HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE POLARITY RESPONSE

William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com
770-913-0506

As a starting point when discussing any conceptual model, it is important to remember the adage of British statistician George Box, Ph.D. (1953, Mathematics Genealogy, University of London) who wrote the famous line: "All models are wrong, some are useful" (1976, p. 972). His point was that we should focus more on whether something can be applied to everyday life in a useful manner rather than debating endlessly whether an answer is correct in all cases.

Polarity Response

Polarity response refers to a behavioral or verbal response that is the opposite of the response that was intended to be elicited by the initiator. The term *polarity* is used because the respondent does the polar opposite of the direction or suggestion. This type of response is also called a *polarity reversal*.[1] These terms are used in hypnosis, verbal communication, and neuro-lingustic programming (NLP). In his book *Practical Magic*, NLP practitioner Stephen Lankton describes polarity in this way:

> Sometimes people will hear words, feel a touch, or see a gesture and respond to the logical opposite of what was intended. This is a Polarity Reversal. It is a kind of automatic distortion best suggested by colloquial labels like "being contrary" or "stubborn." Person A says to person B, "I like your new hairstyle," and person B thinks, "He's being sarcastic;" A hypnotist suggests to a subject that he is beginning to relax and the latter tenses; Roomate A asks Roommate B to take out the garbage and B says "OK," but then can't bring himself to do it. Polarity Responses are the behavioral dynamic at work in most instances of therapeutic "resistance." They also govern behavior labeled rebellion, subversion, and various forms of conflict within and between people. They are the constant in most political activity. When polarity reversal patterns are identified they can be easily predicted. (Lankton (1980, p. 84)

In seemingly paradoxical ways, hypnotherapists and NLP practitioners often use a person's polarity response to effectively guide the person toward their desired outcome.

Ericksonian Hypnosis

NLP evolved out of the efforts of psychologists and other therapists, to understand and later teach some of the techniques used by the famed hypnotherapist Milton H. Erickson, M.D. (1901–1980). Because hypnosis was not taught in medical schools, Erickson was considered a pariah among conventional psychiatrists who focused on using medications or psychodynamic psychotherapy. In terms of effectiveness of interventions, Erickson was considered to be among the greatest hypnotherapists of modern times. Erickson used the concept of polarity (although the term itself was coined by others) as a basis for making hypnotic suggestions that deliberately played on *negation*. In hypnosis, negation refers to the use of negative words or phrases like "don't" or "not" in suggestions.

In his low, rhythmical, growling voice—almost a mumble at times—Erickson used intonation to tonally mark important words in his embedded suggestions. Whatever the client did in response to the suggestion, the result would be beneficial (Rossi, 2008). Here is an example of how Erickson might use intonation (shown in italics), negation, and pacing when inducing a trance:

"You don't have to *go into a trance*, so you can *easily wonder* about what you notice no faster than *you feel ready* to become aware that *your hand is slowly rising."*

Negation of Words

According to Erickson, while the conscious mind recognizes negation in speech ("Don't do X"), the unconscious mind pays more attention to the "X" than the injunction ("Don't do"). The use of negation in hypnosis is based on the underlying assumption that the unconscious mind struggles to process these words and instead focuses on the action or concept being negated ("X").

Pink Elephant Principle

Whether used in hypnosis or not, the Pink Elephant Principle is probably the most common example of how negation works. By telling a person "Don't think of a pink elephant," the very act of hearing the words "pink elephant" elicits a visual image of one. The directive to not think of something typically results in the person thinking about exactly that thing, because the conscious mind must first process the image before it can attempt to negate it or not think of it. Similarly, telling someone "Don't worry about how you look," usually results in the person immediately starting to worry about their appearance. This process occurs because the suggestion indirectly highlights the very thing the person is trying to avoid (i.e., worry).

Negation of Images

A related example of negation can be demonstrated by asking someone to "Describe a man not digging a hole." Because the conscious mind cannot form an image that does not exist (a negative image), the result is for the person to describe something that does exist (a positive image). The person might describe anything but a man not digging a hole. For example, the person might describe a man holding a shovel or standing next to a hole. These positive images are not the same as a man not digging a hole. It is for this reason that negative directives are often not useful (e.g., "Don't fight with your brother," "Don't run around the pool"). It is often better to avoid using a negation and instead to focus on using a positive directive or suggestion. Rather than saying "Don't run around the pool," it might be better to say "Walk slowly around the pool." This approach provides a clear, positive goal on which the unconscious mind can focus, thus increasing the effectiveness of the suggestion. [2]

Law of Reversed Effort

The phenomenon of negation has also been described as the Law of Reversed Effect (also known as the Law of Reverse Effort). It is a psychological principle stating that the more one consciously tries to do something that should be automatic or effortless, the less likely one is to succeed at it. This principle can be observed in athletics. An athlete who overthinks movements may "choke" under pressure. This mental blocking or choking occurs because the conscious mind's effort interferes with the unconscious processes that are better equipped to handle an overlearned skill or task. In contrast, an athlete who is "in the zone" (not consciously thinking about executing the skill) performs effortlessly because they have let go of conscious control.

Understanding Polarity Responders

By extension of the concept of a polarity response, *polarity responders* are people who typically do the opposite of what others ask them to do. Also referred to as *mismatchers*, polarity responders are people who are constantly contrary and oppositional. They tend to disagree with essentially everything that is said. As a result, they typically have an inhibiting effect on others.

By varying degrees of severity, polarity responders can be argumentative or pedantic. In meetings, they are often the pessimistic naysayers of the group. On team projects, they are quick to state reasons that a project won't work rather than explore options that might work. As managers, they can be demotivating rather than motivating to their subordinates. They are better at discouraging rather than encouraging others.

Managing Polarity Responders

Depending on how severe and entrenched a polarity responder might be, there are several ways to respond to them.

Place Principles Above Personalities. When dealing with a polarity responder, the first consideration is to avoid taking it personally and to respond rather than react to their negativistic behavior. Responding rather than reacting is often a matter of being guided by principles rather than the polarity responder's personality.

Take a Preemptive Strike. Taking a preemptive strike involves identifying and stating the negative points in advance, before the polarity responder has a chance to voice them. Identifying the negatives in advance often results in a polarity responder considering positive ways to resolve the problems.

Roll With Resistance. The term *rolling with resistance* refers to the idea of dealing with resistance by rolling with it instead of opposing it (Miller and Rollnick (1991, p. 107). The paradoxical element in this type of response will often bring a person to the opposite—or at least a balanced—perspective. This approach can be useful with people who present in a highly oppositional manner and who seem to reject every idea or suggestion.

Use Radical Acceptance. One type of amplified reflection involves a conscious effort on the part of a group leader or manager to not only accept, but to actively welcome, any and all comments from the oppositional person. This approach involves a radical acceptance of comments that are odd, disturbing, or blatantly provocative. When a manager invites opposing views, the polarity responder may respond in opposition—by offering little or no resistance.

Simple and Amplified Reflections. When making reflective statements, it is often useful to understate or overstate the intensity of a person's expressed emotion when listening to the person. As Miller and Rollnick (2013, p. 72) advise, "When reflecting emotion, err on the British side and understate." When Person A understates Person B's expressed emotion, then Person B is likely to express them more intensely. In contrast, *amplified reflection* involves reflecting a person's statements back to them in an intensified, exaggerated, or overstated manner. In other words, an amplified reflection essentially turns up the intensity of a reflective comment. When Person A overstates Person B's expressed emotion, then Person B is likely to express them less intensely.

Recognize, Recruit, and Limit. One way to manage a polarity responder is to use positive reframing and limit setting. In one sense, this approach involves prescribing the problem and utilizing the polarity responder's unique style. This approach involves recognizing the special skills of the polarity responder, recruiting the person for a special assignment, and then limiting the scope of their contributions to specific times and topics. Limiting the scope of a polarity responder's contributions required good boundary management on the part of a manager. In this way, Frame their responses within special tasks that are most fitted to their skills and abilities. For example, if a polarity responder is so focused on the picky details that he cannot see the big picture, then this approach might be useful:

"You have a *special skill* in identifying the details that might prevent this project from being successful. In *the last five minutes* of the meeting, I would like you *share some of these details*. Until then, *listen carefully*, make some notes, and be ready to share them *during your part* of the meeting."

Assign Mission Impossible. By asking for volunteers for an impossible mission or problem that can't be solved, polarity responders may take the bait. Telling a polarity responder that a problem is unsolvable or that a mission is impossible can sometimes motivate a polarity responder. If so, then be prepared to let go, stand back, and watch them tell you how it <u>can</u> done.

Notes

1. By whatever name it is called, the polarity response has similarities to other concepts such as behavioral reactance, opposition reflex, and thigmotaxis.

For conceptual purposes, the polarity response can be seen as a variant of *reactance*, which is a psychological phenomenon in which people do the opposite of what they're told to do to protect their perceived personal freedom. *Psychological reactance* is the more formal term used in psychological theory and journal articles. *Behavioral reactance* is the term sometimes used to describe the observable behaviors that result from the psychological state of reactance. The two terms are often used interchangeably and refer to the same concept.

In 1966, Brehm published his classic book, *A Theory of Psychological Reactance*. The concept of *psychological reactance* was introduced by psychologist Jack Brehm (1928–2009). *Reactance theory* predicts that a target behavior will increase if a person perceives that their personal freedom is challenged (Brehm, 1966, 2007; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). According to Brehm (1966), when people perceive a threat to their personal freedom, they experience a motivational state directed towards attaining the restricted freedom ("psychological reactance").

Reactance is also an underlying mechanism of how nagging works—to increase the target behavior: "Arguing, blaming, complaining, nagging, and needling, are forms of attempting to control another person's behavior. Nagging a person has the effect of exacerbating rather than diminishing the problematic behavior (Doverspike, 2025, p. 3).

Opposition reflex is a term dog trainers use to refer to a dog's instinctive reaction to physical pressure. Walking an untrained dog on a leash provides an excellent example of an opposition reflex. When the dog is pulled, especially when wearing a harness, the dog will pull or tug in the opposite direction. When a dog is pushed, the dog will push back. This reaction is also important in horse training (Gore, 2004). The concept originated with the Russian physiologist and 1904 Nobel Prize winner, Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936). Although Pavlov referred to it as the *freedom reflex*, it is not actually a reflex but an instinctive survival mechanism.

Technically, the opposition reaction is a type of *thigmotaxis* (from the Greek *thigma*, "touch," meaning contact with an object, and *taxis*, "arrangement, order," meaning reaction by movement). It is an organism's instinctive behavioral response to tactile stimuli, typically referring to an organism's movement in response to physical contact with objects, surfaces, or even liquids. *Negative thigmotaxis* occurs when an organism moves *away from* contact with surfaces or objects. It is observed in animals that need to navigate open spaces or avoid areas where tactile stimuli indicate danger or discomfort. The opposition reflex in dogs and horses is a specific form of negative thigmotaxis. *Positive thigmotaxis* occurs when an organism moves towards or remains in contact with a surface or object. It is seen in rodents and other animals seeking shelter or protection, because staying close to surfaces can reduce exposure to predators and environmental hazards.

2. The unconscious does not really exist. It is simply a conceptual model used in psychodynamic theory and in some other areas of psychology. Erickson's view of the unconscious mind was distinctly different from the model of Sigmund Freud, whose ideas dominated the context of the times. Freud's ideas have dominated the context of psychodynamic theory, whereas Erickson's view of the unconscious mind was distinctly different and not as widely known as Freud's theories. Interestingly, "Freud added 13 cases to the literature, and Erickson added 400 cases to the literature–more cases than anyone, and probably more cases probably than anybody to come" (Zeig, 2013, 2:55-3:05).

Psychologist André Weitzenhoffer, Ph.D. (1921–2005), one of the most prolific researchers in hypnosis in the 20th century, pointed out that "The Ericksonian 'unconscious' lacks in particular the hostile and aggressive aspects so characteristic of Freud's system" (1989, p. 271). Psychotherapist Jeffrey Zeig, Ph.D. (b. 1947), founder of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation, quotes Erickson's description: "The unconscious mind is made up of all your learnings over a lifetime, many of which you have forgotten, but which serve you in your automatic functioning." During a lecture on the Erickson's utilization approach, Zeig (2013, 5:44–5:50) explained it this way: "When we use a concept like the unconscious mind, we are talking about the repository of learnings--things that make the automaticity of everyday life happen."

Although the term subconscious is often used in popular articles, in my own writing I use a Tripartite Model of Levels of Awareness (Doverspike, 2025, p. 7, Figure 5) that makes a distinction among the conscious, subconscious, and unconscious.

References

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Jack Brehm (1928-2009) earned his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota, working with the renowned psychologist Leon Festinger, Ph.D. (1919–1989), who originated the theory of *cognitive dissonance*. Brehm's research for his doctoral dissertation established the *free-choice cognitive dissonance* paradigm and was the first dissonance study to be published.

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Sharon Stephens Brehm, Ph.D. (1945–2018) was a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas. She also served as president of the American Psychological Association. She met Jack Brehm, Ph.D. when she went to work for him as a graduate assistant. They were married in 1968, divorced after several years, and continued to work together and even co-authored a book. Jack constructed the theory of reactance, and Sharon adapted it to the clinical psychology setting.

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George Edward Pelham Box (1919-2013) earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. He has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century.

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Rick Gore is a horseman from Sanger, Texas, whose website contains hundreds of articles and 2,000 videos in which he discusses horse and herd behavior, horsemanship, and other horse topics and wisdom. See his website located at this link: https://www.thinklikeahorse.org/

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First published in 1980, this book is still considered the basic primer for understanding Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). The author demonstrates all the basic techniques for change

and relates these to other established schools of psychotherapy. Stephen R. Lankton, MSW (b. 1947) is a psychotherapist, consultant, and trainer. He is the current Editor-in-Chief of the *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis* (2005–2025).

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Ernest L. Rossi, Ph.D. (1927–2020) was a psychologist who became a student-colleague of Erickson. Dr. Rossi worked with Erickson in the final decade of Erickson's life documenting deeper understandings of entering into the trance state.

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Jeffrey K. Zeig, is a writer, teacher and practitioner of psychotherapy. He has edited, co-edited, authored or coauthored more than 20 books on psychotherapy that appear in fourteen languages. He organizes several conferences on psychotherapy, and is the founder and director of the Milton H. Erickson Foundation.

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This lecture by Jeffrey Zeig, Ph.D., founder of The Milton H. Erickson Foundation, was presented at the Southern California University School of Behavioral Science. Dr. Zeig discusses his observations and understanding of Erickson's approach to therapy.

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