



The genius of eccentricity

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Why Eccentricity is not Odd

Eccentricity is something that should be encouraged. Odd, unconventional, unusual, even peculiar behaviour should be supported and promoted, otherwise we will be in very great danger of becoming a world of mindless drones, which let's face it, according to arch conspiracy theorist David Icke, is what governments want.

Eccentricity is regarded as a mental condition by psychologists. This is because eccentric behaviour does not conform to the general pattern and history is littered with people who could be described as eccentric.

Admiral Lord Nelson displayed certain eccentricities – he wore a diamond encrusted mechanical brooch presented to him by the Sultan of Turkey, in his hat, which bobbed back and forth like a pendulum (it can be seen on nearly all his portraits.) General Picton rode into battle at Waterloo, not in uniform, but in a plain frock coat and top hat. General Hill, another on Wellington's staff, always carried an umbrella into battle. Asked why, he answered 'in case it rains'.

Jesus Christ himself was undoubtedly eccentric and was thought to be so at the time – even by his own family. Salvador Dali was definitely eccentric, and the present Marquis of Bath, owner of Longleat and its lions, is a visible eccentric with his flamboyant dress sense, seventy-odd wifelets and his own private safari park of wild animals.

Most of us know someone who we consider to be a little eccentric and we tolerate their eccentricities because they are usually mildly amusing. On the other hand, people who *claim* to be eccentric, usually aren't.

The true eccentric is the individual who genuinely doesn't think they're eccentric. And then there's always the double bluffer, the would-be eccentric who wants to be thought of as eccentric, but denies being eccentric. Is a wish to *be* eccentric an eccentricity in itself?

The interesting thing about genuine eccentrics is that they have an ability to think outside the box – they find solutions to problems where no solution is apparent. They are inventive, imaginative, and above all, original. In short, they are creative... which is probably why so many of them are artists and composers or inventors.

They are also great thinkers. Albert Einstein was an eccentric. If it were not for the great eccentrics of history, half the things we take for granted would never have been invented. Pottering about for hours on end in a workshop may seem eccentric, but all ideas of oddness evaporate when something of wonder is produced at the end of it.

In Britain, we love our eccentrics – and their eccentricities. Eccentricity is often associated with aristocracy. An aristocrat (or these days a celebrity) who is eccentric is regarded as... er... well, eccentric... and therefore not a threat. An ordinary soul who is eccentric is regarded as someone who is in urgent need of psychiatric intervention. This view is not only biased, it is prejudiced and dangerous.

In the United States, Michael Jackson's eccentricities caused only mild amusement and pretty much ignored, at least until it became known that those eccentricities extended to a sexual interest in young boys. We were then treated to the old 'tortured genius' defence. Michael Jackson was subsequently found guilty of being a mega-celebrity, and therefore innocent.

Freud believed that eccentricity was merely a 'looseness of repression' which as it happens is almost right. Eccentricity is a casualness, or carelessness, for social strictures and convention. In a world where we are all exhorted to conformity, eccentricity comes as a refreshing breath of fresh air. That is undoubtedly one of the reasons Jimmy Savile got away with his crimes for so long.

Sometimes eccentrics are simply ahead of their time and there are plenty of examples in the fashion industry and in the arts. Great artists are forgiven their eccentricities because it is generally accepted that their behaviour is merely the outward expression of their creative impulses.

And so it should be, so long as that expression does not spill over into antisocial or criminal behaviour, such as trashing hotel rooms or getting too touchy-feely with little boys or girls – one of the reasons Jimmy Savile was eventually 'outed', although too late for him to be punished for his crimes.

Eccentrics also have the ability to focus on their work to the exclusion of everything else. The great comic genius Spike Milligan would lock himself away for days at a time, writing, creating. So did composer of world-shatteringly long but brilliant symphonies, Gustav Mahler.

The ability to get 'lost' in one's creativity is one of the things that is supposed to make a good hypnotic subject. The truth of the matter however, is that eccentrics don't normally go in for hypnotism because they already understand the principle without any outside prompting or tuition.

It should come as no surprise to find that eccentrics also tend to be exceptionally healthy, unencumbered as they are by the same social responsibilities as members of more mainstream society.

Dr. David Weeks, a clinical neurophysiologist at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital has studied thousands of eccentric personalities over a ten year period and discovered that they consult their doctors twenty times less than the rest of the population. Dr. Weeks suggests that there is a neurological (and therefore chemical and electrical) reason for this – because eccentrics are not concerned about conformity and social convention, they are naturally much less prone to stress.

Dr. Weeks has confirmed what I always suspected – eccentrics are self-opinionated, intelligent, questioning, non-conforming, outspoken, have a tendency to become obsessed with one or more hobby-horses, are convinced beyond any shadow of a doubt that they are always right about any topic that takes their fancy and universally disinterested in the opinions of others.

Eccentrics somehow *know* that they are different from an early age and they stand out from their peers as early as in primary school. They are scruffy, are impossible to embarrass and have a mischievous sense of humour, something which is often misinterpreted by others, especially those who don't know them very well!

The lack of constraint which allows them the compulsion to wisecrack or make surreal jokes – even during times of intense seriousness – is something which often gets them into trouble. Subtle jokes are often missed or misinterpreted by others as jokes sail over their heads.

The true eccentric finds it almost impossible to compromise and is wholly unconcerned – presuming that they were even aware of it in the first place – by disapproval.

To this end, they often amuse themselves by pretending to extreme right-wing views. Often, this is a deliberate attempt to shock. At the same time they can lose themselves in comparatively innocuous though unusual pursuits like knitting or playing the xylophone.

Their individual contributions to humanity, whether that contribution is in the field of science or the arts, are worth more, and have made a bigger difference than most of the rest of us put together.

Sadly eccentrics don't multiply very well, as the other thing they have in common is an inability to hold down serious or long-term relationships. Nonetheless, I do admire and respect them. They are more vital for the survival of the human species than any of the rest of us. May they all live long and prosper.

'The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honours the servant and has forgotten the gift'. Albert Einstein.

Creative people are better connected

The way our brains are wired could provide the key to understanding the way we think.

A talent for innovation, creativity, imagination, originality, and ingenuity is the result of how the two sides of your brain are able to talk to each other. If you can think outside the box, then you're likely to have greater connectedness.

It's long been thought that right-brained people are more creative, but this turns out to be almost certainly not the case.

Scientists at the University of New Mexico confirmed that creativity does not depend on a single side of the brain, but rather on the ability of the two hemispheres to communicate via the corpus callosum, the neural highway made up of bundles of wires, or axons, which connect the billions of neurons on both sides of the brain and carry electrical signals back and forth between the two hemispheres.

People who are highly creative, inventive or innovative have greater connectivity between the right and left brain.

Using MRI scans, the scientists monitored the network of white matter connections among 68 separate brain regions in healthy college-age participants while they completed a series of tasks, including problem solving, drawing and design, and thinking up new uses for everyday objects.

Participants then filled out a questionnaire about their achievements in ten creative areas, including the visual arts, music, creative writing, dance, cooking and science. All the information was then collated to provide a 'creativity score' for each participant.

The computers sifted through each of the 1GB scans and converted them to three-dimensional diagrams of the brain.

They discovered there was no statistical difference in connectivity within the individual hemispheres, nor was there any difference between male and female brains.

But when they compared the participants whose test scores were in the top 15% with those of the bottom 15%, those in the higher bracket were found to have a significantly greater connection between left and right hemispheres.

So could the technique be used to predict whether a person will be highly creative from an early age?

The researchers are in the process of developing more statistical methods to find out whether brain connectivity varies with IQ, whose relationship to creativity is still a matter of debate.

I suspect the answer will be that it is, as creative genius and intelligence often seem to go hand in hand – Einstein immediately springs to mind.

After his death in 1955, his brain was preserved, albeit in pieces and in different parts of the world. Strange, but true.

Why smart people don't socialise

I haven't been out for days... Apart from Saturday evening when some friends came round for dinner – thankfully, bringing wine and pizza. I haven't seen another living soul for nearly a week, although the neighbourhood fox whizzed by the house the other evening looking for scraps. If it weren't for the BBC, the world could have ended and I wouldn't know a thing about it.

I'd do well on a desert island – I often think of it as an attractive alternative lifestyle. Frankly, I think I would enjoy the solitude, so long as I could get decent food and wine.

Right now I'm reading an article in the *British Journal of Psychology*. It tells me that smart people may be far happier with their own company than in the company of others... and now I'm thinking about that desert island again.

Some psychologists think that the more frequently people with above average intelligence socialise with friends, the less satisfied they are with life.

Satoshi Kanazawa of the London School of Economics and Norman Li of Singapore Management University are my new best friends. Their view challenges the modern wisdom that the more social contact we have, the happier we should be. I have long known that this is, er... bollocks.

Unusually for an entertainer, I'm not really a people person – I hate parties, especially show-business parties – I hate noisy crowded places and small talk and I refuse to go anywhere where the music is so loud you can't hear yourself think. I've never really got on with show business types either. I've been to the odd show business party, but couldn't wait to leave.

Of course, I understand that social interaction has been a valuable part of the human survival strategy – even I need it occasionally and I can handle small intimate groups made up of people I already know and have things in common with, but I find most of the rest of the world not very much to my liking. In all honesty, despite the energy I put out on the stage, I prefer peace and quiet.

With the growth of large cities and centres of commerce, we no longer live in small towns and villages where everyone knows everyone else – and everyone else's business. Life today is filled with meaningless encounters with faceless strangers. The Savannah Theory, which dictates that the kind of existence that made our ancestors content, no longer applies in the 21st century. Except of course that I live in a small town where everyone knows everyone else – and everyone else's business.

In the modern hectic world most people now inhabit, it's large-scale population density that affects levels of human happiness rather than more manageable close-knit societies we were once used to and comfortable with. So it's interesting the researchers have found that people who live in densely populated areas said they had lower levels of life satisfaction.

Among the very intelligent, dissatisfaction with this new sort of existence is at an all-time high. Larger populations offer more frequent opportunities for social contact and it's hard to turn down invitations without appearing rude, or when commercial interests may be at stake.

Kanazawa and Li think that although smarter individuals can more readily adapt to modern life, they don't have the same social needs as their ancestors in order to enjoy life, or even to find their way in the modern world. For these individuals, the savannah theory no longer applies because there are just so many social opportunities to choose from.

This makes sense – if you're someone who regularly gets stuck in traffic, or worse, finds themselves crammed sardine-like in the the hell on earth that is London Underground, you will know exactly what I'm talking about.

Conversely, if the 'urban-rural happiness gradient' is accurate, you will see that people who live in small communities really are happier – I know I am.

The brains of our hunter-gatherer ancestors adapted to life on the African plains, when populations were sparse.

On average, they lived in groups of around 150 and social interaction was crucial to their survival, especially in terms of co-operation and finding a mate. Equally important was that there was plenty of space.

When I lived for eighteen months in an apartment in the busy centre of the city of Manchester, within a couple of minutes walk of the theatres and the art galleries, the restaurants and libraries, I was one of 160 people living in the same building.

Apart from the odd encounter in the lift, when we both would grudgingly acknowledge the other's existence with a polite grunt, I didn't know one of them – not even their names or what they did.

There is a mismatch between the way we evolved and the comparatively busy lives we lead today – it's much harder to keep up with everything, even though life is more comfortable (instant hot water, electricity, TV) and a good deal more secure and safe.

But, for the most intelligent among us, there is conflict between aspiring to greater goals and being tied to our evolutionary past.

Wasting time with people is counterproductive if they have nothing new or significant to offer. Intelligent people realise that spending three years of your life in traffic or engaging in trivial and pointless gossip with people you hardly know is a waste of time.

Which is why, in the end, I realised that I'm happier where I started, in a little town, with its quaint friendliness, its characters, and where everyone knows everyone else – and everyone else's business.

It takes intelligence to find sick jokes funny

People with a dark sense of humour tend to be more intelligent, more emotionally stable, and less aggressive. It takes higher cognitive and emotional skills to understand sick jokes.

There's nothing I enjoy more than a cleverly constructed, deliberately offensive and controversial joke – the more outrageous, the better. But it has to be intelligent.

In other words, the joke must be constructed in such a way that the irony cannot be mistaken for real hatred, racism, sexism, or any other kind of ism, or anti-this or anti-that.

Psychologists from the Medical University of Vienna discovered that people who enjoy gallows humour tend to score highly on intelligence and emotional stability tests. This is because something can be funny even if it may seem offensive to others – intelligent minds are more able to discern and understand the difference between offensiveness and intent.

The intent of humour can highlight for example, the reality of social injustice, religious silliness or political hypocrisy, all of which are legitimate targets for jokes.

To construct or accurately interpret the true meaning of the joke requires a certain amount of cognitive and emotional skill. To get a joke, one has to be able to peel back the layers of the joke. This requires not only a degree of mental agility but also the ability to think outside the box, just as understanding a pun requires the ability to unravel layers of meaning and a degree of mental exercise.

It's also helpful if one has not been indoctrinated by extreme left wing ideology, muddled by snowflake sensitivity, or brainwashed by excessive political correctness.

People process humour in different ways and there are many variables which require the brain to work rapidly to blend ideas and concepts.

Dark humour treats subjects that would normally be taboo – death, deformity, disability, religion, race, migration, war, loss, tragedy – and reveals the *opposite* of what is being expressed as the truth.

Comedians such as Frankie Boyle are perfect examples – his total irreverence to everything on the above list, and more, makes us understand ideas, emotions and events differently. He makes us see things in a different light and makes us question our more usual comfortable preconceptions of the world.

The Vienna researchers think that comprehension of this type of humour is a mark of intelligence. A preference for, and comprehension of dark humour are positively associated with higher verbal and nonverbal intelligence, as well as higher levels of education.

The researchers came to their conclusion by asking 156 participants to rate some dark humour cartoons. Volunteers were asked whether they understood the joke, whether they thought it was good, and whether they found it surprising, vulgar, or interesting. The personality of each participant was also tested for intelligence, emotional stability and aggressiveness.

People who understood and appreciated the humour scored more highly on the tests for verbal and nonverbal intelligence. Those who appreciated the humour in the joke also scored less highly than others on tests for emotional instability and aggression.

I understand that a lot of the stuff I find funny – and ironic – doesn't work for other people, especially those who lean toward the left of the political and social spectrum.

The people who took part in the tests and who understood and appreciated the humour scored more highly on verbal and nonverbal intelligence tests.

The researchers believe the link between dark humour and intelligence may be because it takes both cognitive and emotional skills to understand the real meaning behind even the sickest of jokes and get the point of the unsaid, unwritten philosophy lurking behind the words.

The results confirm the theory that humour processing involves several different cognitive components and points to the ability to frame-shift and conceptually blend both the narrative and the meaning of dark humour.

The same processes could be applied to surreal humour – Monty Python being a fine example of both surreal and dark humour.

Did I tell you the one about Jimmy Savile, Gary Glitter and the giraffe? The Vienna research into that kind of joke was published in the journal *Cognitive Processing*.

Swearing could indicate higher intelligence

People who frequently swear are, contrary to popular belief, more likely to have a larger vocabulary than their more polite peers.

According to a recent study published in the *Language Sciences Journal*, a foul mouth does not mean the owner is lazy, uneducated, or can't control themselves. This is good news for me and certain of my friends, all of whom are highly educated and erudite, yet also let loose with the odd expletive.

I have previously waxed lyrical about the pleasure and benefit to one's sanity of not suffering fools gladly. Believe me, an occasional well-timed 'f*** off' can be immensely satisfying.

In fact, the use of swear words makes us more confident – even if we are more articulate in other circumstances.

In the study, 49 participants, aged between 18 and 22 were asked to say as many swear words as they could think of in 60 seconds. [I would pass this test with flying colours, and so would most of my friends and my ex-wife, who taught me most of them in the first place, and who also invented two of them. Probably.]

They were then asked to do the same with the names of animals. Astonishingly, those who knew the most swear words were more likely to name the most animals.

Kristin and Timothy Jay, the US based psychologists who co-wrote the study, claims it proves swearing is positively related to verbal fluency. They added that those who used taboo words were not only more articulate in other areas, but were also able to use language expressively and make nuanced distinctions. The ability to make nuanced distinctions indicates the presence of more, rather than less, linguistic knowledge.

We tend to swear more when we're angry. The use of profanity can be an emotional coping mechanism that in turn makes us feel more resilient. Swearing seems to represent a harmless emotional release that can help individuals feel stronger, though only when practised in moderation.

In another experiment, participants were asked to remember as many profanities as possible both before and after playing an aggressive computer game. After the game, they were able to recall a wider variety of swear words and were also observed using them more often!

Obviously, the games made people feel more aggressive so their language also became more aggressive.

As we grow up, we learn a lexicon of these words. We also learn that using them while we are emotional helps us to feel stronger. It's possible that using taboo words when we are emotional may serve to make that behaviour more acceptable.

More good news is that another recent studies have proved that swearing is a useful way of mitigating pain because swearing distracts the brain from the pain. The majority of people will at least be tempted to swear when pain is inflicted – hitting your thumb with a hammer or stubbing your toe will usually do it.

It's human nature to judge others on the basis of their speech. This is not just limited to the words they use, but it also takes into account such things as their use of slang and their accents.

The assumption that when it comes to swearing, people who swear frequently are lazy, do not have an adequate vocabulary, lack education, or simply cannot control themselves, is obviously incorrect.

The psychologists said that the overall finding of the study – that swearing and cursing is positively correlated with other measures of verbal fluency, undermines the accepted view.

It's now thought that those who use swear words understand their special expressive effect and significance as well as being aware of the nuanced distinctions to use those words only when appropriate.

This ability – the skill to know when and where to use profanities appropriately indicates the presence of more rather than less linguistic knowledge.

Thank you for listening. You can now all politely go away.

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