

A Symphony of States and the Meaning of the Moment:

Introducing Reversal Theory



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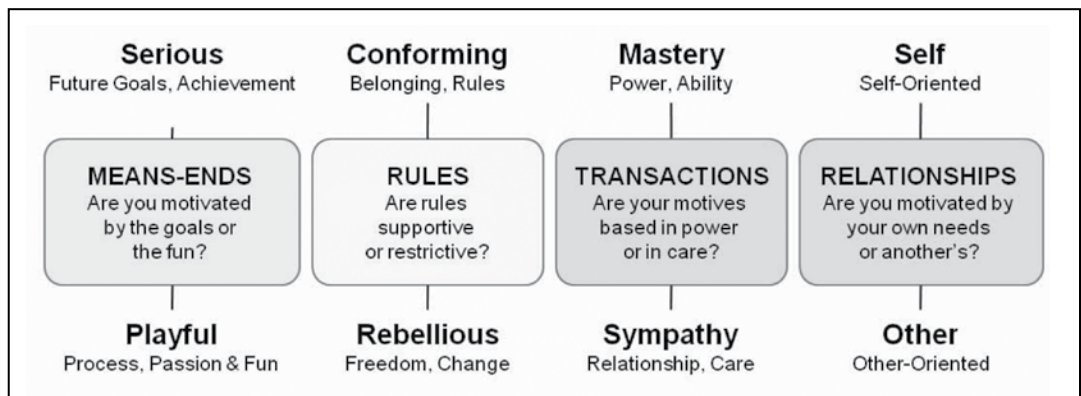
I was excited to hear about the topic of the previous *Bulletin: A Symphony of Assessments*. One reason I love psychological type is that it does not claim to explain everything about personality. Rather, it focuses very precisely on in-born cognitive preferences. This clarity is powerful, because it not only provides for a lot of applications on its own, but it also allows the theory to “play well with others.” Type can be used successfully in combination with a myriad of other theories and tools, such as emotional intelligence, relationship awareness theory, and archetypes.

One theory that type plays particularly well with is reversal theory, a theory that is equally clearly focused, but in a completely separate arena: motivation, emotion, and changeability. Whereas type is interested in assessing preferences that are stable over time, reversal theory illuminates why and how you change in different situations based on the *meaning* you assign to that situation.

Here is an example. My type is INFJ, a code that signals how I might prefer to learn things, lead, and generally communicate, but type does not help predict my motivational changes or emotions within a situation. In any given conversation, I can shift from feeling bored to focused, or from feeling generous in giving my time to a colleague to feeling selfish and wanting to get my own work done. These shifts may happen within the overarching preferences of INFJ, but preferring INFJ does not actually explain them. However, reversal theory does.

Like psychological type, reversal theory is organized into four dichotomies, called *domains*. Each domain contains two *motivational states*; you experience only one state at a time within each pair, and switch (reverse) between those states as either the situation or the meaning attributed to it changes. Motivational states are fluid, with reversals between states in any domains possible at any time. Figure 1 shows each of the reversal

Figure 1: Reversal Theory Domains and States



theory domains and the two states associated with each.

While reversal theory emphasizes the changeability of motivational states, it also recognizes that individuals may express certain patterns of state combinations over time, called *dominance*. While not all people have dominant states, understanding dominance can help point to when and under what circumstances people might experience certain states. With this starting point, you can then see where different states might be more beneficial, and to learn how to *trigger* reversals into an alternative state. Our past research revealed some interesting relationships between psychological type preferences and reversal theory dominances. Here are examples:

- People preferring MBTI® judging reported being in reversal theory's Serious state (motivated by goals and outcomes) more frequently than those preferring perceiving, and those preferring perceiving report being in Playful state (motivated by process and fun) more frequently than those preferring judging.
- People preferring feeling report being in reversal theory's Sympathy state (motivated by care and compassion) and Other state more frequently than those preferring thinking.
- People preferring extraversion reported being in reversal theory's Self state more frequently than those preferring introversion.

These relationships are consistent with their underlying theories. For example, those validating a judging preference on the MBTI tend to prefer seeking closure and decision-making in the external world; this can show in behaviors that are directive, structured, ordered, and decisive. This is compatible with the goal achievement orientation and motivation residing in reversal theory's Serious state. People validating perceiving, on the other hand, generally prefer being open to new data, embracing process, and remaining adaptable to new options or information. This is fully consistent with the Playful state of reversal theory, where motivation comes

from the passion of the process or activity itself.

OKA has a number of resources available for both learning and using reversal theory, including our *Reversing Forward* fieldbook complete with individual and team self-assessments, a free training website to introduce reversal theory, and a web-based skillshop for people wanting to learn how to use reversal theory with clients. You can also learn more about the research we have done comparing psychological type and reversal theory. Visit OKA's www.reversaltheory.net to get started!

Understanding motivational states and reversals may provide a mechanism for accessing and developing psychological type preferences and non-preferences more easily – bridging the divide between stable personality preference and fluid motivational state. Using psychological type and reversal theory together can illuminate “where I generally start” and “how I can change in this moment,” both valuable insights for better self-management. ■

2011 Reversal Theory Conference

Planning for the 2011 International Reversal Theory Conference has begun! Held every two years, this conference has traditionally attracted people from the Reversal Theory research community. Given the growing number of Reversal Theory practitioners, however, we are exploring whether there would be interest in supplementing this research emphasis with a one-day practitioner's track and/or training session, with perhaps some time for socializing and networking with Reversal Theory researchers. The conference will be held in Washington D.C., July 5-8, 2011. If you think you might be interested in this kind of event, or if you want to be added to a conference mailing list as planning continues, please write to Jennifer Tucker, 2011 Reversal Theory Conference Host, at jtucker@typetalk.com. You can learn more about Reversal Theory research at www.reversaltheory.org.