

Evidence-based

CHRIS MCMANUS

Roderick D. Buchanan

PLAYING WITH FIRE

The controversial career of Hans J. Eysenck
475pp. Oxford University Press. £34.95 (US \$65).
978 0 19 856 688 5

The psychologist Hans Eysenck first became known in Britain through his trilogy of Penguin books, *Uses and Abuses of Psychology* (1953), *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology* (1957), and *Fact and Fiction in Psychology* (1965). These introduced psychology to a wide public, making Eysenck one of the best-known names in the field. At the same time, many academics remained suspicious of Eysenck and his approach to science, and his name was surprisingly little mentioned in psychology degree courses in the 1960s and 70s. *Playing with Fire*, for which Roderick D. Buchanan has interviewed a wide range of people who knew Eysenck and were influenced by him, throws light not only on the man himself, but also on the wider context of British psychology over the past fifty years.

Eysenck's achievements were many. His criticisms of Freudian psychotherapy anticipated evidence-based medicine and meta-analysis, with their emphasis on statistical analyses of objective data from clinical trials; his development of behaviour therapy helped many patients with a range of clinical problems, particularly phobias and other neurotic disorders; his work on the measurement of personality was a precursor to the consensus that is now known as the Big Five theory of personality (with its reduction of the majority of variance in individual differences in human behaviour to Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness to Experience, Agreeableness and Conscientiousness); and without him and

the Maudsley school, the clinical training of psychologists in the UK would look very different, even if, somewhat surprisingly, he hardly ever saw patients himself.

Eysenck's pugnacious, competitive style was that of a lawyer, determined to win any argument, with science being seen as a very competitive game. Despite his own repeated entreaties that it was the numbers that should be trusted, however, his scientific papers often seemed cavalier in their referencing and statistics. Raw data were never quite available, and data reconstructed from published graphs were never quite consistent with numbers in the text. Eysenck rarely seemed to care about such things, though, because he was always flitting on to the next study.

The 1970s and 80s were a time when he might have been expected to be showered with honours. Instead, it was then that he embraced some ill-judged causes. An article



Hans Eysenck, 1968

by Arthur Jensen in the *Harvard Educational Review* of 1969 argued that IQ differences between blacks and whites were largely genetic in origin. In 1971 Eysenck entered the fray by publishing *Race, Intelligence and Education*, which contributed little new to the debate, but was a red rag both to the media and to many student activists. The "Birmingham Student Movement" organized a demonstration in February 1973, under the

slogan "Fascist Eysenck has no right to speak!". Eggs were thrown. A few months later Eysenck was headline news when he was punched while lecturing at the London School of Economics, and even in 1977 there was a near-riot in Sydney when he lectured there. He next disputed the link between smoking and lung cancer, got involved in forays into astrology and parapsychology, and, finally, promoted Ronald Grossarth-Maticek's dubious data on the alleged link between cancer and personality.

Buchanan explores the reasons for Eysenck's not being elected to an honorary fellowship of the British Psychological Society, or to the Royal Society (a snub that particularly irked him). Buchanan also describes the major intellectual split between the London School of individual differences, and the narrow cognitive experimentalism practised in Cambridge. A founder member in 1946 of the Experimental Psychology Group (EPG), Eysenck resigned in 1952, subsequently describing it as having "such a light blue tinge".

This biography is a handsome piece of work, with copious, proper footnotes, and is let down only by a poor index. Buchanan has read widely, and interviewed and corresponded with many of those who knew his subject. But the destruction soon after his death of all Eysenck's personal papers, on his widow's instructions, has put a clear boundary on how close Roderick Buchanan was able to get to his subject.