

The 2,128th Meeting of the Society

February 23, 2001 at 8:00 PM

Powell Auditorium at the Cosmos Club

An Introduction to Reversal Theory

Michael J. Apter

Visiting Researcher, Georgetown University

About the Lecture

By modern standards in psychology, reversal theory is an unusually general theory. Although its focus is on motivation and personality, it also provides a conceptual structure for understanding emotions, stress, and psychopathology. Furthermore, it gives an integrated account of a diverse range of apparently unrelated phenomena, such as aesthetic experience, humor, dangerous sport, violent crime, addiction, creativity, leadership and family relations. Based on evidence of various kinds (experimental, psychometric, psychophysiological and clinical) it has been applied in a number of areas including psychotherapy, sports coaching, health counseling and management consulting.

This talk will introduce some of the basic concepts of the theory, including motivational style, reversal and dominance, show how these concepts challenge some basic assumptions in contemporary psychology, and illustrate the theory in terms of well-known phenomena from everyday life.

About the Speaker

Michael J. Apter is a research psychologist who has published numerous papers and is the author or editor of thirteen books. He has a doctorate from Bristol University (U.K.) and taught at the University of Wales for twenty years. He has been a visiting professor at Purdue, Northwestern, Chicago and Yale, and has held visiting positions in Canada, Spain, Norway, Belgium and France. He is currently a visiting researcher at Georgetown University. Dr. Apter is founder and director of Apter International, which is a management consultancy company serving clients worldwide. He is a Fellow of the British Psychological Society and a Life Fellow of the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies.

Minutes

President McDiarmid called the 2128th meeting to order at 8:15 p.m. on February 23, 2001. The Recording Secretary read the minutes of the 2127th meeting and they were approved.

The speaker for the 2128th meeting was Michael J. Apter. The title of his presentation was "Rethinking Motivation and Personality: An Introduction to Reversal Theory".

Reversal theory is in some ways difficult to discuss as a theory, because by the standard of most theories in psychology, it is an unusually general theory. In fact, reversal theory is a general theory of human behavior and experience derived from an analysis of motivation. As a general theory it is meant to be comprehensive and integrative, at a time when psychologists have tended toward narrowness and specialization. It attempts to integrate a diverse range of apparently unrelated phenomena, such as love, aesthetics, creativity, humor, sport, hooliganism, violent crime, military combat, addiction, religious ritual, leadership, family relations, and thereby extend psychopathology to a wider range. As a phenomenological theory, reversal theory starts with the immediate personal experience of these phenomena, and approaches the understanding of behavior through the personal meaning that behavior has for the person performing it. While it is focused on motivation and personality, it provides a conceptual structure for understanding the emotions, stress, and psychopathology. As a structuralist theory, reversal theory approaches understanding through the relationship of basic concepts and entities. At a time when many psychologists have lost confidence in themselves as theorists, advances may come from taking a different view. As a radical theory, reversal theory questions many of the basic assumptions of previous theories

Reversal theory is based on a variety of evidence including experimental, psychometric, psychophysiological and clinical evidence. One early contribution came from a study of sensory deprivation as a component of brain washing, and the relationship between the degree of arousal and how positively or negatively motivated an individual would be by training. The prevailing theory at the time held that on a plot of perceived hedonic tone from unpleasant to pleasant versus the state of arousal from low to high, a person would progress through an inverted U-curve. As arousal increased, the hedonic tone would progress from unpleasant boredom to pleasant relaxation to pleasant excitement to unpleasant anxiety. However, this did not make sense in terms of everyday experience; according to this theory one would not be able to experience a state corresponding to very intense pleasurable relaxation, or states corresponding to mild boredom or mild anxiety.

A different theory taking into account motivation assumed instead that there were two modes of behavior, one seeking pleasure in excitement or arousal, and another seeking to avoid unpleasantness by avoiding anxiety. By this theory the more extreme the arousal, the more drastic would be the switch in the perceived pleasure of the experience. In this interpretation there is a “meta motivation”: the world is being experienced on one level, and interpreted on another level sometimes in very different ways. The nervous system constructs “reasonable” alternate theories of the world and then switches back and forth between them. The frequency of switching can be very different for different people, as with the well-known isometric cube optical illusion.

At the heart then of reversal theory is the concept that there are domains of experience, a set of alternative ways of perceiving and reacting to the world, each characterized by fundamental values or motivations. Specifically, four such pairs of polar states have been discerned. The personality switches - or “reverses” - frequently between these polar ‘motivational states’ or ‘styles’ in the course of everyday life. First in the domain of means and ends, the telic or serious style characterized by planning and fixation on important goals, is contrasted with the paratelic, or playful style characterized by spontaneous actions focused on immediate enjoyment. The telic is goal-oriented and seeks progress, achievement, relaxation, and security. The paratelic is activity-oriented and seeks excitement. The telic/paratelic axis may involve perceptions of failure. Second in the domain of rules, the conformist, or conforming style focused on obligations and the maintenance of rules and routines, is contrasted with the negativistic, or challenging style focused on personal freedom. Third in the domain of transactions, a “mastery style”, characterized by power, control and dominance, is contrasted with a “sympathy style”, characterized by kindness, caring and harmony. Fourth in the domain of relationships an autic or self-oriented style focused on one's own needs, is contrasted with an alloic or other-oriented style focused on the needs of others.

These axes intersect with each other in various ways at different times giving rise to the full range of human emotions and behaviors. A person's personality should be understood in terms of characteristic patterns of change along these axes, rather than in terms of remaining at some fixed position and retaining immutable ‘traits’. This complexity of behavior in time is missed by the static ‘trait’ concept in personality theory and in the attempts of some theorists to reduce motivation to one or two basic needs. Reversal

theory acknowledges the changeability of human nature, the fact that a person's personality reflects a different kind of person at different times, even from moment to moment, and the fact that a person can be inconsistent and even self-contradictory over time.

Mr. Apter kindly answered questions from the floor. President McDiarmid thanked Mr. Apter for the society, and welcomed him to its membership. Mr. Saalbach briefly discussed the benefits and rewards of Philosophical Society membership. The President made the announcements about the next meeting, parking, and refreshments, and adjourned the 2128th meeting to the social hour at 9:36 p.m.

Attendance: 50

Temperature: 4.3°C

Weather: clear

Links: <http://www.apterinternational.com>

Respectfully submitted,

John S. Garavelli

Recording Secretary