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Book reviews

The Personality Continuum and Consumer Behavior

Paul J. Albanese, Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, Westport, CT, 2002, 392 pp., $69.95, ISBN 1-56720-558-5

Paul Albanese surely likes bold challenges. In his provocative *The Personalit Continuum and Consumer Behavior*, Albanese proposes a comprehensive theoretical framework for relating personality to consumer behavior. The framework, called Personality Continuum, applies systematically object relations theory to explore the complexity of personality organization and its implications for consumer behavior. Four levels of personality developments—normal, neurotic, primitive, and psychotic—correspond to different ways in which three levels of internalization—introjection, identification, and ego identity—affect the intrapsychic structure of personality. A comprehensive table in the preface leads the reader through the main arguments of the book. The Personality Continuum offers a broad spectrum encompassing psychological as well as behavioral aspects. The emphasis on the developmental processes and the achievement of the integration of whole object relations are the cornerstones of this fascinating peek into the human psyche. The achievement of a normal personality development is characterized by a fine balance between ego capacities—caring for oneself and others—and superego prescriptions—experiencing guilt for violations—and a prevalence of positive identifications and introjections. The other three levels, or ranges, of personality developments represent different solutions—or lack of solutions—to the same basic developmental challenges. They are described in exquisite detail throughout the book and with reference to more specific personality organizations within the ranges, such as depressive, avoidant, obsessive, hysterical, and paranoid within the Neurotic range. Possibly because often mistaken for a rational economic man, the Narcissistic personality is described at length and a full chapter is organized around this theme. I did find this chapter the most interesting of the book. Anyone who believes in the Homo Economicus as a valid assumption of human and consumer behavior, should read this chapter and think again. The selfish, self-absorbed, exploitative, not concerned with others, behavior of a consumer fits well with the rationality ascribed to the standard economic agent, yet it is not a portrait of a normal personality development but of a Narcissistic personality. Often, scholars who don't agree with the basic assumptions behind Homo Economicus tend to argue that such a portrait of a rational economic agent is in fact more appropriate to describe a kind of antisocial psychotic man. As Albanese rightly clarifies, the portrait corresponds to a Narcissistic personality, which should be classed as belonging to the primitive range—not to the psychotic—and it should be differentiated from an antisocial personality—perhaps it is more akin to an asocial personality. I could not help myself applying this personality organization to some prominent economic agents. Two names came immediately to my mind: the former CEOs of Enron (Kenneth Lay) and of Worldcom (Bernard Ebbers). What better examples of narcissistic personalities? The “grandiose selves” of these two men ultimately led them to destroy their own companies, as probably Albanese would put it.

The definitions of the Personality Continuum can be used to expand the behavioral foundations of the consumer. Albanese provides some insights on how this can be done that whilst representing an important step, still could be improved upon. But what makes this book so distinct from many others is the depth of analysis of the intrapsychic human functioning and the comprehensiveness of the approach. It is hard to find any current personality theory that steps up to the challenge of providing an integrated, broad, and deep account of personality functioning. The development of personality research has been historically mostly focused on an impressive array of specific personality mechanisms and structures, but missing the big picture of a personality organization. The Personality Continuum is a bold attempt to provide such a framework with a remarkable interdisciplinary focus. From this perspective, perhaps the only serious alternative to the Personality Continuum is the Big Five factor model (Costa and Widiger, 2001; De Raad and Perugini, 2001). In a nutshell, five factors, usually named Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism/Emotional Stability, and Openness/Intellect, have consistently emerged from empirical research carried out in many different countries. Although disagreements still persist among personality researchers about the details of some of these factors and the potential for adding an additional factor, there is a general consensus that most specific aspects of personality structure can be understood and explained within this five-factor framework. They can be used to characterize types of personality, by profiling the basic factors in specific patterns, and to explain many diverse behaviors, by examining the mechanisms, motivations, and affective factors behind each factor. They can be combined to give new insights on specific mechanisms, and they can be used as a map to understand the positioning and functioning of more specific personality dimensions. Two examples of recent applications of the Big Five to economic issues are provided by Verplanken and Herabadi (2001), who characterize impulse buying as a mix between Extraversion and (lack of) Conscientiousness, and by Caplan (2003), who proposes that the Big Five should be used as a framework to model differences in stable preferences for economic agents.

A comparison at a glimpse between the Personality Continuum and the Big Five reveals interesting differences. The Big Five cannot match the depth of analysis provided by the Personality Continuum, whereas this latter cannot match the empirical support provided by hundreds of studies adopting the Big Five throughout the world. The Big Five structure has been developed focusing on a normal population and with an assumption of quantitative differences between different people, yet it can be extended to persons with personality disorders and can deal with qualitative distinctions emerging from specific combinations of quantitative differences in traits. On the contrary, the Personality Continuum is focused mostly on personality disorders in its origins and with qualitative distinct personality organizations, yet, as Albanese makes clear, it can be used to understand your next-door neighbor’s consumer behavior and to understand quantitative differences within qualitatively distinct personality levels of development.

This is a book that must be in the shelves of anyone interested in the psychoanalytic aspects of consumption but also of anyone seriously interested in understanding consumer behavior. It provides a comprehensive and deep framework that can be used to model the obvious but often neglected fact that there are stable differences in consumption patterns between different individuals. It gives new insights and it provides a fascinating journey into the depths of the human psyche. It is not the only framework that could be used to integrate personality into consumer behavior theory and research, but it does offer some unique insights. The downside is the lack of empirical research and difficulties that could be envisaged when attempting to transform the general theoretical framework into practical empirically based measures and studies. This has been a historical problem for any kind of psychoanalytic approach and the Personality Continuum, with its reliance on object relations theory, is no exception. But, at the same time, it goes beyond the surface level and forces you to think deep. Personality research is well and alive and ripe to be applied to economic and consumer behavior.

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