THE POSSIBILITY OF A STRUCTURAL PHENOMENOLOGY: THE CASE OF REVERSAL THEORY

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The aim of this paper is to discuss an approach to psychology which those of us who have been adopting have found helpful to think of as "structural phenomenology." Structural phenomenology can be defined as "the search for pattern and structure in the way in which experience is interpreted." It should be emphasized from the outset that although our interest is in structure, it is not in structure in the content of experience in the sense of perceptual Gestalts; rather our interest is in structure in the form of experience itself, in its nature and quality, and the way in which this nature and quality change over time. To use Husserl's distinction, our concern is more with noesis than it is with noema.

In order to exemplify this approach reference will be made to "the theory of psychological reversals" (originally proposed by Smith and Apter, 1975) which is concerned principally with the experience of motivation. It can be defined as a theory of the different ways in which the individual interprets various aspects of his own motivational experience, and the way in which he switches between these different types of interpretation.

This theory was developed initially on the basis of careful self-observation in everyday life, over an extended period, by the authors of
the theory. 'Self-observation' means, here, observation not only of one's own behavior, but more particularly of one's mental states in relation to that behavior. This constitutes in a certain sense a kind of ethology, since careful and detailed observation is made of the phenomena of interest, as they occur in their natural settings. The difference of this kind of ethology from classical zoological ethology is of course that one is observing one's own conscious experience, and its relationship to one's own behavior, rather than observing the overt behavior of some other organism. (Ironically, on etymological grounds the term 'ethology' would have been better applied to the observation of one's own mental states than to the subject matter which it usually depicts, since the word is derived from the Greek ethos which means 'spirit').

From an early stage of the development of the theory its authors regularly compared their self-observations in order to identify common patterns in their experience of motivation as it occurred in everyday situations. So more or less from the beginning, the existence of the structures dealt with by the theory had this kind of minimal intersubjective validity. Such consensual validity was soon extended by self-reports from colleagues and others, and by information derived from patients in the course of clinical interviews.

Once the theory had become adequately articulated, it became possible to derive hypotheses for experimental testing. A number of such experiments have now been carried out (Apter, 1976; Murgatroyd et al, 1978; Fontana, 1978; Aris, 1978) and the results so far have been generally consistent with the predictions of the theory. Other experimental studies are currently in progress.

Although this second step of experimental testing is undoubtedly important in order to legitimize the ideas of reversal theory within psychology, and will undoubtedly play a part in the development and elaboration of the theory, there is a sense in which the basic ideas of the theory can be more directly demonstrated. This is because, as has been indicated, the structures with which the theory deals are directly discernible from an examination of experience—provided attention can be suitably drawn to them. This statement may seem paradoxical, and yet the fact is that mental phenomena which are in some sense particularly obvious are often those which are among the easiest to overlook: one may spend several hours watching a film and yet not notice the screen on which the film is projected; one may spend one's waking life looking through a pair of spectacles and yet remain totally unaware of them, except when putting them on or taking them off. Indeed, Husserl's