

Reversal Theory and Music Therapy: It Helps Being Inconsistent! Psychological Reversals and Well-Being in the Workplace

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This paper proposes that music therapy may facilitate psychological reversals and thus provide a stress-coping mechanism for individuals in high-stress occupations, one such as Information Technology design environments. Additionally, music therapists who understand and practice psychological reversals can positively affect their own degree of burnout and work stress. Awareness of our ability to “psychologically reverse” is a first step towards preventing and/or addressing occupational burnout. Burnout is a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, while the antithesis of burnout has recently been defined as *engagement* (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Engagement, a positive affective-motivational state, is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption in the workplace. Music therapy, with its inherent mood altering techniques, can play an important role in reducing organizational burnout and enhancing engagement.

Reversal Theory

To begin with, reversal theory emphasizes that people are inconsistent and self-contradictory. People want very different experiences at different times: What a person wants right now may not be what he or she wanted an hour ago or what he or she will want an hour from now. ... The healthy person is characterized by instability, not stability. People are constantly changing, and they should be constantly changing.

(Frey, 1997, p. 17)

Reversal theory is a theory that describes inherent motivational inconsistencies in human behaviour. It is “a theory of the different ways in which individuals interpret various aspects of their own motivational experience, and the way in which they switch between these different types of interpretation” (Lafreniere, 1993, p. 63). Opposed to the idea that there are inherent stable characteristics of individuals, human behavior is explained in cybernetic terms – such that a person is a highly complex machine at times operating according to one program, while at other times another program, depending on how it seeks to use the environment (Apter, 1989). The theory posits that there are eight meta-motivational modes that combine in different ways to determine one’s motives (Frey, 1997). The ability to reverse readily between the modes (goal-minded versus playful, conforming versus rebellious, mastery versus sympathy, other versus self) is an indication of psychological health.

Reversals between these modes occur as a result of contingencies, frustration or satiation. A contingent event refers to an external situation that may instigate a reversal. Frustration may bring about a reversal as evidenced when an individual not achieving the satisfaction of a preferred state (e.g., anxiety-avoidance or excitement-seeking) reverses to the opposite state. Lastly, even in the absence of a situation influence or frustration, simply over time a person becomes satiated in one state and will eventually undergo a reversal. These reversals occur between opposite ways of being and are exclusive of each other. There are eight “states of mind,” also referred to as “modes” with more detailed explanations and their subsequent behavioural consequences found in the literature (e.g., Apter 1989, 1997, 2001). This paper focuses on the Telic (goal-minded) and Paratelic (playful) modes.

Additionally, while individuals reverse modes frequently, they also spend relatively more time in one state than the other. Hence, there is a stable moderating force referred to as Dominance.

Telic versus Paratelic Mode

One subjective motivational state (or state of mind) that individuals may experience is *Telic*, a term that comes from the Greek word “telos,” meaning “a goal” (Lafreniere, 1993). Individuals in a Telic state are motivated to plan and achieve and have a future-oriented focus. The term “state” refers to individuals’ preferred motivational drive in the present or recent moment. Emotionally, these individuals avoid anxiety and value tranquility and calmness.

An opposite state, one which individuals may reverse to, is referred to as *Paratelic*. It is displayed as a playful state in which on-going activities are engaged in for their own sake. Individuals in this state are motivated to have fun and enjoyment with characteristic attitudes that are playful and activity oriented. Emotionally, these individuals are thrill-seeking, spontaneous and open, valuing stimulation and intensity (Apter 1989; 1997; O’Connell and Calhoun, 2001).

While individuals may demonstrate a preference for either the Telic or Paratelic state at a particular moment, they will tend to be more often in one state than the other. Thus, reversal theory also posits that individuals demonstrate a degree of Paratelic-Dominance, the degree to which an individual spends time in a state of mind of playfulness, spontaneity, and arousal-seeking.

Susceptibility to Stress

The psychologically healthy person is defined as someone who ... is “inherently inconsistent” - that is, as someone who can reverse readily, even in the face of relatively stable outer situations, between the metamotivational modes at opposite ends of the various dimensions identified by reversal theory. When applied to stress, such a definition implies that an inability to reverse as appropriate in the face of potentially stress-promoting variables (whether situational or personal) may be a major factor in vulnerability to stress. (Fontana and Valente, 1997, p. 200)

As suggested by Fontana and Valente (1997) individuals with an inability to reverse are prone to stress and burnout, and more so in a constantly high-stress environment, one such as information technology environments.

The designing of computer systems is part of a larger industry known as Information Technology (IT), an industry that is competitive, continually changing, and one that constantly requires creative approaches in software design. Several writers have identified work stressors in this industry, the consequential stress on the employees, and the consequential detriments to their work (Longenecker, Schaffer, & Scazzero, 1999; Wastell & Newman, 1993). In a recent examination of burnout in an IT group, participants shared what they felt was the most stressful part of their jobs. A few responses to “The most stressful part of my job is . . .” are given below:

- Workload, uncertainty about future (outsourcing to be announced)
-No control (i.e., often too much needed too soon and it’s all very important) of the quantity and timelines of my work
- Meeting unreasonable deadlines and accommodating new requests mid-stream
-Meetings all day - have to catch up at nights. Long hours - stress from family (not enough time spent with them). Volume of work, feeling behind - never time to exercise
- Lack of confidence that I can perform my job adequately

Themes that recur in the participants’ responses include time pressures, unrealistic deadlines, volume of work, not knowing how to do something, co-worker problems, client problems, and layoffs of co-workers. Not only do these stressors create psychological and physiological problems for the developers during work hours, but there is significant carry-over of the effects of work stress to home-life. Indeed, Leiter and Durup (1996) found significantly more spillover from work stress to home than from home stress to work.

Certain individuals, by their very nature, are more susceptible to experience the detrimental

consequences of this high-stress work environment. Individuals with obsessive tendencies, individuals with Type A personality, show rigidity in the Telic dominance mode, lacking skill in reversing to the Paratelic mode when doing so would be potentially a stress-coping mechanism (Fontana & Valente, 1997). Generally, individuals with Telic dominance are more prone to have aversive responses to the stressors, while Paratelic dominance is linked with a boredom response when stress is absent. Physiological differences between Telic and Paratelic Dominance have been reported such that Telic-Dominant individuals were found to show steeper electromyographic activity gradients, higher tonic skin conductance and greater thoracic respiratory amplitudes than Paratelic-Dominant individuals during an identical challenging task (Lafreniere, Gillies, Cowles & Toner, 1993).

Individual personality differences have been found to be related to motivational states such that individuals scoring high in both serious-mindedness (Telic) and arousability have shown high levels of trait anxiety (Lafreniere et al., 1993). This correlation is relevant in light of findings reported in a study investigating the effect of music listening on stress levels of 33 air traffic controllers from the Federal Aviation Association in Longmont, Colorado (Lesiuk, 1992). The study reported that music listening was more effective in helping reduce stress for some personality types than others. While music listening decreased stress for low-trait anxiety individuals with introversion and extroversion, as well as for high-trait extroverts, it was not enough of a catalyst to reduce stress for high-trait introverts. In addition, that same personality-trait combination perceived a significantly higher level of air traffic activity than the other employee personality combinations. Frey (1997) has reported that stress and pathology are outcomes which arise from a mismatch between individuals' arousability and their preferred level of arousal. Music therapy sessions with their inherent mood altering music techniques could address these individual differences and needs.

Facilitating a Reversal Through Music Therapy

There is a role for music therapists in organizations in both a preventative and rehabilitative capacity to facilitate stress-coping skills. Facilitation of changes in motivational modes is especially relevant for individuals who demonstrate an inability to reverse from a Telic (goal-minded) state to a Paratelic (playful) state when doing so would be useful as a stress-coping mechanism.

Preliminary research investigating music use and motivational modes in IT organizations is occurring. Two examples of written responses from a music listening study with IT professionals (Lesiuk, 2005) are given below. In the 2005 study participants were given the freedom to listen to music, via headset or personal stereo, "when they wanted, as they wanted" in their workplace. These comments about music listening at work, while not directly measuring the motivational states, indicate the presence of the Telic mode in operation.

<u>Comments re Music Listening</u>	<u>Psychological Reversals</u>
1. High stress level with high level tasks to be accomplished. In this case music was a great stress reliever.	Individual in Telic mode needing lower arousal.
2. Whenever you're frustrated because you're stuck on a problem, music always calms you down.	A reversal could have occurred because of frustration, but music aids in reducing the arousal - thus extends the goal-minded (Telic) mode.

In a follow-up study (Lesiuk, in progress) both Telic/Paratelic State and Rationale for Music was measured. Indeed, those who were arousal-avoiding tended to choose music to reduce their arousal and those who were arousal-seeking tended to choose music for increased excitement.

Several music therapy techniques could be employed to facilitate or induce reversals, as needed, including live instrumental improvisation, songwriting, movement improvisation with music, and guided music listening followed with discussion. An assessment of the arousal needs (or motivational mode)

would best inform the music therapist as to the stress-coping goals of the sessions. The music therapist would need to employ counselling skills, such as listening, attentiveness to feelings, and encouragement of group sharing prior to and following the music stimuli. The group or individual preference for such techniques should also be taken into consideration. The goal to lessen proneness to burnout is made more possible to accomplish when there is ownership and liking of the music therapy approach.

An educational approach is recommended empowering the employees with knowledge of motivational states and their dynamics and effects on mood and behaviour. Eventually, the understanding and practice of "psycho-diversity" (i.e., a living of all motivational modes in balance) will help build a healthy workplace - having an effect both on the creative work of the organization, and on the well-being of the employee.

Data should also be collected and reported by music therapists of the efficacy of both the techniques and the duration of music therapy programming to determine the best practices for organizational music therapy. Several measures of the efficacy of music therapy programming addressing psychological reversals are available. Music therapists could choose to measure levels of burnout over time, creative output of the work itself, levels of awareness of feeling states, and/or the degree of ability to reverse states.

Lastly, the organizational music therapist can encourage the practice of reversing - whatever the mode needed to reverse in the work situation. The confidence that one has in being able to readily reverse is an invaluable work-life skill, as well as a home-life and social-life skill. The benefits of a music therapy program that facilitate the necessary psychological reversals, understood and practiced within the organization, will lessen the detrimental effects of work stress and burnout.

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