On The Development Of Relationship Awareness Theory

The Strength Deployment Inventory is based on the theory of Relationship Awareness — a model for effectively and accurately understanding the motivations behind behaviour. The theory includes four powerful, ideas developed from Dr. Elias H. Porter's academic research and real-world clinical experience. Following is an excerpt from Dr. Porter's article, which was originally published in 1976 in the journal, Group and Organization Management.

Relationship Awareness is a theory of interpersonal relationships rather than a theory of intrapsychic relationships (although the theory promises to bring a new view to the phenomenon we call personality).

PREMISE 1: The first major premise of the theory is that behaviour traits are not conditioned responses or reinforced behaviours, as B.F. Skinner would imply, nor are they primary personality factors as Raymond Cattell stated (1971). The theory assumed, as does Tolman's theory, that behaviour traits arise from purposive strivings for gratification mediated by concepts or hypotheses as to how to obtain those gratifications

(Tolman, 1967). Put in simplest terms, behaviour traits are the consistencies in our behaviour that stem from the consistencies in what we find gratifying in interpersonal relationships and the consistencies in our beliefs or concepts as to how to interact with other people in order to achieve those gratifications.

As we become increasingly aware of the gratifications we are seeking from others and examine our beliefs and concepts as to the best way to achieve those gratifications, we open ourselves to feedback on the efficacy of the behaviour in which we engage, with the result that old patterns of behaviour may be readily modified or even abandoned for more effective behaviour patterns.

As we become increasingly aware of the gratifications that others are seeking from us, their behaviour becomes more understandable to us and opens new avenues for the achievement of mutual gratification and the avoidance of Unwarranted Conflict that may arise when one person presumes that another person equally shares his beliefs and motivations.

Relationship Awareness Theory avoids the unspoken assumption underlying so many approaches to understanding human behaviour that the world impinges upon the individual in a more or less uniform and undifferentiated manner so that, if one is able to assess an individual's "primary personality factor," one is able to predict, within the error of measurement, the pattern of the individual's behaviour in most, if not all, situations. Relationship Awareness Theory holds this assumption, so often left unspoken, to be faulty and misleading.

PREMISE 2: As a second major premise, Relationship Awareness Theory holds that there are, at the very least, two clear, distinguishably different conditions in the stimulus world that affect

patterns of behaviour. One of these conditions exists when we are free to pursue the gratifications we seek from others. The second condition exists when we are faced with conflict and opposition so that we are not free to pursue our gratification, but must resort to the preservation of our own integrity and self-esteem. The behaviour traits we exhibit under these two conditions truly differ. When we are free to pursue our gratifications, we are more or less uniformly predictable, but in the face of continuing conflict and opposition we undergo changes in motivations that link into different bodies of beliefs and concepts that are, in turn, expressed in yet different behaviour traits.

We are predictably uniform in our behaviour when we are free, and we are predictably variable as we meet with obstructing conditions in our stimulus worlds.

PREMISE 3: The third major premise is directly from Fromm: a personal weakness is no more, nor no less, than the overdoing of a personal strength. An individual operates from personal "strength" when he behaves in a manner that enhances the probability that an interpersonal interaction will be a mutually productive interaction. An individual operates from personal weakness when he behaves in a way that decreases the probability that an interpersonal interaction will be a mutually productive interaction. To act in a trusting manner is a strength; it enhances the probability of mutual productivity. To act in an overly trusting or gullible manner is a weakness; it decreases the probability of mutual productivity and increases the probability of a destructive or, at least, a nonproductive outcome for one or even both of the individuals concerned. The same things can be said for being self-confident and its nonproductive form, being overly self-confident or arrogant. To be cautious is a strength; to be overly cautious or suspicious is a weakness.

When the premise that behaviour traits are purposive strivings for gratification is coupled with the premise that weaknesses are strengths overdone, a new dimension in understanding is open to us as facilitators. Whether a given individual is operating from his strengths or from his weaknesses, we should be able to assess the gratifications for which he is striving and, as psychotherapists or facilitators, help the individual assess the effectiveness of his beliefs and concepts about how to interact with other people to obtain the gratification he seeks.

PREMISE 4: A fourth premise relates to two distinctions that can be made among personality theories. First, the concepts inherent in some theories are remote and distant from how one experiences one's self, but the concepts inherent in other theories approximate how one experiences one's self. The second distinction is that in some theories the concepts used amount to labels, while in other theories the concepts lead to further self-discovery.

Erik Erikson, in Childhood and Society (1974), writes, "In introjection we feel and act as if [emphasis mine] an outer goodness had become an inner certainty. In projection, we experience an inner harm as an outer one: we endow significant people with the evil which actually is in us." I intend in no way to discount the validity of Erickson's assertion, but I do want

to point out that the person who is engaged in introjection or in projection does not experience himself as doing so. These concepts are distant from immediate experience. For example, when I am engaging in projection, I need to have someone point out and more or less prove to me that I am projecting. The concept of projection does not serve me very well as a heuristic device; it does not lead me to much self-discovery. It may have heuristic value to me as a facilitator or therapist observing and discovering the behaviours of others, however.

Transactional Analysis offers a set of concepts much closer to how we experience ourselves, which serve as rather effective devices for self-discovery. One can rather readily grasp the concepts of "Parent," "Adult,"

"Child," and "transactions" and understand many of one's relationships with others in these terms. These more experience-proximate concepts not only lead more readily to self-discovery, but also point to what can be done to change one's behaviour for more effective interpersonal relationships.

The fourth premise, then, is simply that the more clearly the concepts in a personality theory approximate how one experiences one's self, the more effectively they serve as devices for self-discovery. The more a personality theory can be for a person rather than about a person, the better it will serve that person. By implication, were the concepts in personality theory sufficiently close to how we experience ourselves, psychotherapists might well become trainers and the concepts become healers. I don't think we are there, as yet, but I think that concepts in Relationship Awareness Theory are closer to that possibility than Fromm's concepts of receptive, exploitative, hoarding and marketing orientations, closer than Karen Horney's concepts of moving toward others, moving against others, and moving from others (Horney, 1950), and closer than the concepts of Parent, Adult and Child of Transactional Analysis.

Experience-Proximate Concepts

The first set of experience-proximate concepts of Relationship Awareness Theory relates to the first premise, that behaviour traits are purposive strivings for gratification. According to the theory, there are three distinguishably different basic strivings in relating to others. The first is the striving to be nurturant of another — wanting to be genuinely helpful to the other person and to see the other person do well — and we all experience ourselves as wanting to be helpful in some of our relationships. The second is the striving to be in the position of directing events — to set goals and be the leader — and we all experience at times wanting to be the person in charge. The third is the striving for autonomy, self-reliance, and self-sufficiency, and we all experience at times wanting to do things for ourselves without help or direction from others. For some individuals, one of these motivations may be predominant.

The second set of concepts relates to the second premise, that there are two distinguishably different conditions in the stimulus world that affect patterns of behaviour. When an individual is free to pursue his gratification, the nurturant motivation takes the form of actively seeking to

be helpful to others, the directive motivation takes the form of self-assertion and seeking opportunity to provide leadership (in the conventional sense of leadership), and the autonomizing motivation takes the form of actively seeking logical orderliness and self-reliance.

In the face of conflict and opposition, the nurturant motivation is expressed in efforts to preserve and restore harmony, the directive motivation is expressed in efforts to prevail over the other person, and the autonomizing motivation is expressed in efforts to conserve resources and assure independence.

The third set of concepts is based on the third premise, that a weakness is the overdoing of a strength. Here the concepts are those of actual overdoing and perceived overdoing of strengths. The actual overdoing of a trait, for example, is trusting to the point of being gullible, being self-confident to the point of being arrogant, being cautious to the point of being suspicious, and so on. Perceived overdoing occurs, for example, when someone in whom the nurturing motivation is high interacts with someone in whom the directing motivation is high. When the latter acts quickly with self-confidence, ambition and directness, the highly nurturant person may well perceive him as arrogant, aggressive, overbearing and rash. Perceived overdoing is somewhat akin to projection as described by Erikson, but it seems to be more over-reacting to behaviour in others that would be considered inappropriate for one's self.

The fourth set of concepts is based on the fourth premise, that when the concepts in a personality theory are more closely related to how we experience ourselves, they serve as more effective heuristic devices for self-discovery as well as for understanding the behaviour of others. For example, if one knows where he is "coming from" (the gratification he seeks) and he knows where another person is "coming from" (the gratifications the other person seeks), he may assess whether a conflict is unwarranted or real. If it is unwarranted, he may devise strategies for achieving win-win (mutually gratifying) solutions; if the conflict is real, he may attempt to develop a limited relationship or decide to terminate the relationship. Whatever one decides to do may be done with insight and without violating his integrity or the integrity of the other person.

Relationship Awareness Theory seeks to provide first and foremost an effective means to understanding one's self and understanding others, to the end that interpersonal interactions may be made as mutually productive and gratifying as possible or, where they cannot be mutually productive, that destructiveness of individual integrity be minimized.

About the Author & Developer

Academic and Clinical Experience

Elias H. Porter received his Ph.D. at the Ohio State University, studying under Carl Rogers, Ph.D. He worked alongside Rogers and other notables such as Thomas Gordon, and Will Schutz at the University of Chicago Counseling Center – where he significantly contributed to the group's development of the client-centered approach to counseling and therapy. He held teaching posts at the University of Oregon, the Ohio State University, the University of Chicago and the University of California at San Diego. He served as Associate Clinical Professor in the Department of Psychiatry, School of Medicine, University of California, Los Angeles and maintained a private practice through the years.

Business and Organizational Experience

Dr. Porter held positions of Assistant Director of Human Factors Directorate at Systems Development Corporation (also known as RAND Corporation, the famed think-tank) and Senior System Scientist at Technomics, Inc. He founded Personal Strengths Assessment Services (now Personal Strengths Publishing) in 1971 and served as its president until his death in 1987.

Publications

In addition to Relationship Awareness Theory, the SDI and many related publications, he published numerous academic, research and business articles that appeared in prestigious journals including Harvard Business Review, and authored two books, Introduction to Therapeutic Counseling, Houghton Mifflin, 1950, and Manpower Development, Harper Rowe, 1964.