

Basic Concepts In Reversal Theory

Reversal theory provides an analysis of the experience of everyday life, showing that a normal person will display different personalities at different times, meaning that he or she will see the world, and act in it, in different ways at different moments. These different types of personality (motivational styles) are each based on a fundamental motive/value, such as achievement, control or freedom. This implies that human personality has an essentially dynamic quality, and that inter-individual differences cannot be understood without reference to intra-individual differences.

The following entries may be used either as a glossary or, by entering at any point and following the hyperlinks (represented by words in *italics*), as an introduction to the theory.

Autic and Alloic states. These two [*metamotivational states*](#) represent alternative ways of experiencing one's relationships with others. In the autic state (from the ancient Greek *autos* meaning self) one evaluates the outcome of actions in terms of how far they aid oneself, whereas in the alloic state (from the ancient Greek *allos* meaning other), one evaluates them in terms of how far they are of benefit to others with whom one identifies. The basic value of the autic state is individualism and of the alloic state is transcendence.

Alloic state. See Autic and Alloic states.

Bistability. A system is bistable if it has two alternative stable positions towards which it tends to return when disturbed. A light switch would be a simple example. Reversal theory suggests that motivational systems are bistable, in the sense that they involve a movement ([*reversal*](#)) between opposite [*metamotivational states*](#), such that one or the other is active at all time (like the two positions of a light switch) but only one is active at any particular time. This contrasts with the widespread idea of homeostasis in motivation theory, that suggests that for the motivational variables of interest to such theories (e.g. drive, tension, arousal) there is a tendency to return to one single position (e.g. low drive or tension, moderate levels of arousal).

Chronotyping. An error of overgeneralization that occurs when one generalises from what one knows about a person at one moment of time to a permanent characterisation of that person. For example: "he is an unpleasant person" of someone that one has just met. It can also relate to oneself, e.g. "I am unlovable." Trait theories of personality systematically commit this error and imply to people that they cannot change. The [*bistability*](#) suggested by reversal theory suggests that chronotyping involves an oversimplification.

Conformist and negativistic states. This pair of [*metamotivational states*](#) represent opposite ways of experiencing rules (taken in the widest sense to include expectations, social pressure, conventions, routines, etc). In the conformist state such rules provide structure and meaning and therefore one is pleased to comply. In the negativistic state rules of all kinds are experienced as restrictions and therefore, during the moments when one is in the negativistic state, opposed. The basic value of the conformist state is that of duty, and of the negativistic state is that of freedom.

Domain. An aspect of experience which constitutes a permanent feature of mental life, and which is characterised by the opposite interpretations that go to make up a pair of [*metamotivational states*](#). There are four such domains: means-and-ends (characterised by the

telic and paratelic states), rules (characterised by the *conformist and negativistic states*), transactions (characterised by the *mastery and sympathy* states), and relationships (characterised by the *autic and alloic states*). For example, one is always aware of one's purposes and the activities that one is undertaking to achieve those purposes, and these make up the means-and-ends domain. But these purposes and activities can enter experience in the two opposite ways defined by the *telic and paratelic states* respectively. The identification of domains is an essential part of *structural-phenomenology*.

Dominance. The innate tendency to spend more time in one *metamotivational state* than its opposite in a given pair of states. Thus one would be sympathy dominant if one tended to spend more time in the *sympathy* than the *mastery state*. Every degree of dominance is possible between the members of a pair of states, including an exact balance between them. Dominance may be due especially to the way in which *satiation* can build up faster in one direction than the other in a pair of states. It should be noted that even if a person is dominant in one state, that person will still be expected to spend time in the opposite state. In this respect the dominance concept is fundamentally different from that of a trait. It is also different in that dominance itself, unlike a trait, will normally be expected to change over time.

Focality. A *metamotivational state* is focal at a given moment if it is at the center of attention at that moment. Although four states will be active at any one time (one from each *domain*), normally only one or two of them will be focal in this sense. If the members of a pair of states are frequently focal then that pair (or the domain that they make up) may be said to be *salient*.

Lability. The facility, and therefore frequency, with which an individual tends to switch from one *metamotivational state* to another. Thus two people with the same *dominance* with respect to a pair of such states, may nevertheless have different degrees of lability, moving between them more or less frequently while still tending to spend longer periods of time in one than the other.

Mastery and Sympathy states. This pair of *metamotivational states* represent alternative ways of experiencing transactions between oneself and other people and objects. In the mastery state the situation is experienced as being about control, and the transactions are interpreted as being about taking or yielding. In the sympathy state the situation is experienced as being about affection and personal relationships, and transactions as being about giving or being given. The basic value of the mastery state is power, and of the sympathy state is love.

Metamotivational state. A state in which one of a set of basic psychological motives is experienced, and which organizes mental life around itself for the period that it is active. Such a state is referred to as metamotivational because it leads to other motivational variables (such as arousal) or biological motives (e.g. hunger) being interpreted in a particular way. It can also be referred to as a *motivational style*, although this term makes particular reference to the general way of seeing and acting that is related to the motivation concerned. Metamotivational states go in pairs of opposites, such that one or the other in each pair is active at a particular moment. Since there are four such pairs, four states are active at any given moment. A switch from one member of a pair being active to the other member of the pair being active is referred to as a *reversal*. Specifically, the pairs are the *telic and paratelic*

pair, the [conformist and negativistic](#) pair, the [mastery and sympathy](#) pair, and the [autic and alloic](#) pair.

Motivational style. A particular way of seeing the world and of acting in it associated with a particular [metamotivational state](#). E.g. serious (related to the [telic state](#)) and other-oriented (related to the [alloic state](#)). These styles go in pairs of opposites, each such pair representing a [domain](#). There are four such pairs representing between them eight motivational styles.

Negativistic state. See Conformist and Negativistic states.

Parapathic emotion. An emotion that is supposedly unpleasant (e.g. disgust, anger) but which in fact will be enjoyed when it is experienced in the [paratelic state](#). For example one can enjoy horror while watching a horror film, or anxiety while reading a thriller novel, or grief while watching Greek tragedy at the theatre. In these cases particular cases one experiences parapathic horror, parapathic anxiety and parapathic grief respectively.

Paratelic state. See [Telic and Paratelic states](#).

Protective frame. When there is a protective frame in experience, this means that one sees oneself as effectively immune from the consequences of failure or error and therefore can enjoy doing what one is doing without having to worry. The protective frame can be seen as an aspect of the [paratelic state](#), its absence being associated with the [telic state](#).

Reversal. A switch from one to the other of the opposite [metamotivational states](#) that make up a [domain](#), e.g. from the [telic state](#) being active to the [paratelic state](#) being active, or the converse. Reversals are provoked by situational change, by frustration and by [satiation](#). The dynamic processes that result from reversal, including [bistability](#), mean that [chronotyping](#) is an inappropriate way of describing people.

Salience. This applies to [domains](#). One domain is more salient than another domain if the individual tends over time to be more aware of the pair of [metamotivational states](#) that make it up than he or she is of the states that make up the other domain. Another way of putting this is to say that one domain tends to be more *focal* than the other: For example, for one person the conformist and negativistic pair may be more often focal over time than the [telic and paratelic](#) pair, while for another individual it may be the other way around. The first individual tends to be more aware of issues concerning rules and the second of issues concerning means and ends.

Satiation. An internal process that makes a reversal increasingly likely with the passage of time and which itself leads to an eventual [reversal](#) in the absence of situational change. Imbalances in the rapidity of such a process as between a [metamotivational state](#) and its opposite may explain to at least some extent the [dominance](#) of one state over another.

State-balance. The proportion of time actually spent in each of a pair of [metamotivational states](#) over a specified period of time. This is likely to be strongly influenced by the [dominance](#) of one state over the other, but the situations that the person has confronted during this period will also play a part. For example, someone who is telic dominant may nevertheless show a state-balance towards the paratelic state while on holiday.

Structural-phenomenology. This is the general approach adopted in reversal theory, which involves identifying the structures of experience. These structures center on [domains](#), [metamotivational states](#) and the [reversals](#) that can occur between metamotivational states.

Sympathy state. See Mastery and Sympathy states.

Synergy. Also known as cognitive synergy. This occurs when a given perceived identity is experienced as having incompatible qualities at the same time or in immediate succession. For example: a painting is both a flat canvas and also a three-dimensional scene, a pompous man falling down is both dignified and absurd. In general, synergies are enjoyed in the [paratelic state](#) (where they tend to take such form as jokes, artworks, etc.) and disliked in the [telic state](#) where they are experienced as dissonances, ambiguities, etc.

Telic and paratelic states. This pair of [metamotivational states](#) comprise two opposite ways of experiencing means and ends. In the telic state (from the ancient Greek telos meaning an end), the individual evaluates the activity in terms of how far it leads towards the achievement of important goals in the future. In the paratelic state (which adds the Greek para, meaning alongside, to telic), the ongoing activity is evaluated in terms of the pleasure it gives to the individual at the moment in question. The telic state tends to lead to planning ahead and the paratelic to spontaneity. High arousal is disliked in the telic state where it is experienced as anxiety, and enjoyed in the paratelic state where it is experienced as excitement. The paratelic state is characterised by the presence of a [protective frame](#), and the telic state by its absence. Supposedly unpleasant emotions are enjoyed in the paratelic state where they take the form of [parapathic emotions](#). [Synergies](#) tend to be enjoyed in the paratelic state and disliked in the telic state.

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