



ELSEVIER

Available online at [www.sciencedirect.com](http://www.sciencedirect.com)

SCIENCE @ DIRECT®

Journal of Economic Psychology 25 (2004) 293–296

JOURNAL OF  
**Economic  
Psychology**

[www.elsevier.com/locate/joep](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/joep)

## Book review

**The personality continuum and consumer behavior.** Paul J. Albanese. Quorum Books, Westport, CT and London. pp. xxvii+366, 2002, ISBN 1-56720-558-5, \$69.95 (hardcover)

Paul Albanese's magnum opus has been two decades in the writing, beginning with his Ph.D. research at Harvard under Harvey Leibenstein. It comes with rave pre-publication reviews from Morris Holbrook, Gordon Foxall, Rick Bagozzi and Manfred Ket de Vries, indicating that it may be a work that consumer researchers in marketing ignore at their peril. Its reception by economists, by contrast, is likely to be far less enthusiastic even if, like myself, they share Albanese's view that differences in consumers' patterns of behaviour may reflect differences in their personalities. The economist who originally agreed to review the book opted to return it, commenting that 'The book is so dogmatic and vacuous that I seriously doubt whether it is worth reviewing in an academic journal'. This unexpected reaction intrigued me but having now read the book myself, I can see what provoked it. (I can also imagine how Albanese would assess such behaviour and where he might want to place that economist on his personality continuum!)

My reservations about this book have nothing to do with what Albanese has to say about how his thinking relates to conventional economic analysis of consumption. In fact, his attempt to look inside economic man is highly constructive as well as interesting in its discussions of writers such as Becker, Duesenberry and Scitovsky, and its consideration of Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments as a basis for the examination of consumer choice. Instead, the problems lie with the book's psychological foundations and with what Albanese does and does not do with them.

The scholarship displayed by Albanese is meticulous within the literature that he employs and he has a clear, engaging style when he uses his own words. Unfortunately, roughly half the book consists of quotations from his key sources, which often do not share his gifts as a writer. The book starts out with a clear structure but becomes less focused and, most disappointingly, stops – with a chapter that reflects on whether the relentless pursuit of self-interest in America reflects tendencies for many Americans to have chronically juvenile personalities – before getting into a detailed application of the theoretical framework to consumer behaviour.

Albanese's framework is essentially an application of Freudian psychoanalytic ideas and post-Freudian 'object relations theory', developed by Michael Balint, W.R.D. Fairbairn, Otto Kernberg and Harry Stack Sullivan. It turns out that object relations theory is not about objects that people consume but about the process of

personality development in terms of changes in how people see themselves in relation to others. The theory gives particular attention to differences in behaviour in ordinary conditions compared with what different personality types do when under pressure. Albanese makes much of the use of the strategy of ‘splitting’ as a defense mechanism by less mature personality types but despite the book’s excellent index, I found it impossible to pin down anywhere in the book precisely what splitting might have to do with consumer choice.

The personality continuum in object relations theory has normal, well-adjusted people at one end, ranging through neurotic and primitive personalities to people prone to psychotic behaviour at the other end. ‘Normal’ people are portrayed as having developed balanced, integrated views of themselves in relation to others – particularly in relation to their parents who, early in their lives, try to provide boundaries for socially acceptable behaviour that serve as a superego voice against their impulsive and selfish urges. Normal people are able to recognize both good and bad aspects of themselves and others. They are able to form close relationships and share value systems with other people; they operate in a predictable manner when under pressure, displaying humour, altruism, and the ability to suppress impulsive urges. They do everything in moderation, can display self-control and can delay gratification.

People with ‘neurotic’ personalities function well under ordinary conditions but lack the self-assurance of a normal person and use pre-commitment devices to control themselves. They are prone to be indecisive and ambivalent. Under pressure, they regress to more primitive patterns of behaviour and display signs of being depressive, avoidant, obsessive, hysterical or paranoid. Those with ‘primitive’ personalities are far less predictable in ordinary situations. They are prone to display alternating and contradictory behaviour as they struggle with a lack of impulse control and backslide into ultimately self-destructive myopic activities such as drug-taking. The primitive personality can appear to have two selves, which one is observed depending on the context, and tends to be infantile, narcissistic, anti-social, schizoid, and borderline in terms of reality testing. Such a personality seems, in many respects, to match the typical picture of the consumer in neoclassical economics as someone engaging in the pursuit of self-interest without any regard for the impact of their selfishness on the well-being of others – in contrast to the normal and neurotic consumers who have a capacity for sympathy and who work within moral codes.

According to Albanese, people with psychotic personalities are those who have, in essence, failed to work out a clear view of themselves; their self-concepts fluctuate wildly and they tend not to be able to envisage themselves as entities in relation to others. Because of the lack of any firm spot on which to stand, so to speak, they end up behaving in a very capricious manner that may look utterly irrational to those around them. Such people may be highly unpredictable and prone to suffer from symptoms of manic depression or schizophrenia.

So far so good, and before he gets immersed in lengthy quotations Albanese provides readers with a very effective summary table (also available at [www.personalitycontinuum.org](http://www.personalitycontinuum.org)) and hints of where it might all lead as a framework for explaining why some people end up in addictive behaviour or unable to contain their spending

impulses. What follows is enough to justify any academic library purchasing the book as a convenient guide to object relations theory for consumer researchers, and yet, quite apart from the extraordinary extent of the quotations, there are many things that make the book ultimately frustrating, such as:

- It seems unscientific/dogmatic because of the major role it accords to unsubstantiated claims about unresolved sexual issues being the key determinants of personality: the worst stereotypes about psychoanalysts being obsessed with Oedipal issues are writ large here and it is claimed that a crucial factor in determining whether or not one is a normal or neurotic consumer is whether or not one has achieved one's preferred form of genital intimacy. Surely, even if people (or entire societies) seem to be preoccupied with sex, this does not necessarily demonstrate poorly resolved Oedipal relations with their parents – an alternative explanation might simply be in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, combined with raised expectations of what a normal sex life ought to entail. Consumer researchers probably *can* do a lot with the typology of personalities that the personality continuum entails, and with which psychiatrists and clinical psychologists work on a daily basis via their diagnostic manuals of mental disorders (from which Albanese himself quotes at length), but I think they can do so without taking on board these Freudian sexual conjectures.
- A golden opportunity was missed to link the discussion of ego/superego relations to the classic Fishbein–Ajzen model of behavioural intentions, in which one's own views about the merits of a course of action are weighed against those of significant others, mindful of one's motivation to comply with them.
- While it is understandable, given the object relations perspective, that Albanese should present anxiety in terms of decision makers being concerned with how others will view a decision they are considering taking, this leaves out a much broader view of how anxiety can affect human behaviour, found in personality theories of Maslow and George Kelly. On this view, we feel anxious when faced with the unknown or situations that we cannot anticipate with our ways of looking at the world (which can include, as a subsystem, a particular way of looking at ourselves in relation to others).
- Reflection may imply that people may have many different sides to their personalities that are context specific, rather than being consistently one kind of person except when under pressure. One might lead a very ordered life at work and counterbalance that with a desire to have leisure that is not timetabled and goes where the mood of the day takes one, be obsessive about some things (say, as a collector) and be casual about others (say, matters of dress) and to oscillate in some areas (say, between different types of cars) because one is experimenting, having yet to work out what is 'the' way to go.
- Beyond areas such as addiction, drug taking and compulsive choices, the book has little to say about how particular kinds of abnormal behaviour relate to the process of choice or what gets chosen. Here, some testable hypotheses might have been advanced, such as, 'people with primitive personalities are more likely to purchase designer-label products than are those with other types of personality';

or, ‘people with neurotic personalities are more likely to use intolerant, checklist-based decision rules’. (The book’s shortcomings in this respect will particularly irk those who have seen the recent use of the Myers–Briggs personality analysis by Caplan (2003) as means of explaining differences in consumption behaviour.)

- In general, the book would have been much more useful had it covered object relations theory quite briefly and instead compared it with other views of personality and other views of personal development that might have complementary implications for consumer behaviour. As an example of the latter, I couldn’t help noticing some potential synergies between aspects of the personality continuum and the ‘Perry Progression’ of students’ intellectual development from dualism to committed relativism as modes of thinking about the nature and quality of the education they receive (see Perry, 1970).

It should by now be obvious that, while this book has a number of infuriating aspects, the personality continuum notion is certainly thought-provoking for consumer research. Let us hope that Paul Albanese will now write a shorter book, with minimal use of quotations, that sets out the implications of his research in terms of a scientific research programme and for marketing action/economic policy.

## References

- Caplan, B. (2003). Stigler–Becker versus Myers–Briggs: Why preference based explanations are scientifically meaningful and empirically important. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization*, 50, 391–405.
- Perry, W. G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of intellectual and ethical development in the college years*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Peter E. Earl  
School of Economics  
University of Queensland  
St. Lucia, Brisbane, QLD 4072  
Australia

Tel.: +61-7-3365-6598; fax: +61-7-3365-7299  
E-mail address: p.earl@economics.uq.edu.au