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 The Journal of Mind and Behavior
 Winter 1993, Volume 14, Number 1
 Pages 81-84
 ISSN 0271-0137

Adult Play: A Reversal Theory Approach. John H. Kerr and Michael J. Apter (Editors). Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger, 1991, 192 pages, \$40.00 hard.

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Is play natural? Explanations vary, of course, but most psychologists of human behavior would agree, more or less, that play is natural. Many trace the common heritage on play and other issues to a single publication, William James' 1890 textbook classic *The Principles of Psychology*.

James (1890/1983) considered play one more human instinct:

Instinct is usually defined as the faculty of acting . . . to produce certain ends, without foresight of the ends, and without previous education in the performance [Instincts] are the functional correlatives of structure. (p. 1004)

Ignore James' dated nomenclature; focus on the spirit: Play is natural.

Human play's naturalness is reworked recurrently throughout American psychology's history. A century after James, John Kerr and Michael Apter (1991) wrote from a very different theoretical perspective.

. . . play is not a special and unusual psychology phenomena. It is, in healthy people, . . . normal, regular and frequently occurring. . . (p. 163)

A shared orientation toward the naturalness of play does not dampen human psychology's internecine disputes. Details remain contested. Tastes vary from the behavioristic to the biological and the psychodynamic to motivational schema such as depicted in reversal theory, the focus of Kerr and Apter's (1991) *Adult Play*.

Reversal theory is a phenomenological approach to human motivation. Behavior follows perception, and perception reflects metamotivation. Furthermore, reversal theory applied to human behavior like play is recursive. If you "see" a situation as, first, anxious or too risky or boring, you will, second, approach the task as work (i.e., "telic" metamotivational). In contrast, if you can "see" the same anxious, risky, and boring experiences as recreation, you have, according to reversal theory, shifted to a "paratelic" metamotivational state. It is metamotivation, more than some inherent task quality, which determines whether you perceive an experience as work or play. Switch metamotivation, and behavior and feelings change.

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... [Play] is a state of mind, a way of seeing and being, a special mental "set" towards the world and one's actions in it. (Apter, 1991, p. 13)

... Here the [play] activity comes first and the goal is secondary and chosen in relation to the activity. (Apter, 1991, p. 16)

Illustrations of shifting metamotivations abound in *Adult Play*. For example, we gamble away \$1000 one vacation night in Reno (i.e., a paratelic metamotivation). Gambling, we see, is fun and exciting and risky and very pleasurable (Brown, 1991). Let's compare our Reno night with a different but equally adventuresome situation. An enterprising stock broker convinces us to invest \$1000 into Deutsche mark futures. (The stockbroker's wife's cousin knows a guy whose brother is a guard at the Bundesbank.) Awake all night, you ruminate anxiously about your investment: similar amounts of money and comparable levels of physiological arousal as Reno but very different psychological reactions. Reversal theory explains why we perceive Reno and commodity markets differently.

In general, enthusiasm for reversal theory has grown. To date, interest has stimulated conferences, empirical and theoretical journal articles, and four books (Apter, 1982, 1989; Apter, Fontana, and Murgatroyd, 1985; Apter, Kerr, and Cowles, 1988). The latest effort, *Adult Play*, is an anthology of a dozen original essays which explore reversal theory in sports, television, entertainment, humor, religion, etc. Apparently, reversal theory's approach to human motivation has explanatory potential.

Reversal theory's strengths are appreciated best by comparing it to two rival motivational models: (1) drive reduction and (2) optimal arousal (Apter, 1989, pp. 180–195). Regressing hedonic tone (pleasant, unpleasant) against arousal level (low, high) yields distinctive linear portrayals and explanations for each model.

In *drive reduction models*, hedonic pleasure equates with low tissue tension, reduced drive, and a physiological quiescence; in contrast, hedonic pain and high anxiety are coupled. Drive reduction models predict some kinds of learning in some organisms well. However, its pre-eminence has been empirically challenged.

Human psychologists have long since ventured beyond biological drives and comparative laboratories, and Clark Hull's approach to motivation has been very restrictive in human motivational research. The Gestaltists and a resilient army of American human problem solving experimenters have turned most of us into mediationalists (Miller, 1959). Postulating events inside our skin has made psychology more palatable and predictable.

In time, other motivational constructs, like the *optimal arousal model*, dominated. Here, the hedonic tone and arousal related in a curvilinear fashion, that is, moderate levels of motivation or arousal produced optimal hedonic satisfaction. Linear relationships were quite different than curvilinear ones, computationally and experientially. Curvilinear portrayals pre-dated Hebb, in spite of what this anthology claims.

Early this century, America's pre-eminent primate psychologist, Robert M. Yerkes, found that levels of motivation and problem solving performance produced a predictable curvilinear relationship: moderate levels of motivation yielded the highest performance. The Yerkes–Dodson law was standard textbook lore for years (Corsine, 1984, p. 481; Easterbrook, 1959; Wolman, 1973, p. 475). No mention was made of Yerkes in *Adult Play*.

Kerr and Apter's anthology amply highlights the commonplace shortcomings of optimal arousal and drive reduction—these beans have been hoed before. Their

arguments, unfortunately, are not historically or empirically exhaustive. *Adult Play* does not plow to the end of the row.

Key data-bridges are missing. *Adult Play's* references to the *Telic Dominance Scale* (TDS) promised relief. Was this a reliable and valid source of confirmatory data? I perused all eleven editions of Buros' *Mental Measurement Yearbook*, including the most recent eleventh edition (Kramer and Conoley, 1992). I found nothing. How can we confirm TDS's psychometric credibility?

Effective social science theory requires both inter-related verbal statements and empirical support. *Adult Play* provides more words than numbers and more ideas than research confirmation. Reversal theory's treatment of play is provocative, but important data pieces remain missing from the puzzle.

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