

Reversal Theory: Why Your Emotions Flip-Flop

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Reversal theory is a theory of personality, motivation and emotion in the field of psychology. It focuses on the dynamic qualities of normal human experience to describe how a person regularly reverses between psychological states, reflecting their motivational style and the meaning they attach to a given situation at a given time. For example, sometimes a roller coaster seems exciting; other times, it may cause anxiety. Sometimes a crying baby creates sympathy; other times it causes irritation.

The theory distinctively proposes that human experience is structurally organized into metamotivational domains, of which four have been identified. Each domain consists of a pair of opposing values or motives, so that only one of each pair can be experienced in any given moment.

Reversal theory has been developed primarily by British psychologist Dr Michael J. Apter since its inception in the mid-1970s by Dr Apter and psychiatrist Dr Ken Smith. The theory has been researched, developed and applied extensively.

Domains

Reversal theory is organized around a series of metamotivational states, organized into four pairs called "domains". Each pair in a domain represent two opposite forms of motivation - only one state in each pair can be active at a time. We reverse between the states in each pair depending on a number of factors, including our inherent tendency to adopt one style over the other.

The four pairs (or domains) are as follows:

Means-Ends - The two states in the first pair are called "Telic" (or "Serious") and "Paratelic" (or "Playful") and refer to whether one is motivated by achievement and future goals, or the enjoyment of process in the moment.

Rules - The next two states are called "Conforming" and "Rebellious" (or "Negativistic") and refer to whether one enjoys operating within rules and expectations; or whether one wishes to be free and push against these structures.

Transactions - The next two states are called "Mastery" and "Sympathy" and relate to whether one is motivated by transacting power and control; or by care and compassion.

Relationships - The final two states are called "Autic" (or "Self") and "Alloic" (or "Other") and refer to whether one is motivated by self interests (personal accountability and responsibility) or by the interests of others (altruism and transcendence).

Reversals and emotion

The primary emphasis of Reversal Theory lies in the concept of reversals - by "triggering" a reversal between states, we can change the meaning attributed to the situation. What seemed

serious before, can suddenly feel exciting with the right change in situation or mindset. Reversals can be created by changing a situation, reframing it, role playing, or using specific symbols or props that invoke a specific state (e.g., a toy can help trigger the Paratelic/Playful state; the image of a traffic sign may invoke the Conforming state).

Reversal Theory links the motivational states above to emotion by proposing that if one is in a state and things are going well, positive emotions result; if the needs of the state are not fulfilled, negative emotions result.

Dominance

Reversal Theory introduced the term dominance to make the motivational styles being a testable factor in psychometrics, so as to expand its application regions. Dominance means the tendency that an individual has to be one kind of person or another over time. An individual may reverse into a paratelic state, but if he or she is telic dominant, he or she will easily reverse into telic states. This term distinguished the Reversal theory from the traditional trait theory, namely, one's personality is not a permanent asset but a reversing tendency changing in accordance to the environment etc.

History, Use and Instrumentation

Reversal Theory was first proposed in the mid-1970s, by K.C.P. Smith and Michael Apter. Since that time, research using the theory has been conducted in the areas of sports performance and psychology, addiction management, health, business/management, and other areas.

While Reversal Theory has been actively researched in academic circles for the last thirty years, it has more recently entered a more public sphere of use by trainers and consultants for purposes of leadership and team development, and sports counseling.

A number of instruments have been created to measure Reversal Theory phenomena. While many of these focus on dominance (which states are more prevalent for a person over time), others attempt to capture the phenomena of the reversals themselves (how people's states shift in specific situations).

Psychometrics tools in reversal theory

Since the formulation of Reversal theory psychometric instruments were developed to test the motivational styles. An early documented such instrument was The Telic Dominance Scale developed by Murgatroyd, Rushton, Apter & Ray in 1978. This scale was aimed primarily at assessing Telic Dominance.

The current Apter Motivational Style Profile (AMSP) is administered by practitioners trained at Apter International.

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