Hans Eysenck – has there ever been a psychologist like him? Born in Berlin in 1916 during the Great War, Eysenck was a leading figure in postwar British psychology. He developed a distinctive dimensional model of personality based on factor-analytic summaries, audaciously attempting to anchor these dimensions in biogenetic variation. Eysenck also played a pivotal role in the emergence of clinical psychology in Britain, tirelessly promoting new behavioural treatment regimes over more traditional psychoanalytic approaches.

Eysenck's parents had ambitions for him in the theatre, and he wanted to be a physicist. After graduating from secondary school in 1934, he fled Hitler's Germany and arrived in London the following year. He enrolled in psychology at University College, London, where he took a degree and then rapidly completed a PhD on aesthetic preferences supervised by Cyril Burt.

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preserved, scattered in various collections around the globe and on the web. But given Eysenck covered so much ground as a scientist and public intellectual, there was more than enough in the public domain to fill several books. He was a man who virtually turned himself inside out: almost every idea, hunch or half thought got put out there, incorporated into a presentation, paper, rejoinder, letter or book.

**Doing it his way**

Despite the banner press and TV glare, Eysenck was actually an intensely shy, somewhat aloof figure. He did not do small talk easily, preferring to talk about work at social gatherings. He was never one for thankless committee work and organisational tasks, and he never fitted comfortably with established associations, preferring to form his own. But he had a competitive streak that drove his immense productivity. He treated science as a game, and he played to win. Intellectual debate was a kind of sporting joust. Thus Eysenck and controversy were a natural marriage. Controversial issues gave him the opportunity to display his dazzling rhetorical skills, affirming a strictly adversarial model of science in the process. It was the game rather than the limelight he was addicted to.

Eysenck never compromised on the simplicity of his three dimensions as sufficient to describe the underlying structure of personality. However, his attempt to reconcile Cronbach’s two schools of experimental and correlational psychology was met with indifference bordering on hostility. While he may have had the intellectual power and the disciplinary reach to break down such entrenched barriers, his partisan, non-conciliatorily style worked against him.

These personal proclivities also went some way in explaining why Eysenck attracted so much hostility and slander. Those on the wrong end of his pen or book-length theoretical integrations at will. Replication, adjustment and revision were less rewarded, and often had to wait. For someone seemingly so ruthless, Eysenck was also quite trusting. He gave almost unconditional loyalty, and he inspired it in return. But his loyalty was not always well placed, as he embraced causes and collaborators no one else would. Increasingly wedded to a past of heterodox positions, he painted himself into several corners. Probably the best example of this was his persistent denial of the carcinogenic effects of tobacco. Eysenck maintained that cigarettes should be given the benefit of the doubt, despite the mounting evidence. However, Eysenck received the millions of pounds from the American tobacco industry over several decades, only some of which was declared at the time. Litigation-driven archival stores have made it possible to investigate just how deep this relationship went. The controversial epidemiological research of Ronald Grossarth-Maticek was, Eysenck hoped, the ultimate comeback – since it suggested that psychosocial personality factors were the main culprit. Eysenck extended on and promoted this research tirelessly in the 1980s and 1990s in the face of immense scepticism. While Eysenck always waved away the criticism, his certainty in his own independence was not shared by many observers, nor his indifference to issues of conflict of interest and ethical oversight.

And what of the race and IQ issue? The controversy certainly took its toll on Eysenck, more than he was prepared to admit. Drawn into it partly out of loyalty and partly as a kind of debating challenge, the controversy blended the scientific, political and the social like no other. Perhaps one would have to go back to his childhood to explain his motivations, for that is exactly what he did. During the controversy Eysenck used his experience of pre-war Berlin to bolster his anti-fascist credentials. The fairly scant records surviving from this period paint a complex but incomplete picture, but they were enough to make some of the claims he made seem a bit of a stretch. His childhood also offered an insight into his distaste for politics and his faith in the superordinate power of science. Today in the era of genome-mapping, it all has a sepia-toned quality. Some but not all of the heat has gone out of the issue as more contingent answers to the nature/nurture dichotomy are put forward. Old political certainties have likewise been muddied. With the dominance of sophisticated biogenetic techniques in the neurosciences and beyond, Eysenck’s conservative nativism – so against the grain in the 1960s and 1970s – now looks both cruder and more prescient.

In the course of getting *Playing with Fire: The Controversial Career of Hans J. Eysenck* to print in the UK I have learnt a lot about what Simon Singh has described as the most hostile libel laws in the world. That, however, is another story – this is Eysenck’s. *Playing with Fire* is an attempt to provide a full and frank account of this inveterate controversialist’s career, the man they loved to hate.

*Editor’s note: For Michael Eysenck’s review of *Playing with Fire*, see the September 2010 issue or tinyurl.com/4c3v3cm.*

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