

Frequently Asked Questions About Reversal Theory

Reversal theory is a psychological theory of motivation – perhaps the first major theory of this kind since Maslow, Herzberg and others put forward their classic theories some fifty years ago. But it is much more than that: it is also a theory of emotion, personality, stress, addiction, violence and many other psychological phenomena. In fact, it is a general theory of human behavior and experience derived from an analysis of the way that people experience their motivation.

Where did it come from?

The founding ideas were advanced in the mid nineteen-seventies, by Dr. Ken Smith and Dr. Michael Apter, a British psychiatrist and psychologist respectively. They were later added to and developed into a full-scale theory by Dr. Apter with contributions from colleagues. Many researchers and practitioners around the world have become involved in testing, and developing the applications of, the theory.

What evidence is it based on?

Reversal Theory is grounded in a variety of types of evidence, including experimental, psychometric, psychophysiological and clinical evidence. This evidence has been collected over a period of more than twenty five years by researchers in many countries around the world.

What is special about the theory?

The theory is unusually **comprehensive** and integrative, at a time when psychologists have tended to become narrower and more specialised in their work. Among other things, it provides a new structure for understanding all the major types of psychopathology.

It argues that we cannot understand behavior unless we understand the **personal meaning** which that behavior has for the person who is performing it. This means that the theory starts from mental life and “works outwards” towards behaviour, performance, and relationships.

It emphasises the **changeability** of human nature, the way in which we are all different kinds of people at different times, even from moment to moment. From the perspective of the theory people are inconsistent and even **self-contradictory** over time, and they behave differently at different times, even in the same situation.

The theory brings out sides of human nature often overlooked by other theories, including playfulness, rebelliousness and self-sacrifice. In the process it deals with a variety of interesting phenomena such as humour, art, sport, military combat, gambling and religious ritual. It can be regarded as a theory of **everyday life** – in all its color, complexity and paradox.

It has been applied successfully in an impressive range of areas, including health psychology, sport performance, and child guidance. In particular it is being used in management consultancy for such purposes as team building, change management, and executive development.

What are its basic ideas?

At the heart of the theory is the idea that our experience is shaped by a set of alternative ways of seeing the world, each based on a fundamental value or motive. Specifically, four pairs of such opposite states have been identified. We switch – or ‘**reverse**’ – fairly frequently between these opposite ‘**motivational states**’ or ‘**styles**’ in the course of everyday life and under a variety of circumstances.

These pairs can be characterized briefly in the following way, with the technical term for each member of the pair placed in parenthesis following the more everyday term, where it differs from it:

- The **serious** (telic) state, focused on important goals, and planning ahead, versus the **playful** (paratelic) state, focused on immediate enjoyment, and acting spontaneously.
- The **conforming** (conformist) state, focused on obligations and the maintenance of rules and routines, versus the **challenging** (negativistic) style, a challenging state which is focused on personal freedom.
- The **mastery** state, focused on power, control and dominance, versus the **sympathy** state, focused on kindness, caring and harmony.
- The **self-oriented** (autic) state, focused on one’s own needs, versus the **other-oriented** (alloic) state, focused on the needs of others.

These combine with each other in various ways at different times to give rise to the full range of human emotions and behaviors. Personality is to be understood in terms of patterns of change that characterise people over time, rather than fixed positions on dimensions (‘traits’).

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