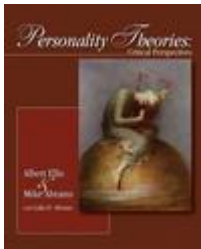


## Does Psychology Really Need Another Personality Textbook?

A review of



### **Personality Theories: Critical Perspectives**

by Albert Ellis and Mike Abrams (with Lidia D. Abrams)

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2009. 696 pp. ISBN 978-1-4129-1422-2

(hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4129-7062-4 (paperback). \$119.00, hardcover;

\$74.95, paperback



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Reviewed by

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There is currently a plethora of personality textbooks available, with many covering the same material as one another and many contributing very little by way of novel observations. Accordingly, the arrival of the present text, *Personality Theories: Critical Perspectives*, by Albert Ellis and Mike Abrams (with Lidia D. Abrams), should mark a fresh contribution, rather than simply providing a superfluous addition to an already excessive personality textbook field.

The book's subtitle, *Critical Perspectives*, would suggest a fresh critical approach to the material, and given that the authors include Albert Ellis, one may indeed hope for something distinctive. Ellis, who died in July 2007 at age 93, developed rational emotive behavior therapy, proposing that irrational beliefs, rather than "negative" situations, are often responsible for negative emotional experiences. While not known for his expertise as a personality theorist or researcher, Ellis has been described as contributing "one of the first

cognitive approaches to psychotherapy” (Farley, 2009, p. 215). Furthermore, Ellis claims in the present text that this is the first formal exposition of his “complete theory of personality” (p. xv). Hence, there may be reason to believe that this text will contribute something special.

## **Organization and Scope**

The book generally follows Hall and Lindzey’s (1957) perspective-by-perspective approach, which divides the material according to major theorists or approaches. This is a common approach to personality texts, although one that has been criticized for presenting the student with a fragmented view of personality rather than an integrative one (see Mayer, 2005). Like others of its ilk (e.g., Cloninger, 2008; Feist & Feist, 2009; Sollod, Wilson, & Monte, 2009), the text covers similar territory, such as discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis, followed by Jung and Adler’s dissent. The neo-Freudians, such as Karen Horney and Harry Stack Sullivan, are considered before the text moves on to trait perspectives (including contributions from Allport, Cattell, and Eysenck, along with discussion of the five-factor model). Both behaviorist and humanistic approaches are also featured, as well as cognitive approaches (including theories by Kurt Lewin, George Kelly, Allport, and Bandura).

The text’s coverage of each perspective is generally comprehensive and of much greater depth than what is found some other texts (e.g., Cloninger, 2008). Additionally, rather than being fixated in the early- to mid-20th century, the material includes much up-to-date discussion of present research and approaches (including neuroscience). Furthermore, unlike some personality texts that discuss the theorist’s personality in depth (e.g., Sollod, Wilson, & Monte, 2009), the present text focuses more on theory and research (although some interesting but brief biographical material is included, nevertheless).

Aside from such contributions, the present text does make inclusions that are less commonly found in its competitors. For instance, evolutionary approaches to personality are discussed (including some interesting discussion of both the eugenics movement and Soviet evolutionary research). Additionally, a chapter titled “Abnormal Personality and Personality Disorders” provides a helpful inclusion of the role of personality theories for both understanding psychopathology and guiding application in therapy (although see comments below). Furthermore, the text provides the reader with a good grounding in the history of psychology generally and the scientific foundation of personality research. All in all, the present text is one of the better ones in terms of extent and depth of coverage.

## **Novel Components**

While the foregoing material can to a greater or lesser extent be found in other personality texts, there are two original aspects of the present text—but whether these will be of major interest to lecturers in the field of personality is disputable. One of these aspects is a section devoted to Ellis’s rational emotive behavioral theory of personality, which is placed as the penultimate chapter. However, despite Ellis’s numerous contributions to psychology (see Farley, 2009), it is difficult to really say that Ellis contributes a novel theory of personality *per se*.

Ellis’s approach, instead, appears to be far more of an eclectic perspective that attempts to synthesize a variety of components found in other theories, such as traits, psychodynamics, and humanism, and that bears some resemblance to other “cognitive” approaches. It might have been better to see Ellis’s position put forward as an integrative approach, which would mitigate Mayer’s (2005) criticism of the perspective-by-perspective approach referred to earlier, rather than presenting his contribution as a grand theory. This would allow the student to see how it all fits together, rather than introducing a new paradigm.

Another novel inclusion is the book’s final section, Religious, New Age, and Traditional Approaches to Personality. Here one finds approaches as diverse as Ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, and Christianity and a discussion of their application for understanding personality. Some readers may find this a pleasing inclusion (and one that certainly sets this text apart from others), and it is refreshing to see some acknowledgment of cross-cultural conceptions of persons. However, other readers may wonder why such approaches appear to be singled out as worthy of attention. After all, the “traditional” humoral approach to personality, which has been enormously influential in shaping Western conceptions of person (see Arikha, 2007), is relegated to being a historical curiosity in the text’s opening chapters. Perhaps the implication being made by the text’s authors is that some traditional approaches are more valid than others, despite being equally lacking in evidence.

## **Major Weaknesses**

A major weakness of the book is its poor organization, and in certain areas the thematic content flows poorly across chapters. For instance, after discussing Freud’s theory, the text turns to discussing Jung’s and Adler’s approaches (as is standard fare). From there, however, the text turns to discussing psychiatric and medical models of mental illness, which is then followed by the neo-Freudians. Why the chapter on the medical models of illness dissects

these psychodynamic perspectives is unclear when the more logical place for such a discussion would be either before discussing the various theorists' contributions or later when the text discusses abnormal personality and personality disorders. A similar example of poor organization occurs later in the text, when the topic of abnormal personality and personality disorders dissects evolutionary perspectives on personality and Ellis's "theory" of personality. The text's organization subsequently appears haphazard, and those responsible for any future editions would do well to reconsider the order of presentation.

Another major weakness concerns the critical treatment of the material. The book's title suggests that a critical approach is a particular strength of the present text. However, the critical evaluation of the material is either generally pedestrian or lacking. Psychoanalysis, of course, receives its typical share, and the text here is somewhat better than what is found in some other books. For instance, rather than asserting as axiomatic the Popperian declaration that psychoanalysis is untestable—and without *any* demonstration of the claim—as some texts do (e.g., Funder, 2007, p. 367), the present text at least makes some attempt at arguing for this. The current text also devotes considerable attention to discussing Freudian theory in light of modern research (e.g., implicit learning), which is also better than some other texts. However, nearly every other theoretical position receives little or no critical assessment, including Ellis's own position, which is disappointing for anyone wishing to choose a student text to foster critical thinking rather than dulling it.

## Summary

There are aspects of *Personality Theories: Critical Perspectives* that make this a valuable contribution to the current array of personality texts, including its scope (e.g., evolutionary approaches) and appreciation of context and history. The text's coverage is better than that of many other similar textbooks, and anyone wishing to extend the breadth of his or her teaching beyond Western academic research contexts may also find the section on traditional and New Age approaches of interest. However, the text is somewhat disserved by its organization, and the book fails to deliver on its promise of providing critical perspectives. This latter point is especially important with respect to making contributions over and above its competitors. Furthermore, while Ellis's "theory" of personality is interesting, it provides little by way of novel material. Does psychology, then, really need this extra personality text? The answer, unfortunately, is not really, even if the present text is in many respects better than others.

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