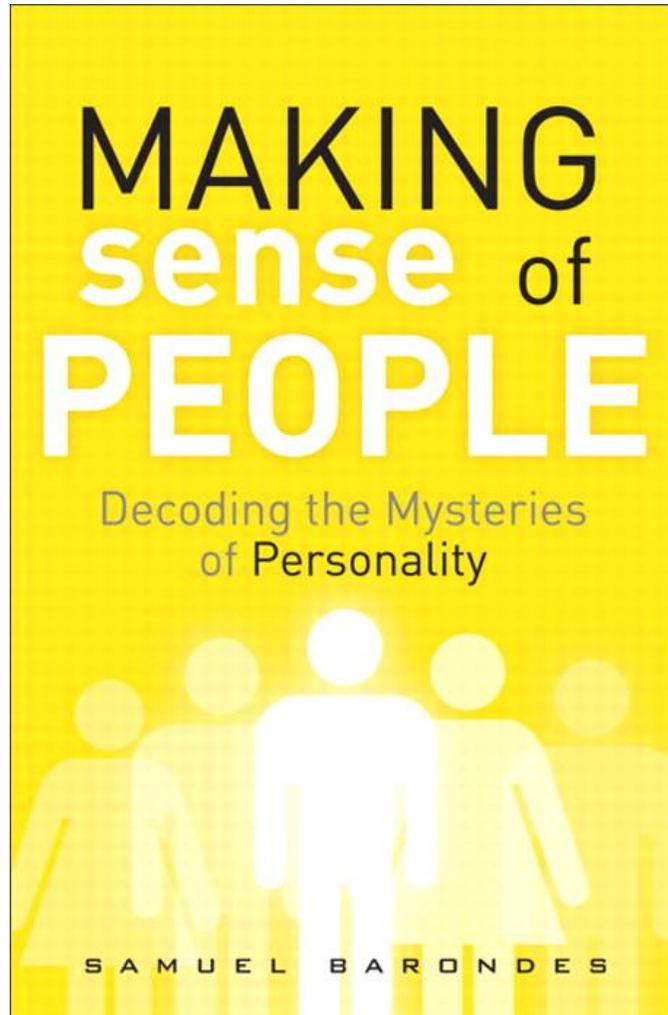More Mysterious Than We Suppose

Review: *Making Sense of People: Decoding the Mysteries of Personality*

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FT Press, 2011

Review available online at http://dana.org/news/cerebrum/detail.aspx?id=34364

Samuel Barondes, a respected psychiatrist and neurobiologist at the University of California, San Francisco, presents his account of why people have different personalities in prose that is readily accessible to readers who are neither psychiatrists nor psychologists. Barondes peppers his seven short chapters with brief, cherry-picked, lively biographies of famous figures as a strategy to keep readers engaged.

The narrative rests on two ideas. The first, which is in accord with evidence, but is given the least attention, is that each person's genetic makeup makes an important contribution to his or her personality. Few scientists would quarrel with that declaration. Barondes acknowledges that the available evidence is too sparse to permit any firm conclusions regarding a relationship between any gene, or genes, and any known personality trait because a person's experiences not only control the form that an inherited trait assumes but also influence the level of gene expression.

The heart of the text revolves around the second idea: three lists of words naming human characteristics. One list refers to 10 profiles that psychiatrists use to classify patients:

- excessive disregard for others
- unusual sensitivity to criticism
- extreme impulsivity
- perfectionism
- overdependence on others
- constant seeking of attention
- feelings of grandiosity
- paranoid distrust of others
- emotional detachment
- eccentric habits

The second list names a number of character traits, such as orderliness, humility, courage, and wisdom, which, Barondes notes, Benjamin Franklin would have endorsed. The third list refers to five continuous dimensions, called the Big Five, on which people are placed depending on their answers to a questionnaire. The five dimensions are extraversion to introversion, agreeable to disagreeable, conscientious to careless, open to new ideas to dogmatically closed, and tense to relaxed.

Although the properties named on any of the three lists can be regarded as personality traits, popular usage arbitrarily calls the first list symptoms, the second character traits, and the third personality dimensions. Barondes fails to note that the display of any of the behaviors, motives, or moods implied by the terns on these lists involves more than one set of causal conditions, none is a unitary psychological state. Therefore, it will prove difficult to find a particular biological or experiential cause for any of them. Extraversion, for example, can be the partial result of an inherited temperamental bias, or a person can acquire it through experience alone without any biological assistance. Barondes accepts the Big Five as an excellent solution to the mysteries of personality.

The book's chapters would profit from more coherence. For example, Chapter 1, which is about the Big Five, is followed by a chapter on symptom types, and both chapters lack prose to help readers understand the relationship between the two themes. The third chapter returns to the theme of personality by suggesting explanations of the different dimensions described in the first chapter.

The more serious problem, however, is Barondes' decision to treat the Big Five as the key to understanding personality. A society nominates a personal property as a personality trait when it meets two criteria: (1) the trait affects adaptation in that society and (2) obvious variations exist among the adults in that community. Courage and anger were personality traits in Plato's Athens; piety and ambition were traits in medieval Europe. In none of these societies was a feeling of anonymity as salient a trait as it is in the United States today.

The shortcomings of the Big Five are easy to describe. First, none of the traits specify the settings in which a person displays the relevant behavior. I know no one who is agreeable or conscientious in all contexts. I am conscientious when I write a research paper or analyze data, but I am not at all conscientious when I purchase a television set or arrange the books and papers in my study, as my wife will attest. Words like *agreeable* or *introverted* are naked concepts with ambiguous meanings until they apply to a particular situation.

Second, a person's answers on the Big Five questionnaire are the only evidence on which trait assignments are made. Researchers neither observe how the person actually behaves in natural settings nor consider biological information, such as measures of heart rate, hormones, and brain activity. This is a serious flaw because scientists have shown that the relationship between what people say about themselves and how they act or feel is questionable.[1] The author

of a popular questionnaire to evaluate psychological problems acknowledged that diagnoses based only on self-reports correspond poorly with diagnoses based on multiple sources of information, including direct observations of behavior and biological measurements.[2] This critical evaluation of questionnaires is less harsh than a comment by Lee Sechrest, a respected psychologist who, after reviewing a year of research papers that relied on questionnaires to evaluate personality, concluded that this field of inquiry reminded him of "the apocryphal jet pilot who assured passengers that although the plane was lost, it was at least making good time."[3]

Many of the adolescents my colleagues and I have been studying since they were infants reported that they were extraverts who were rarely shy with strangers. But they spoke in a soft voice and would not look at the interviewer who was asking them about their personalities. When I was an active faculty member I saw myself as easy to approach and kind and gentle with my graduate students. Recently, at candid luncheon discussions with some of my former students, I was surprised to learn that many of them found me intimidating and far from gentle.

Most of the time, the answers on personality questionnaires reflect the qualities people would like to believe are elements of their personalities, not the traits they actually possess. One reason is that most adults are reluctant to tell a stranger about qualities they view as less than desirable. Many descriptions of the self are serious distortions of what the person believes to be true.[5]

A third problem is that the Big Five represent relatively superficial human traits. This set of properties ignores the variation in sexual urges and sexual conflict; intensity of guilt or shame over failing to honor seminal moral standards of loyalty, honesty, and kindness; and the strength of identifications with one's gender, class, and ethnic groups, all of which profoundly influence our moods and actions. The scale called "open to new ideas" is associated with whether a person grew up with a disadvantaged or privileged social class. More relevant is the fact that, rather than any known gene or a score on a questionnaire, a person's social class remains the best predictor of the likelihood of a bout of anxiety or depression, a criminal career, or addiction to alcohol or other drugs. The reason for this robust fact is that a disadvantaged class position is associated with chronic worry over financial security, boring or physically strenuous work, poor health, few years of education, anger toward people who have more privilege, and feelings of self-doubt or shame about one's relative status in the society that create anxiety about social interactions with more affluent, better-educated adults. For example, the memoir of the popular writer John

Updike contains a confession of the deep shame he felt about his family's compromised class position in a small Pennsylvania town.[5]

Another shortcoming of Barondes' argument is his belief that the everyday language of a society contains the most accurate clues to its critical personality traits. The Big Five originated in a list, compiled by Harvard psychologist Gordon Allport, of all the terms referring to personality found in many human languages. The later distillation of that list by many psychologists led to the Big Five. Barondes regards these traits as resembling chemical elements, for they can be combined to form a large number of profiles. It is worth noting that no natural scientist would consult the world's languages in the 1930s in order to discover the most fruitful scientific concepts. *Neutrino, prion,* and *transposon* do not appear in any 1930 dictionary.

In the book's final pages, Barondes summarizes what he believes will help readers understand others and themselves. Two recommendations are commendable: Each of us should be conscious of our common humanity and listen attentively to the stories others tell us. But the terse final suggestion, "Integrate what you've found," fails to tell readers what they have to do in order to attain the prize they hoped they would command—decoding the personalities of themselves and others—when they began reading the book.

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