Hans J. Eysenck at 100:

Reflections on Conformity and Contrariness in Academia

Philip J. Corr

City University of London

Prepared for the *Times Higher Education* (not published)

Friday 12 February, 2016

March 4, 2016, marks the centenary of the birth of Hans J. Eysenck, the most famous and infuriating British psychologist of the twentieth century. Among the general public he is perhaps best known for championing unpopular causes – as one obituary put it, he was an “IQ Warrior” - but within academic psychology he is widely acknowledged for his many and major contributions to the scientific and professional standing of the discipline. Given his high profile and, what is often thought, his controversial views, it is timely to ask whether a young Hans Eysenck would survive and thrive in the academic world of today? In particular, would his defiant and oppositional attitude from which, I argue, his academic successes were shorn, now be tolerated?

During the process of writing a biography of him, *Hans Eysenck: A Contradictory Psychology* (2016), I could not help but reflect on the implications of his life and work in the context of current-day Research Excellence Framework (REF) defined culture – my views on this matter are also shaped by being managerially involved in the 2008 and 2014 REFs. Especially in the case of young academics, it strikes me that there is a tension between, on the one hand, getting those prized 3/4\* outputs and high value grants, and on the other, taking a longer view on research matters and, even, engaging with topics that some chose to label ‘controversial’.

With these thoughts in mind, we may well ask, how possible today is it for early career researchers (ECRs) to plough their own academic farrow when, as Richard Budd, lecturer in education studies at Liverpool Hope University, puts it the *Times Higher Education* (4 December, 2015), the life of a newly appointed academic can leave you feeling ‘bit punch-drunk’. And what are the likely long-term consequences of young academics not being afforded the intellectual freedom *truly* explore and develop?

To put things into perspective, a brief summary of Eysenck achievements may be in order. The credit side of his academic account is very wealthy. He is remembered for: being the handmaiden to the profession of clinical psychology; the slayer of the psychoanalytical dragon; pioneering behaviour therapy and, thereby, paving the way for the acceptance of cognitive behavioural therapy; arguing for the necessity of *evidence*-based medicine; establishing the need for the statistical technique of meta-analysis; and enabling the biological nature of personality and individual differences (now called *personality neuroscience*), as well as much else. It is true that in his later years, the balance of Eysenck’s account was eroded by his largely unproductive forays into astrology and parapsychology; and his research on smoking, personality and cancer attracted, and still does, severe criticism, as does his writings on race and IQ, which exploded in his 1971 book, *Race, Intelligence and Education*. During all of this, Eysenck built one of the world’s leading psychology departments at IoP. Whatever one thinks of Eysenck, these are surely remarkable achievements.

It is easy to make the case that Hans Eysenck achieved so much because he was thick-skinned – toughened during his childhood in Nazi Germany – defiant and oppositional (never in person, but often in print). Given the ‘battles’, as he called them in his lively 1997 autobiography, *Rebel with a Cause: The Autobiography of Hans Eysenck*,would a more agreeable person have had the fight in them to challenge the conventional and convenient of that time?

Well, as L. P. Hartley famously observed, ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there’, and things were certainly different back in Eysenck’s younger days. During his just-minted PhD days at the Mill Hill Emergency Hospital – a WWII outpost of the Maudsley Hospital – Eysenck was given enormous freedom to develop his own research plans and to *think*. He flourished under the far-sighted Sir Aubrey Lewis who was the first head of the Institute of Psychiatry (IoP; now the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology and Neuroscience, IoPPN, at King’s College London) and the leading psychiatrist of his day. Eysenck was forever grateful to Lewis.

Looking back on my own doctoral studies, commencing in 1989, at the IoP as it still was then, I am amazed at the freedom that prevailed in department founded by Eysenck, which by that time was headed by one of his most brilliant students, Jeffrey Gray – Eysenck was still much in presence, and I shared a desk with him for three months.

From my experience of working in five universities, three at professorial level, it is all-too-evident that such academic freedom in younger members of staff is a precious and, there is good reason to think, dwindling commodity. One manifestation of this is the pressure on universities to ensure that doctoral students complete in four years which is bound to have an effect on the types of (‘safe’) research undertaken; and, then, this ‘research training’ is likely to carry over into subsequent university life especially if the academic is firmly on a REF-defined trajectory – in research-led universities, this is the only route to prized academic positions.

But real process is often dependent on being contrarian, as highlighted by Lincoln Allison, emeritus reader in politics at the University of Warwick, who writes in the *Times Higher Education* (20 August, 2015): “A good rule of thumb is that any seriously interesting proposition should be offensive to somebody” and “If we are to progress and enhance knowledge we must be open to ideas however offensive or preposterous we or anyone else might find them.”

History gives testimony to this claim. As the BBC science programme asked: ‘Are great scientists always heretics?’ (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/0/22078983>). Its presenter, Stuart Clark, explored the characters of such luminaries as Charles Darwin and Issac Newton and pointed out: “Great scientists change the way we view the world. Doing that usually means smashing an old, entrenched idea - often making enemies in the process. Before being proven and accepted, a great theory can be subjected to harsh criticism and its proposer can be mocked, rejected, even vilified. Sometimes a religious authority is on the attack, other times it's the scientist's colleagues - either way it takes special determination to stick to an idea others believe is clearly wrong.” Hans Eysenck conforms well to this picture and, appropriately, was the subject of an entire BBC programme in 1994: ‘Heretics’.

The pressures on academics to conform is a reflection of wider trends in higher education. Sir Keith Burnett, vice-chancellor at the University of Sheffield, writes in the *Times Higher Education* (21 January 2016) on the challenges facing senior university management and the need to preserve free learning and speech. In a similar vein, Joanna Williams, programme director for the MA in higher education at the University of Kent, in her new book, ‘*Academic Freedom in the Age of Conformity: Confronting the Fear of Knowledge’*, draws attention to the ‘corrosion of conformity on campus’ – this is discussed by Matthew Reisz, *Times Higher Education* (7 January 2016).

The danger we face is the temptation of tolerating subtle forms of social control that snuff out new, but uncomfortable, ideas. As extremists of all kinds know, one effective means to shut-down ideas is the shut-up the individual. Recent examples of the vilification of those who dare espouse views that some find objectionable illustrate this point – *they* are attacked along with their ideas (an effective strategy as it serves to tarnish all of their ideas, past, present and future). Putting to one side what we may personally think of their views, of late, David Starkey and Germaine Greer have been on the receiving end of abuse. Starkey has been called: ‘arrogant’, ‘opinionated’, a ‘bigot’, a ‘xenophobe’, ‘one-man gaffe machine’, [‘the rudest man in Britain](http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2012/apr/22/david-starkey-interview-a-bit-harsh)’, and the thought-stopping *coup de grace*, a ‘racist’ – something levelled at Eysenck by some people (if he was then it is interesting to note that he probably educated more commonwealth psychologists and psychiatrists than anyone else in the world!) Even the then Labour Leader, Ed Milliband, could not resist the fun of the pillory, calling saying him ‘disgusting and outrageous’.

Not too long before, James Watson, the co-discover of the structure of DNA and Nobel Prize Winner, similarly found himself in hot water for ‘racist’ comments, leading to him become a ‘unperson’ (people simply no longer wanted to know him and his book tour and lectures were cancelled) – “Watson told *The Sunday Times* that he was "inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa" because "all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours – whereas all the testing says not really". He was due to speak at the Science Museum’s Dana Centre, but this was cancelled because, according to a spokesman Watson’s comments had gone “beyond the point of acceptable debate”. As a consequence of all of this, Watson was forced to sell his Nobel Prize medal to make ends meet – which was subsequently returned by its new owner to ‘its rightful owner’. As unpleasant as many of us may find Watson’s comments, maybe his *style* of thinking helped him discover the molecular structure of DNA – and, sometimes, highly creative people are odd, oppositional, defiant and contrarian, and even unpleasant.

In the case of Eysenck, despite his more moderate and reasoned tone, some people preferred to express themselves by a punch to his face rather than serious academic debate. In 1973, he was physically attacked at the London School of Economics. His house in South London was dubbed with ‘scum’, ‘sadist’, and ‘murderer’ – this came from a misinformed and misguided vivisectionist group. Something of a more amusing nature, which has echoes in more recent times, is an example of how some people think they can best hold uphold free speech by attempting to curtail it. Arriving at a lecture at Birmingham University, Eysenck was once greeted with the oxymoronic phases painted on two walls: ‘Uphold Genuine academic freedom!’ and ‘Fascist Eysenck has no right to speak!’

It is certainly ironic that on such days when Eysenck was physically attacked, he would have been one of the very few, perhaps the only one, who had faced fascism, opposed it, and acted on his beliefs, leaving Germany in 1934 at the age of 18. He hated Hitler and for all he stood, and he hated being pushed around in academia and being told to shout his mouth – Hitler could not stop him and nor would social scientists who opposed him. We do not have to accept Eysenck’s ideas to accept his freedom to hold and express them - as I explain in an article in *The Psychologist* (March, 2016), some of Eysenck’s pronouncements were plain silly.

When contrarian academics cannot be ignored and side-lined, attempts to destroy their reputations are not uncommon. This was the case with Eysenck because of his high public profile, achieved through his very successful Penguin paperback books (e.g., *Uses and Abuses of Psychology*), popular writings (e.g., *in Reader’s Digest* and *Penthouse*) as well as his frequent media appearances and public lectures. He had an outstanding ability to put his case in the most persuasive terms. This was shown by the frustration of one of his numerous protesters who could not contain himself any more, jumping up during a lecture to proclaim: “That I should agree with Eysenck!”

But things are altogether different for younger academics who have not developed a high public profile. The contrarian voice may be muted by a more subtle means of social control: ignoring them. Some suspect that this as happened in the case of a former PhD student of mine, Adam Perkins, lecturer in the neurobiology of personality, at the IoPPN. In his recent book, *The Welfare Trait*, he argues that generous welfare payments distort the personality of claimants and their children, leading over the generations to ‘employment-resistant personality’. Discussing Perkins’s book, Toby Young in the *The Spectator* (January 16 2016) points to a form of il(liberal) McCarthyism in academia and the media - it is also possible that supporters of *The Welfare Trait* position may also want to mute debate so as not to stir-up a hornet’s nest. A lecture by Adam Perkins at the London School of Economics (LSE), scheduled for 9th February, was postponed at the last minute due to “unforeseen circumstances”, according to an email from LSE Events to me (dated 8th February, 2016). As several sources at LSE inform me, the “circumstances” were adverse “twitter traffic” – one senior member of LSE puts it this way, there were “aware of some negative social media activity”. It would seem that LSE acted in good faith and with justification, and as the senior source at LSE said to me, “I can assure you we take free speech and academic freedom very seriously” – the intention is to reschedule the lecture and not for postponement to be indefinite.

We must ask though: what message does such an outcome signal to those who wish to mute voices in the future? An effective strategy seems simply to stir-up negative comments on social media. As it happens, a few weeks’ earlier Perkins gave the same lecture at King’s College London, which proved to be a rather sedate affair, even though the “Twitter Traffic” before the event was just as “negative” (but it was overly negative, and balance by positive comments).

The danger of being complicit in the social control of contrarian voices is complicacy and, even, the breeding of apathetic cynicism and intellectual lethargy. Well, maybe, we must just have to tolerate (albeit often through gritted teeth) those with whom we, especially most, disagree – within the university, academic debate is the best way to counter such ideas; not fists, slogans, underhand accusations of a personal and professional nature, and adverse social media content.

Let us imagine for one moment that Eysenck during his earlier days in the 1940s and 1950s was altogether more ‘agreeable’, ‘reasonable’, ‘accommodating’, ‘less confrontational’, and so on. Would he had achieved so much; would he have had the necessary fight in him? Something of a moot point, but most people now think he was correct to challenge: the dominance of psychiatry by scientifically unsound psychoanalysis; the lack of reliability of psychiatric diagnosis; the notion that empirical evidence is not needed to support the efficacy of major psychotherapies; the idea that the psychology of communists were more agreeable than those of fascists; the lack of scientific rigour in much of what passed for psychology; and claim that environment shaped personality and intelligence and not biological factors. To engage in these battles without being destroyed by them, someone of Eysenck temperament and attitude is needed.

As time passed, on all of these important points, Eysenck was proved correct. And it turns out that he was also right when he was shouted down in 1958 by psychiatrists at the *Royal Medico-Psychological Association* (RMPA)– now the Royal College of Psychiatrists -- because of his advocacy of behaviour therapy in place of various forms of psychotherapy and its theoretical notions– which included such dangerous and incorrect psychoanalytical guff such as autism is a consequence of a ‘refrigerator’ mother and patient reports of sexual abuse are merely neurotic expressions of a female fantasy– if you think Freud did not believe this then see page 72 of my biography of Eysenck (Eysenck was right to oppose this pernicious nonsense, and if he was being ‘controversial’, ‘defiant’, ‘arrogant’, etc., at the time, then good on him!) In the case of the RMPA, as Richard Passingham, Oxford University emeritus professor of cognitive neuroscience, commented in my biography of Eysenck, 'The Psychiatrists were wrong'. (p. 87).

Even on topics where critics thought they had got the better of Eysenck, his success and ‘research impact’ only appeared a long time after the initial work for which he was continually criticised. Take, for example, the claim that not only does intelligence exist but it has a biological basis with important life consequences. Based on analyse of around 100,000 people in the UK Biobank, it has just been reported by Hagenaars and others in *Molecular Psychiatry* (January 26, 2016) that there are shared genetic influences on intelligence and a range of diseases (including coronary artery disease, stroke, Alzheimer’s disease, schizophrenia, autism, major depressive disorder, body mass index, intracranial volume, infant head circumference and childhood cognitive ability) – these findings point to pleiotropic genetic effects (i.e., same genes code for different physical and psychological outcomes). Eysenck predicted as much 70 years ago and widely abused for his ‘controversial’ idea – time sometimes does tell

It *really* should not matter what we think of those who espouse ‘contentious’, ‘provocative’ or ‘controversial’ ideas. What *should* matter is the intellectual content of their ideas, and the place for them to be evaluated is under the harsh light of academic scrutiny. If an idea is found to be faulty in fact or erroneous in reasoning, then it must be consigned to the academic dustbin (but not the academic who proposed it!); but if not, then, it deserves recognition and respect, for which one of us can foretell its true impact in the future? (This is unlikely to be best decreed by a panel of experts, however well intentioned, who are heavily invested in the knowledge of *today*.)

The precious commodity of the contrarian voice not only needs protection but nurturing – even, indeed especially, when teeth are gritting.

Philip Corr is professor of psychology at City University London, Co-Founder and Co-President of the *British Society for the Psychology of Individual Differences* (BSPID), and the current (2015-17) President of the *International Society for the Study of Individual Differences* (ISSID). Philip is author of a recent, 2016, biography, *Hans Eysenck: A Contradictory Psychology* (published by Palgrave).