

Free Form Friday: Psychological Reactance Theory

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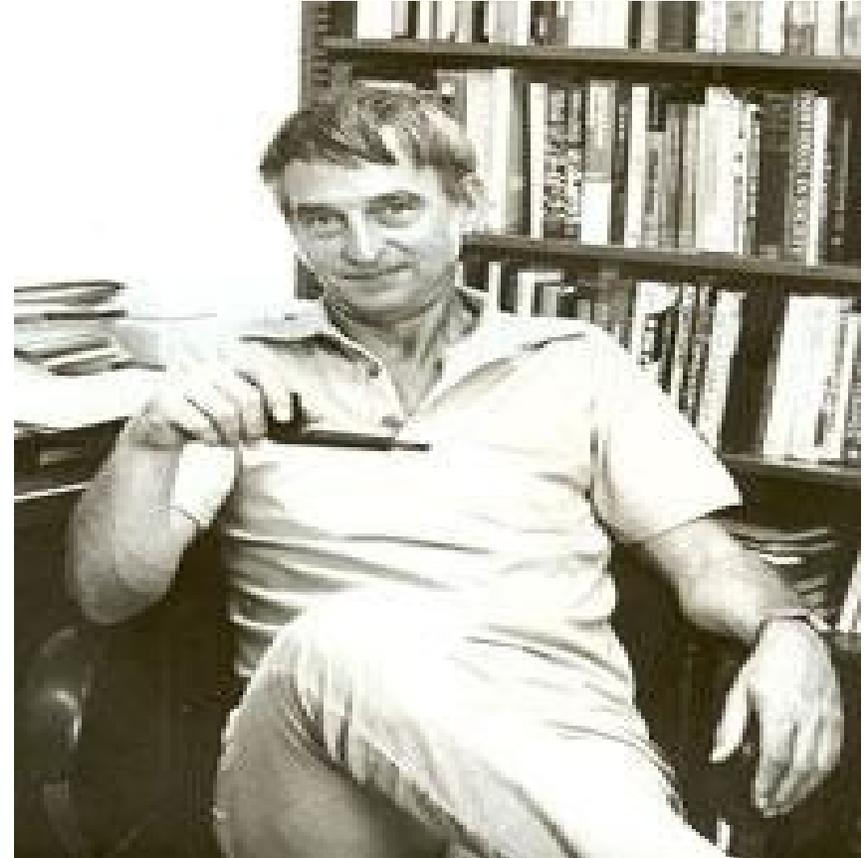
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Plan for the Day

- Brief introductions
- Jack Brehm
- Overview of PRT and research
 - Two examples of expansion and advancement
- Critiques and ideas for continued advancement

Jack Brehm

- Student of Leon Festinger
- Established Duke University's Social Psychology program
- Developed psychological reactance theory, theory of motivation Intensity, and theory of emotion intensity



“Jack was a remarkable human being. He did not seek glory: He wanted to learn, understand, and teach. His students loved him.”

Sharon Stephens Brehm

Overview of PRT

Overview: PRT

- Psychological reactance theory (PRT; Brehm, 1966; for review see Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018)
- Two assumptions:
 1. People have a set of “free behaviors”
 2. Threat or elimination of free behaviors →
Motivation to restore freedom

This motivation = psychological reactance



Overview: PRT

- Based on assumptions, model PRT sequentially (Quick et al., 2013)
 1. Existence of free behaviors
 2. Elimination or threat to free behaviors
 3. Reactance arousal
 4. Freedom restoration attempts

Overview: PRT

1. Free Behaviors

- Acts previously or currently engaged in; could engage in future
- People must feel **aware** and **capable** of engaging in the behavior
- Subjective – depends on *perception* of freedom

(Brehm, 1966)

Overview: PRT

2. Elimination and Threats to Free Behavior

- *Elimination*: Completely blocks a certain behavior or position
 - E.g., power relationship, law or policy
- *Threats*: Block, but do not eliminate, perceived freedom
 - E.g., attempted social influence

(Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981)

Overview: PRT

3. Reactance Arousal

- Aversive motivational state aimed at restoring free behavior
- Amount depends on...
 - Characteristics of the freedom: Proportion & importance (Brehm & Brehm, 1981)
 - Characteristics of the threat: Severity & intent to persuade (Brehm, 1966; Benoit, 1988)

Overview: PRT

4. Freedom Restoration

- Behavioral outcome
 - Engage in threatened behavior (e.g., Engs & Hanson, 1989)
- Subjective outcomes
 - Evaluate threatened behavior more positively (e.g., Brehm & Rozen, 1971)
 - Anger (e.g., Nezlek & Brehm, 1975)
 - Ridicule source of threat (e.g., Rains, 2013)



Five Waves of Excitement

- Wave 1: Theory Proposal and Testing
- Wave 2: Clinical Psychology
- Wave 3: Communication Research
- Wave 4: Measuring Reactance
- Wave 5: A Return to Motivation

Wave 1: Theory Proposal and Testing

- Some select findings:
 - You must feel competent for reactance to occur (Wicklund & Brehm, 1968)
 - Freedom threats increase attractiveness of the threatened freedom (Mazis, 1975)
 - Importance of the threatened freedom matters (Goldman & Wallis, 1979)
 - More severe threats leads to greater reactance (Heilman, 1976; Rains & Turner, 2007)
 - Explicit intent leads to more reactance (Heller, Pallack, & Picek, 1973)
 - Implied threat (Andreoli et al., 1975)
 - Attractiveness of threatened freedom (Brehm, 1966)

Wave 2: Clinical Psychology

- Some select findings:
 - Reactance as a trait (Beutler, 1979; Dowd & Swoboda, 1984)
 - Tailored therapy (Dowd & Seibel, 1990)
 - Client reactance as desirable (Brehm & Brehm, 1981)
 - You must procrastinate

Wave 3: Communication Research

- Some select findings:
 - High threat vs low threat drinking messages (Bensley & Wu, 1991)
 - Controlling vs autonomy supportive messages (Buller et al., 1998; Quick & Kim, 2009)
 - Restoration post-scripts (e.g., Gordon, 1976)
 - Message novelty (Kang, Cappella, & Fishbein, 2006)
 - Message sensation value (Palmgreen et al. 1991)
 - Narrative (Moyer-Guse, 2008)
 - Empathy (Shen, 2010)
 - Reactance as a persuasive strategy (Quick et al., 2009)

Wave 4: Measuring Reactance

- Remember, Brehm said it could not be measured, but...
 - Attitude change
 - Confidence or strength of attitude
 - Self-report of anger
 - Number and content of negative relevant cognitions
 - Behavioral engagement
 - Physiological changes (e.g., heart rate)

Wave 4: Measuring Reactance

- Self-report measures (Trait)
 - Hong Psychological Reactance Scale (Hong & Page, 1989)
 - Contains 11 items assessed with a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) measuring trait reactance.

Example:

“I become frustrated when I am unable to make free and independent choices.”

“I find contradicting others stimulating.”

Wave 4: Measuring Reactance

- Self-report measures (State)
 - Dillard and Shen's (2005) intertwined model: Reactance is “an amalgam of anger and negative cognitions” (Dillard & Shen, 2005, p. 164)
 - Salzburg State Reactance Scale
- Physiological Measurement of Reactance
 - Sittenthaler et al., 2015

Wave 5: A Return to Motivation

“...reactance is defined *not* simply as an unpleasant tension which the individual will reduce in any way he can...but rather a motivational state with a specific direction, namely, the recovery of freedom” (Brehm, 1996, p. 11)

Brehm and Brehm (1981) noted, “...as with any motivational state, when reactance is aroused, the organism is propelled toward a goal. Motivational arousal has the virtue of ordering our priorities. It suddenly becomes clear what we want” (p. 111).

Wave 5: A Return to Motivation

In their 40-year review of PRT, Miron and Brehm (2006) reemphasized reactance's motivational qualities: "Because reactance is a motivational state, it possesses energizing properties that drive individuals to engage in freedom-restoration behaviors" (p. 4).

Wave 5: A Return to Motivation

- In the past: Personality variables (e.g., Type A personality)
- New Focus: Motivational States
 - Self-affirmation (Schuz et al., 2013)
 - Depression (Lienemann & Siegel, 2016)
 - Uncertainty (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2021)
 - Already being in a state of reactance (Siegel & Rosenberg, being collected)

Wave 5: A Return to Motivation

- Expanding outcomes of reactance
 - Goal shielding (Shah et al., 2002)
 - Risky decision making (Bauman & DeSteno, 2012)
 - Willing to risk harming themselves to do so (Rosenberg et al., 2015; Siegel, 2013)
 - Reduced creativity (e.g., De Dreu, Nijstad, & Baas, 2011)
 - Sensitivity to freedom threats (Brehm & Brehm, 1981)
 - Increased willingness to punish a wrongdoer (e.g., Ask & Pina, 2011)
 - Increased reliance on stereotypes to make judgments (e.g., Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994)

Threatening Uncertainty

- Freedom threat → Reactance → Freedom restoration well-established (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2018)
- What factors affect perception of threats to freedom? And arousal of reactance?
 - Self-affirmation (e.g., Wicklund & Brehm, 1986)
 - Learned helplessness (e.g., Wortman & Brehm, 1975)
 - Personality type (e.g., Type A, Rhodewalt & Comer, 1982)
 - Depression (e.g., Lienemann & Siegel, 2015)
 - **Threatening uncertainty?** (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2021)

Advancement 1: Uncertainty

- Initial data: Support (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2021)

Table 1 ANCOVA Means, SDs, *F*s

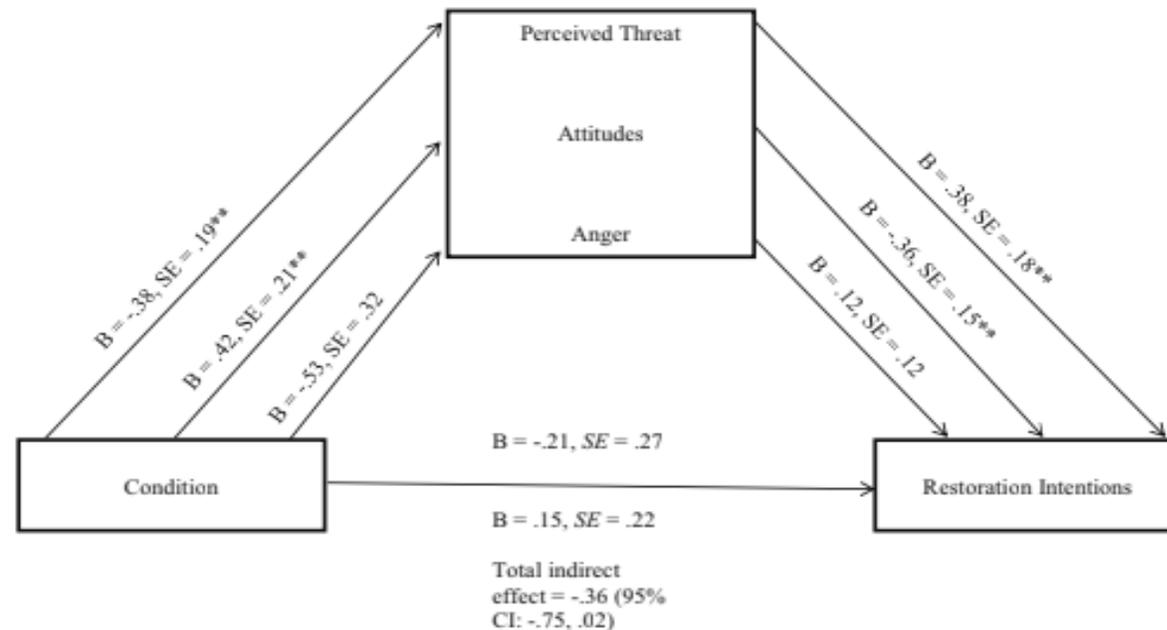
	Condition		<i>F</i>	Partial η^2
	Uncertain (<i>n</i> = 56)	Certain (<i>n</i> = 55)		
Behavioral Intentions	5.20 (1.56)	5.43 (1.33)	0.61	< .01
Perceived Threat	5.71 (1.13)	6.08 (0.91)	3.95*	.04
Attitudes Toward Policy	2.24 (1.18)	1.82 (1.05)	4.02*	.04
Anger Toward Policy	4.87 (1.89)	5.40 (1.50)	2.77	.03

Note. Standard deviations are listed in parentheses. * $p < .05$

Advancement 1: Uncertainty

- Initial data: Support (Rosenberg & Siegel, 2021)

Fig. 1 Perceived Threat, Anger, and Attitudes Mediating the Effect of Condition on Intentions. Note. $p < .05^{**}$, $p < .01^{***}$ (two-tailed). The test underneath the path from condition to restoration intentions is controlling for the effect of perceived threat. Commonly known as the c' path



Critiques of PRT

- Until recently, lack of direct measurement of reactance
 - Still unobservable (is it?)
- Real vs. imagined freedom threats
 - We're guilty of this, too!
- Unimportant freedom threats?
 - E.g., flossing, going vegan

What else? Anything you would add?

Future Directions for PRT

- Focus on motivation
 - Antecedents
 - Moderators
 - Outcomes

Where do we go from here?

Should we be...

Replicating? Adding to the theory?

What are you doing?

Thank you for coming!

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