precursors in ethology and sociobiology. Again evolutionary psychology is a discipline that, like both Eysenck and Freud, attempts to explore the relationship between biology and meanings albeit in yet another very different fashion.

1.3. The problem of meaning

Although it has desperately needed them, psychology is and has been short on grand theories. Where they have arisen, as for example with Skinner and Freud, they have been strikingly limited by their parochialism and their insulation from ideas from outside the discipline. In the current academic climate, grant money and citations emphasize empirical data and micro-theories and actively discourage the construction of grand ones. So I value Eysenck's foray into grand theorizing and his attempt at unification by linking correlational data and the biological ideas, using conditioning as a bridge between behaviours and postulated physiological processes. However, as I have suggested above, a critical eye may be cast on the foundations on which this attempt at unification has been built. As so often with Eysenck, his grand theorizing is flawed or at least limited.

One flaw, I have argued, is his conception of the biological. The other limitation about the nature of meaning is worth examining in more detail in that it raises a profound epistemological issue for psychology.

Although he may have often disregarded its requirements in his own research, Eysenck passionately subscribed to the importance of science. However, he failed to appreciate a key premise of science – the need to be humble before one's subject matter. There is no doubt that the approach of natural science – observation, measurement and hypothesis testing to explore causal relationships, has been the royal road to our understanding of the physical world of matter. However good a method is though, it has to be appropriate for the phenomenon it is used to investigate. Human beings and the human mind are complex. They are not merely matter. They are rooted in the physical world of biological being (i.e., psychophysiological processes). But I would argue, through the development of symbolic systems, in particular language, they go beyond this. Language and conceptual thought create a world of emergent phenomena which govern and constitute much of our experience of ourselves and the world. Their emergent properties cannot be investigated in the same way as the physical processes which give rise to them. Thus my earlier point that meanings do not exist 'out there' as an object in the physical world to be effectively quantified except in fairly basic or trivial ways. (One might find a *measure* of happiness or anger, for example, but how far would it, in itself, adequately convey the meaning of any particular exemplar of happiness or anger?). The only way to begin to unpack meanings is to interpret them, as likewise, to

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