

The Smoke Is Clearing

British psychologist Hans Eysenck (1916-1997) and his theories about society have always been controversial. Now his scientific integrity has come under attack – once again.

by Vittorio Busato¹ – first published in Dutch in [Skepter 33.2](#) (2020)

It's February 1992. Hans Eysenck, one of the most famous and frequently cited psychologists of his generation will be giving the 12th Duijker Lecture in the Lutheran Church in Amsterdam. [1] The topic: one hundred years of personality research. It is precisely in that area that the Brit, then 75 years old and who has spent his entire working life at the Institute of Psychiatry, currently part of King's College London, is considered an absolute authority. Every student of psychology has learned about his three personality factors: extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism; dimensions that are heavily determined by genes, according to Eysenck.

However, the ASVA (the Amsterdam Student Union) is not amused. Eysenck may be world-famous, but he is also considered controversial and racist. For instance, his belief that intelligence is primarily hereditary and that blacks score considerably lower on intelligence tests than whites who in turn score lower than Asians, was roundly criticized by students and colleagues alike. The explanation of his theory also appeared in his book *Race, Intelligence and Education* published in 1971. This put Eysenck in the same league as the equally notorious Arthur Jensen, professor of educational psychology at the University of California, Berkeley. [2]

Both Jensen and Eysenck had frequently been threatened with violence for their views. In his biography of Eysenck, *Playing with Fire* published in 2010, Rod Buchanan, a science historian at the University of Melbourne, argues that those threats also turned Eysenck in a kind of martyr — a freedom of speech icon unperturbed by and with an aversion to political correctness, who stood by his science-based theories.

But the ASVA, using the Anne Frank Foundation as reference, claimed that Eysenck, who was born in Berlin and by his own account fled to England in the mid '30s because of rising Nazism, was definitely in contact with extreme right-wing groups. However, proof of these contacts were inconclusive.

According to Buchanan the somewhat unworldly Eysenck probably did not have a hidden political agenda. He was far too introverted for that and too focused on this status and ambitions — which is not to say that Eysenck's scientific work didn't give political factions intellectual ammunition.

In any case, the day before the lecture Eysenck called from London and informed the organization that 'a student representative' had called him and threatened to disrupt the lecture,

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and that he did not want to appear ‘in that kind of atmosphere’, according to a report in *De Volkskrant*, one of the leading newspapers in the Netherlands. The ASVA was ‘baffled’ and denied any involvement.

Cancer-prone personality

In March 2019 — Eysenck had died from a brain tumor over two decades ago — the Scottish psychiatrist Anthony Pelosi published a scathing article in the *Journal of Health Psychology* about the dozens of studies and book chapters that Eysenck had coauthored and published in the eighties and nineties with sociologist Ronald Grossarth-Maticek. [3] Buchanan also delved into the issue in *Playing with Fire*, but it didn’t cause much of a stir at the time.

In those studies Eysenck and Grossarth-Maticek expound the existence of a cancer-prone personality, based on interviews with hundreds of people that Grossarth-Maticek conducted in the sixties in Crvenka, a city in the former Yugoslavia, and in the eighties in the Germany city of Heidelberg. Under stress people with this personality react rather passively and fatalistic; as a result they are a hundred times more likely to get cancer and twenty times more likely to contract cardiovascular diseases than people with a ‘healthy’ personality, characterized primarily by autonomy and a positive outlook on life.

Grossarth-Maticek’s results were compatible with Eysenck’s ideas about the relation between health and personality. [4] Early in his career the Brit had already expressed his doubts about a causal connection between smoking and lung cancer and cardiovascular diseases, which epidemiologists had been claiming since the mid-fifties. In his book *Smoking, Health and Personality* published in 1965, Eysenck claims that personality factors and stress might well play a much more significant role — a theory, that like his ideas about intelligence, made him very unpopular.

His positive stance on smoking did not go unnoticed by the American tobacco industry. Since the early sixties, Eysenck was being paid by the industry for performing consultative research, and he and his employer received money for various research projects. And he was also regularly invited to speak at tobacco industry conferences, for a fee of course and air travel expenses preferably by Concorde. Buchanan insists that although Eysenck received large sums of money over the years — corrected for inflation, an estimated £ 800,000 and another £ 2,000,000 paid to his institute — it was his scientific conviction that motivated his positive claims. The money from the tobacco industry, he states, was also used for various other research projects.

Buchanan does suggest that the tobacco money may have had an addictive effect. It also enabled Eysenck to maintain the intellectual and international lifestyle he was accustomed to even after he was appointed professor emeritus. But the same way his ideas about intelligence played into the hands of extreme right-wing groups, the tobacco industry also eagerly took advantage of Eysenck’s theory about smoking and his reputation as a scientist — not one court case was lost.

Grossarth-Maticek, now 80 years old, denies all the allegations on the Krebs-chancen.de website, but does not comment on the questionable articles. He calls Pelosi and Marks incompetent and criminal, and their call for a retraction should remind people of book burnings and Nazi tactics. On his personal site, Grossarth-Maticek.de, he calls it a ‘total sham’ and demands damages and a retraction of the articles by Pelosi and Marks.

Retractions

Eysenck’s ideas about the relation between health and personality came under renewed scrutiny as a result of Pelosi’s article. Not in the least because Eysenck and Grossarth-Maticek claimed that a short course of behavioral therapy aimed at a ‘healthy’ personality change, stress reduction and positive thinking could reduce the chance of contracting cancer and cardiovascular diseases, and considerably improve life expectancy. Pelosi saved most of his criticism for the enormous effect sizes the duo reported: unheard of in biomedical literature. He concluded that their findings had to be fraudulent. And some experiments, if they were actually carried out, were clearly unethical.

It’s interesting to note that Pelosi’s article was initially rejected by *Personality and Individual Differences*, a magazine started by Eysenck.

For David Marks, skeptic and editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Health Psychology*, the publication of Pelosi’s article in his magazine was the reason King’s College London and the British Psychological Society called for a formal inquiry into Eysenck’s integrity. [5] To support his claims he added a list of 61 questionable articles by Eysenck.

The professional association didn’t want to get burned by this affair and placed the responsibility on Eysenck’s former employer. [6] By then King’s College had labelled fourteen publications — all of them coauthored by Grossarth-Maticek — as ‘unsafe’; these have all since been officially withdrawn from scientific literature. [7]

But Marks and Buchanan feel that King’s College did not go far enough. Questionable publications written solely by Eysenck were not considered; this might give the impression that Grossarth-Maticek was the main culprit of this fraud. Moreover, after some detective work by Buchanan, another 27 questionable papers were added to the list. [8] In the meantime, the journal *Perceptual and Motor Skills* had officially labelled 36 articles by Eysenck (with or without coauthors) published between 1960 and 1982 as ‘questionable’. [9] His 25 articles published between 1955 and 1995 in the journal *Psychological Reports* were also found questionable. [10]

Three publications considered questionable by Marks and Buchanan in *Personality and Individual Differences* remain — a ‘spineless’ reaction according to Marks, which was to be expected from an editorial board with several members that had worked with Eysenck and wouldn’t dare labelling him a charlatan. [11]

Wrongful act

Back to the Netherlands. Henk van der Ploeg held two special chairs between 1970 and 1991 in Leiden before becoming a professor of medical psychology at the Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. Although he rarely follows his profession since becoming professor emeritus, over the telephone he tells me that he is not surprised that Eysenck is once again under fire. ‘Due to the spectacular results that Eysenck and Grossarth-Maticek boasted about, I was asked in the late eighties to perform a statistical reanalysis of the data Grossarth-Maticek allegedly collected in Heidelberg. I was willing to do that on the condition that his raw data material be made available to me.’

That contact was made through psychiatrist Jan Bastiaans, the former head of his department in Leiden, who was on such friendly terms with Grossarth-Maticek that he named his son after Bastiaans. ‘I believe I was the only person to ever have been granted access to Grossarth-Maticek’s original data files.’

Van der Ploeg clearly remembers that while he was visiting Grossarth-Maticek, who lived in a splendid villa behind Heidelberg Castle, he was handed photocopies of the original interview forms. ‘We reentered all that data with punch cards in Leiden. Gradually it became clear that quite a few things were not quite right. Some of the data were used two, three and some up to seven times.’

In the end, Van der Ploeg may even have committed a wrongful act. Like an amateur Sherlock Holmes he started checking causes of death in the *Gesundheitsamt* in Heidelberg. ‘Names and addresses on his forms were crossed out with a felt-tip pen. But the black ink of felt-tip pens becomes faint very quickly, so I was able to read all the names and addresses. With the help of one of Grossarth-Maticek coworkers I was allowed to copy them under very strict conditions, and in Grossarth-Maticek’s data file I could see who had a higher risk of getting cancer because of his or her personality profile. Subsequently I could verify whether these people actually died from cancer. And Heidelberg is not that big. It’s not that difficult to check someone’s cause of death in the local press. It didn’t take me long to determine that Grossarth-Maticek’s data were too good to be true.’

Suspicion

Van der Ploeg was also eager to talk to a few of the interviewers who collected data for Grossarth-Maticek. ‘He flatly refused. I don’t remember why, but naturally he became suspicious. Perhaps there never were any interviewers. At that time I also calculated how much time it would have cost to interview and treat all the people in the data file. The numbers were astronomical, that couldn’t possibly be accurate.’

Cleary there was something fishy going on. He had the feeling that he was getting close, but one of Van der Ploeg’s biggest regrets is that he never found out precisely how Grossarth-Maticek manipulated the whole thing. ‘I could never shake the feeling that I was dealing with a fabulist.

Moreover, as far as I knew, Grossarth-Maticek had never had his own research institute or an official university appointment, while he did claim as much. He also claimed that he held two doctorate degrees. In any case, he certainly was not a psychotherapist, least of all a medical doctor — and it was clear to me that he knew nothing about epidemiology and statistics.'

Which makes it all the more peculiar that, of all people, Eysenck chose Grossarth-Maticek as his protégé, Van der Ploeg admits. 'I knew Eysenck well and asked him about that. But he would respond by saying that he did not collect the data, nor did he conduct the therapies. He could be so critical of other researchers, but never a bad word about the genius Grossarth-Maticek. He blindly accepted everything he said! Why? Well, the data suited his theoretical framework to a tee. And Eysenck had, let's say, an interesting relationship with the tobacco industry. But I was afraid to blatantly accuse him of fraud. Mrs. Eysenck did approach me at a conference one time and asked me if I despised her husband.'

He limited himself to half a dozen publications about the case in professional journals and magazines — which were often referenced by Buchanan and Pelosi. [12] [13] At the time, Van der Ploeg had already tried in vain to have publications by Eysenck and Grossarth-Maticek withdrawn from scientific literature. 'I was flatly refused, presumably out of respect for Eysenck. By the early nineties I had had enough. That connection between personality, cancer and cardiovascular diseases simply does not exist. Moreover there were more urgent matters to attend to at the VU Hospital at that time.'

Eysenck and Stapel

Eysenck's possible fraud didn't dominate the news nearly as much as Diederik Stapel's fraud did in 2011 when it came to light. If Stapel was social psychology's golden boy, as the *NRC Handelsblad* – another leading Dutch newspaper – described him, then surely Eysenck was personality psychology's platinum guy.

Fifty-eight of Stapel's publications were withdrawn from scientific literature, which earned him the title of Most Retracted Psychologist in History. If Eysenck's questionable articles prove to be inaccurate, Stapel will have the glorious pleasure of being knocked off his enviable throne. [14] Another argument for a scientific integrity inquiry is that Eysenck, contrary to Stapel, may have put people in danger. Patients with cancer were made to feel guilty because they didn't 'think positively'. The work of Eysenck and Grossarth-Maticek is still referred to in self-help books.

In an e-mail Buchanan lets it be known that the alleged consciously misleading of people certainly is an additional argument to start a thorough and extensive inquiry. 'The Eysenck affaire did not generate nearly as much press as the Stapel affair. But then Eysenck is not that well-known to the general public anymore. It concerns research that is more than two decades old and it was heavily criticized several times in professional journals and magazines. Nevertheless, it still appears unrevised in a number of prominent meta-analyses. If science were truly self-cleansing, it is essential that such an integrity inquiry be performed.'

Bibliography

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2. Arthur Jensen (1923–2012) published an analysis in 1969 titled ‘How Much Can We Boost IQ and Scholastic Achievement’, which became one of the most controversial articles in psychology journals and magazines.
3. Pelosi, J. ‘Personality and Fatal Diseases: Revisiting a Scientific Scandal.’ *Journal of Health Psychology* 2019; 24:421-439, [PMID 30791726](#).
4. Perhaps they were also kindred spirits of sorts. Grossarth-Maticek was awarded a doctorate in 1973 in Heidelberg with his thesis *Motivationsstrukturen, Ideologien und Faktoren der Differenzierung bei politisch engagierten Students*, in which he had come to the conclusion, based on interviews with leftist students, that the protests of 1969 were caused primarily by unresolved maternal issues. (*Der Spiegel*, April 22, 1974).
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14. [Retractionwatch.com](#), October 7, 2019.