Understanding Reversal Theory and Its Importance for Sport Psychology

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The aim of this presentation is to introduce reversal theory (Apter, 1982) to delegates unfamiliar with its distinctive approach and concepts and to review the results of reversal theory sport research. Reversal theory is a psychological theory of motivation, emotion and personality. One basic tenet of reversal theory is that two individuals may engage in the same behaviour, but may do so with different metamotivational states operative which, in turn, may result in different or even opposite experiences.

Consequently, the subjective experience of the individual is of primary importance. In addition, the theory's framework of paired metamotivational states and the notion of reversals between these states are central to the theory's approach to the understanding of the structure of experience. The four pairs of metamotivational states are the telic-paratelic, negativistic-conformist, mastery-sympathy and autic-alloic states. Also, the related concepts of bistability, metamotivational dominance and parapathic emotion add to the theory's 'structural phenomenological' approach.

A selection of results from reversal theory sport and exercise research will also be presented. This includes studies which have investigated the metamotivational dominance characteristics of different groups of sports performers and studies in which the metamotivational states and arousal levels of athletes have been monitored in ongoing sports situations.

Other studies have investigated the effect of winning and losing and playing at home and away; training and competition; and the emotional responses that arise from taking part in sports activities with different levels of social interaction and physical contact. Some of this research has been conducted on top level sports performers and some on recreational level performers.

Where possible attempts will be made to relate reversal theory and research findings to other theoretical perspectives in sport psychology.