

## Psychology on a Page 10: Fromm



Erich Fromm

Treat yourself to a book by this eloquent and deeply human man! His contribution was primarily as a thinker - drawing together political (Marx), psychoanalytic (Freud), theological and sociological ideas. He has an interest in the economic and cultural roots of personality – not just the biological and personal (c.f. Freud). Very close to being an 'existentialist'. Respectful yet critical of Freud, whose thinking he regarded as contradictory and limiting. I am indebted to Nicky Forsythe for her brilliant summary of this complex thinker, below:

Fromm's key ideas are:

*the importance of freedom of will and independent action:*

- using our own reason to establish values rather than adhering mindlessly to received values
- he believes we are hugely influenced by our class, culture, biology and personal history BUT we have the capacity to transcend these influences. Did not believe in determinism, which sets him apart from both instinctivists like Freud and positivists like the behaviourists

*with freedom comes uncertainty, isolation, alienation and bewilderment. We are inclined to avoid these through one of three means:*

- **authoritarianism** – doing what we are told by a person/system
- **automaton conformity** – merging with the prevailing mores of our society; adopting conventions – e.g. being a 'fashion victim' – a horizontal counterpart to authoritarianism. We can see versions of this Automaton thinking in the heuristics of Behavioural Economics.
- **destructiveness** – attempting to eliminate others

*The kind of tactic we use depends on our family culture. He talks about three kinds of families:*

**symbiotic families**  where some members of the family are 'swallowed up' by other members – typically this takes the form of children becoming the reflection of their parents' wishes. This happens a lot with girls in traditional societies

- leads to the **authoritarian** escape



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**withdrawing families – Type 1** a more recent type which has evolved in Northern Europe over last 200 years. These families are prevalent wherever merchants became an important layer of society – essentially they are the bourgeoisie

- parents very demanding of children
- perfectionism – living by the rules – is encouraged
- children expected to succeed & meet high standards
- punitive
- **leads to destructive escape** – this is internalised until circumstances like war permit its release. We saw an outburst of children's reaction to these pressures in the outburst of destructiveness in the recent London riots. It is clear that many of those taking part could not live according to these pressures & ideals

**withdrawing families – Type 2** the modern family where children are considered the 'equals' of parents; parents want to be their kids' buddies; children turn to peers for their values. The 'modern, shallow, TV family'

- leads to **automaton conformity**

Fromm believes in what he calls the 'social unconscious' – unwritten rules dictated by class and culture which affect the way we think and behave. We aren't even aware of these influences and may think we're acting according to our free will when we aren't. He identifies 5 orientations within this social unconscious:

- **Receptive orientation.** People who expect to *receive* what they need and are passive in their orientation. People with this orientation are found at the bottom of any society: slaves, serfs, welfare families. We might call this 'benefits culture'. On the positive side they are accepting and optimistic; on the negative they are submissive and wishful.
- **Exploitative orientation.** People who expect to *take* what they need through coercion. Prevalent in upper classes – aristocracy, colonial powers. On the positive side, assertive, proactive. On the negative side, aggressive, seductive, coercive.
- **Hoarding orientation.** The emphasis here is on accumulating and keeping. This orientation is prevalent amongst the bourgeoisie/middle classes and is exemplified by the Protestant Work Ethic. On the positive side, these people are economical, prudent and practical. On the negative side they are stingy and unimaginative.
- **Marketing orientation.** This is the orientation of modern society. The emphasis is on *selling*. A big emphasis on packaging and advertising. Preoccupation with things *looking good* – my family, job, education. On the positive side, this encourages sociability, purposefulness, being enterprising. On the negative side it gives rise to shallow, amoral, childish thinking and behaviour.
- **Productive orientation.** This is the 'healthy' one! These people do not shirk from freedom and responsibility. They value *being* rather than (as in all the other orientations) *having*. In the productive orientation you are defined by your actions not by what you have, you prefer reason to rules and freedom to conformity.

