



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

You Can't Tell Me What to Do with Benjamin Rosenberg

March 27th, 2023

Web: <http://opinionsciencepodcast.com/>

Twitter: [@OpinionSciPod](https://twitter.com/OpinionSciPod)

Facebook: [OpinionSciPod](https://www.facebook.com/OpinionSciPod)

Andy Luttrell:

Should any book be banned? Can we forbid a certain kind of knowledge? Just the other day, the American Library Association released a report showing that attempts to ban books set a new record in 2022—doubling the book banning efforts from the year before, which was already a huge increase over the year prior. These consider calls to remove books from schools and also from public libraries. But could book banning backfire?

Since you listen to this podcast, there's a chance you've also listened to the show Freakonomics Radio. As they put it, it's a show about the "hidden side of everything" and features a behavioral science perspective on life's odds and ends. Well you can trace that podcast back to a book called Freakonomics by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner that came out in 2005. It was a bunch of essays on economic analyses of curious questions about how society works.

And one of those essays quickly became controversial. I'm simplifying and being a little loose here, but the authors shared some data suggesting that a significant drop in crime rates could be tied to *Roe v. Wade*. In other words, homicide rates dropped like 18 years after *Roe*, which would be right around the time kids who might otherwise have been born reach an age where you could see evidence of them getting caught up in crime. Legalized abortion lowers the homicide rate.

Suggesting that abortion has benefits to society is obviously going to sound an alarm, and plenty of people weren't thrilled. And here's where I enter the story. I was wrapping up high school when this book came out, and a board member in my suburban Chicago school district wanted to strike *Freakonomics* from a required reading list, directly citing the part about abortion.

The suggestion gave way to a rowdy board meeting, and ultimately the book was not banned in our district. But the authors of the book caught wind of all this and offered to send some signed copies of their book to students in the district. And I was like hell yeah. The district can't decide what I can and can't read. I'm gonna read this book. And sure enough, I was able to claim a copy of the book, read it cover to cover, and it's still on my shelf today.

So my brush with book bans was pretty mild—I'll give that to you. But I can tell you exactly what it felt like to hear that someone was trying to tell me I wasn't allowed to read this book. I wanted to read that book. And here I am 17 years later, a social scientist, possibly driven by the intriguing

social science in Freakonomics. And that's a pretty typical story. Time and again, book sales soar when someone's trying to censor them.

There are even a few psychology experiments from the 70s that had a similar idea. The experimenters would tell people, "You know, our plan for this study was to play a speech arguing that police should never be allowed on university campuses, but the review board here told us we weren't allowed to play that speech for students." Wouldn't you know it, students who weren't going to get to hear this speech ended up just agreeing more with the censored opinion.

Tell people they can't do, feel, or think certain things...and those are exactly the things they want to do, feel and think. It's pretty fundamental. Like, go back to the biblical story of Adam and Eve. On day 1 of humanity, God says, "Hey, whatever you do, just don't eat that fruit." And they're like, "Whoa, back off bro. We are definitely gonna eat that fruit now."

So why do we do this? Well, hang on because we're about to talk to the guy who knows...

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. I recently talked to Dr. Ben Rosenberg, and I thought about banning this episode, but I decided to release it. Ben's an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Dominican University of California. And one of the things he knows a lot about is psychological reactance theory. In 2018, he published a paper titled "A 50-year review of psychological reactance theory: Do not read this article." If you don't get the joke now, you will by the end.

Banning books, telling people what to do and think, forbidden romance...these are all things that are likely to arouse reactance. So to get a better idea of what that means and why we should care, let's jump into my conversation with Ben Rosenberg.

Andy Luttrell:

No better place to start than what is reactance theory. It's one of those things that it's been around for so long, but it kind of has crept under the surface. I get the impression that it's like a theory everybody knows in vague terms but is not something that people really have grappled with, like you have engaged with reactance theory, so you've come to know it very closely. So, what is it? If you were to just sort of elevator pitch reactance theory, what's the premise?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. I mean, reactance theory, I think to your point, is similar in many ways to cognitive dissonance, which I know we'll talk about a bit later. The difference, to your point, or a difference, is that cognitive dissonance is everywhere. It's exploded. People talk about it in sort of common language, common conversations. Reactance, that hasn't happened quite as much. So, the basic sort of tenet is relatively clear, and I think it's somewhat common sense on its face, right? So, basic tenet is basically that anything that threatens people's freedom, or that reduces people's freedom, eliminates their freedom to choose what they believe, what attitudes they hold, how they're gonna behave, at least has the potential... Doesn't mean it's going to, but has the potential to arouse what Jack Brehm called reactance, right? To arouse this motivational state, the aim of which, and again, it's a motivational state. The aim of which is to get their freedom back.

And so, again, the underlying theme, this underlying reactance piece is a... I always grapple with whether to call it a negative motivational state, right? But I think it is considered relatively aversive

similar to how dissonance is considered aversive. We don't like how it feels to have our freedom threatened, right? To have our freedom taken away. And so, it motivates our... and we'll talk about the strategies by which this can occur, but it motivates people to try to get their freedom back, right? To try to recover whatever freedom has been lost or whatever freedom might potentially be lost.

Andy Luttrell:

It might help also to get a little concrete too. Freedom is a very abstract sort of a thing.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Indeed.

Andy Luttrell:

And you could imagine like, "Yeah. What do you mean, you stripped me of my freedoms?" That might evoke this extreme sort of idea when it's I think probably often more mundane than that. We probably experience something like this pretty regularly. And so, can you give some examples of the sorts of things we mean when we say people feel as though their freedom has been threatened?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Totally. And it really can run the gamut. I mean, from your point, it could be something as mundane as me telling my four-year-old he can't have his twelfth cookie for the day, right? That's a freedom that he feels like he should have as a four-year-old. Like, "Man, I need to eat all the cookies." That can induce reactance, right? To him, that's something that's important, it's valued, and if I tell him he can't do it, he might lash out. He might hit me. He might throw something at me because he thinks it's gonna help him... insult me, right? Because he thinks it's gonna help him regain his freedom.

The other end of the spectrum are things that people would consider more of value, and that's not to say that a cookie isn't valuable to a four-year-old, but they might be more broadly considered more valuable. So, I've obviously, as you can imagine, been thinking about this stuff a lot in the context of COVID, and mandates about health, mandates about mask wearing, and vaccination, all this stuff. So, that would be a more I think extreme, more maybe valued piece, potential place of reactance, right? Where if somebody's telling you what to do in that context, in other words, threatening what you perceive is your bodily freedom to decide how you want to treat yourself, the behaviors you want to undertake to protect yourself or not, those kind of threats can be more extreme and could have a commensurate response that is also more extreme than perhaps the four-year-old's response to getting his cookie taken away.

Andy Luttrell:

Similar to that, it's reminding me of the aversive effect of people telling you how to plan out your diet. You have to eat this. You need to eat better. When someone says like, "You need to eat healthier," you go, "Well, screw you. I don't need to do anything." That's that kind of like mundane, like every day, no one's trying to strip you of your freedom, per se, but you experience it as like, "You can't tell me what to do." My inner monologue for reactance is, "You can't tell me what to do." Does that capture most of it, you'd say? That kind of-

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Totally. Yeah. Totally. I think that's the lay crux of it, is like you can't tell me what to do. That's the response, right? That we don't like that feeling of being told what to do or having certain beliefs or behaviors mandated, and that's the response. Yeah. You're not the boss of me. You can't tell me what to do.

Andy Luttrell:

Are there certain things about which people feel especially passionate about that freedom? Is any way in which it feels like someone is controlling me strikes me as bad? Or is it a particular kind of case of control that people don't like?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

It's a gradient, right? It's a spectrum. So, there are certain situations, certain people who could have that sort of feeling of freedom threat, that reactance, don't tell me what to do aroused perhaps in any situation, and there are some that would argue that people vary on a trait level in terms of how much reactance they sort of carry around with them into any given situation. What I think Jack Brehm would argue is what's most... The key, and what's most important, is the centrality of whatever freedom is being threatened to somebody in terms of how they can see themselves. The importance, basically. To steal a term from Bill Crano, one of my advisors, the vested interest that somebody has in a given freedom, like how much do I care about whatever is being threatened?

So, again, the cookie to a four-year-old, he probably gets over that pretty fast. Yeah, of course he cares about eating another cookie. Eh, he can let that go pretty quickly. But somebody telling me how I have to behave in terms of maybe, like you said, your diet, right? Or something that's a bit more central to how you behave, or mandating, "Oh, you have to marry this person," or, "You have to move to this place," right? Those are more impactful. They sort of touch more aspects of our lives. So, in general, those are the things that are really gonna arouse reactance.

And I actually think that's a relatively common misconception about the theory, that we almost forget to take into account this importance piece, the centrality piece. That's really gonna have an impact and that, to Jack Brehm, to the roots of the theory, I think this is actually pretty interesting. This is in the '60s, right? This was before there were many people talking about evolutionary psychology. And Jack Brehm actually talks about the reasoning for people wanting, feeling like they need to maintain their freedom is because they want the ability to make choices that are the most valuable to them in terms of survival value. And you know, I don't know if I believe that that's at the root of reactance, but I think that is an important piece to throw in. That's an important consideration, that there are certain things that if they're threatened should be more impactful to us and should arouse more of this motivation to get our freedom back.

Andy Luttrell:

You mentioned that this sort of was born in the '60s, so that's one bit of context. The other is that it was in the United States where this was born, a place where freedom is kind of the name of the game, like written into the founding documents. That's the thing. And so, do we have a sense... The impression I get is that the theory says this is like a human desire for freedom, to your point

about evolutionary mechanisms. Do we have any sense that that's true? Or do we go, "This actually is a lot more culturally sensitive than Brehm made it out to be?"

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. My answer would be both. So, the evidence that I've seen, and unfortunately, as with many things in social psych, as you know, there's not enough cross-cultural evidence. But the evidence I know of that's compared reactance cross-culturally typically does the independent versus interdependent thing, right? And to your point, you'd expect perhaps that people in independent cultures like the U.S. or Canada would be more likely to experience reactance in a wide array of circumstances. And people from more collectivistic or interdependent cultures, maybe they experience reactance differently.

So, the evidence that I've seen suggests that people from both cultures do indeed experience reactance, that freedom threats can arouse this motivation, but that it's different things, right? So, people in the U.S., people with this independent kind of cultural bent or self-conception tend to experience reactance in the typical way that we think of it, like somebody threatens my freedom to choose for me, that's what causes me to be reactant. In more collectivistic cultures where the focus tends to be a little bit more outward rather than inward, people actually tend to become more reactant when their close social groups, their close social ties have their freedom threatened, right? So, it's more of a vicarious, if you will, experience, right?

So, seeing the freedom of somebody who I care about being threatened, that arouses reactance in me. So, the process does seem to be universal but it's different things that seem to arouse it.

Andy Luttrell:

It's similar to some of the dissonance work cross-culturally where they show that back to Brehm, early dissonance stuff is like when I make choices, that arouses dissonance. I resolve dissonance. And there's the question of, "Oh, is that just like an individualistic thing that when I make choices..." And it seems like in other cultural contexts inconsistency is still aversive. It just is a question of what is inconsistent with what, right? And so, interesting, it seems like the same sort of story. But it comes back to like freedom threats just seem globally aversive, which makes adaptive sense, I guess.

I'm gonna do something that I almost never do, which is quote you to yourself, which his-

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Scary.

Andy Luttrell:

I don't want to put it on the spot, but when I was reading the review of reactance that you co-wrote, there's a point at which when you're describing how Brehm thinks about it, you write that people don't desire freedom but it's loss is motivationally arousing, which surprises me a little bit, that the proposal would be that people don't actually care about having freedom until it's gone. Is that... What do you make of that? Does that seem right still? Or what do you think he meant by that?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. First of all, I love that you dug that up. I mean, I know that quote is sort of buried in there, but we actually took a great amount of care to include that, and part of the reasoning is that Brehm was really clear about in his writing in the '66 book, and then him and his wife did a review in '81 of kind of the early reactance scholarship, they were really clear in multiple places that reactance theory isn't about people seeking out freedom, right? Looking to gain freedom. But rather what happens when freedoms that we perceive we have are lost, right?

And I actually think that's kind of a key thing that's often overlooked about the theory, that it's not about us looking to get more stuff in the way of freedoms, or to get more ability to act however I want. It's more of this baseline, like, "I feel like I should be able to do the things, believe the things that I want." And when that baseline ability, again, to make it evolutionary, to make the choices that are best for my survival, when that is lost, that's what arouses reactance, right? So, I'm not going around seeking freedom but I'm trying to protect the freedoms that I feel like I have.

Andy Luttrell:

Like the saying that you don't realize what you have until it's gone. People take it for granted. And the way it seemed like he was defining this, what is it? Freedom... I forget what they were called. Freedom acts or whatever, free behaviors, was that these are behaviors that ordinarily you have experienced agency over. And so, there may be some things where you go, "Well, I have never been in control of this," and so for someone to remind me of that, I'd go, "Yeah, I know. I don't have a say in this." It's when I sort of have gotten used to feeling as though I have control over this that it's really aversive to suddenly feel like you're trying to take that control away from me.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. Yeah. He was clear about the free behaviors, right? It was stuff that we've done in the past that we think we should have agency over, as you said. There are free behaviors I perceive in the present, right? So, things that are in my repertoire of behaviors that I think I have control over enacting now or I believe that I think I have control over holding now. Or things that I might think in the future, "That might be a good thing to do," or, "That might be something I would do." So, it's any of those three time points, right? And again, it's not trying to build up a cadre of more freedoms. It's the perception that in any of those three time points I have or had a freedom that somebody is now trying to remove from me.

Andy Luttrell:

This is reminding me of another question I had, which is that word reactance is just bizarre to me. Do you have any sense of where that came from? It's one of those words that it's like you hear it defined in this context only and then suddenly one day you go, "What a weird way to refer to this." Do you have any idea, is there some-

Benjamin Rosenberg:

I wish. I wish there was some cool story or something. I don't, unfortunately, know. One perhaps interesting corollary is folks in clinical psychology have talked about reactance or similar phenomena, as well, in therapy, right? So that like a client will become reactant to a going along with a therapist's suggestions, and they often use the term resistance to kind of encapsulate what Brehm's talking about when we refer to reactance, so I think that's a nice... and actually, folks in

clinical psych often use those terms interchangeably. You'll see in the title of some papers that are clearly looking at reactance in clinical psych, it'll say resistance, so that's a nice corollary. I wouldn't say that's a perfect substitution, right? But that does come to mind, but yeah, I wish I knew where the term itself, reactance, came from.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. It may just be that at the time, that was a common way to refer to something like this that we've lost, but I just... It's always like it just strikes me as like, "Why do we have to call it that?" We need a word for this, but reactance? What a bizarre one. Okay, so one of the domains in which I care a lot about reactance and have thought about it a lot, and I know that you have too, is in the domain of persuasion. And sometimes when I've told students about this, I sort of pitch it as the very act of persuasion is an act of control, right? And so, one way to kind of get us into this second half of things is like is persuasion by definition the kind of thing that arouses reactance or does it not have to be? Do we think of persuasion as fundamentally in the interest of taking people's freedom away? Or why would people think that if that's not necessarily the truth?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. I've grappled with this question a lot. I think there's a world in which you could portray or perceive any act of persuasion, as you said, to be an act of taking people's freedom away. And there is some interesting research on this in the reactance realm, so there was a meta-analysis and a bunch of other studies looking at... This is fairly early on, looking at the persuasive intent of a reactance-inducing agent. So, the freedom threatening person, usually they were like some cool old school experimental design, where the confederate of the study was making it really clear that they were trying to get the participants to come over to my side of this issue, and it was always about something cool like putting fluoride in the water, or like nuclear weapons, or something very of the time, which I always love reading about.

But they did some cool studies on this, right? And they indeed find that the more obvious the persuasive intent of the freedom threatening agent, the more reactant people become, right? So, it seems that there's a gradient. If you force me to answer this, which you are, I would say that not all persuasion is going to arouse reactance. And again, I think that a lot of the studies, particularly from communication, where a lot of the reactance-persuasion stuff has happened over the last 20-plus years, you'd say that not every communication attempt or every persuasion attempt has to arouse reactance. But that some certainly can, and that there is a way in which you could again, make the case as you did that all persuasive attempts are efforts of freedom threat, right? Or attempts to control.

I think I would tend to side, I think, with the communication folks on this one, that it's a gradient, that certain worded or certain framing of messages is more likely to arouse or induce reactance. So, when messages, sort of to the point of the earlier studies, when the persuasive intent of the message is clear, when it's obvious that a message is really... The only intent here is to persuade you. I think in those cases it's likely that they'll induce reactance. And the main paradigm for studying reactance these days is messages, as you and I have talked about offline, where they modify the type of language that's used in the message.

So, one condition, the heavy reactance, very threatening condition includes very harsh language, very strongly worded language. Andy, you must put me on your podcast, right? And the other condition is meant to contrast that and it's a little softer, right? It's not a demand. It's still clearly a persuasion attempt. It's an attempt to bring you over to my side. But it's worded much less harshly. It's Andy, you should consider having me on your podcast, right? And so, there's a clear difference there in the semantics of how it's presented. And I mean again, the evidence is clear that those really harshly worded messages arouse more reactance than the more softly worded ones.

I would caveat it, though, by saying those softly worded ones, it's not to say they don't arouse any reactance, right? I think they still have the potential to arouse reactance. But if you really want to get people riled up, show them a harshly worded message threatening a viewpoint, or forcing them to take on a viewpoint maybe that they don't want, or that they disagree with. Then you'll see some stuff happening.

Andy Luttrell:

Do you get the sense... So, those strongly worded messages are very useful for research purposes. Do you get the sense that they're realistic? Every time I see those studies I go, "When would anyone ever do this?" You read them and they're like, "If you listen to my arguments you will be forced to agree with me. You must brush your teeth not once, but twice a day." And you go, "Who's out there saying you are compelled to believe me?"

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah.

Andy Luttrell:

Maybe. Maybe it is more common than I imagine. But how important is it that we think of those as realistic? Is that what reactance looks like in the world or is that just how we're bottling it up?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

I think in this case it's how we're bottling it up and I would argue, and I was gonna I think say this earlier on, I'm glad it's coming up now. I would argue that we need to sort of move away from this messaging paradigm. I think it's served as a really nice testing ground for some of these ideas and clearly we've seen that with these message effects, but to your point, where's the experimental realism in these studies? Both in terms of how much people believe them, their believability, like to your point, somebody could see these messages demanding that you floss, or demanding that you do XYZ, and it's like, "Man, this is bullshit. Nobody's really gonna do this in the real world." And they might just disregard it.

And so, that I think is important. How much are people buying into these messages? But then the second piece, more to your point, is like how much are these testing what actually happens in the real world? And so, I would say, and I'm trying this futilely right now with my lab, is we need to at least to some degree go back to the old school reactance studies which actually introduced a freedom to people and then removed it, right? So, it was like the whole megillah is happening right in the context of this experimental study. You come to my lab, I convince you that I have some freedom, you're gonna get a choice... And again, these studies are in the '60s and '70s and they're

great. It's like, "You're gonna get your choice of these records," like, "Which one of these five records do you want?"

And you know, people say, "Ooh, ooh, ooh. I really want this one," right? And then later on-

Andy Luttrell:

I thought you were gonna say like, "We'll give you this many cigarettes. How many cigarettes you want?" Give me 10 packs.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

It's funny because so many of the examples in Brehm's '66 book are about cigarette smoking. So many of the freedom threat examples are about changing gender norms and gender roles and about cigarette smoking. And it's actually a spectacular read. I'm sure nobody out there will go read it, but it's a great... It's a short book but it's a great read.

Andy Luttrell:

It's the same in Festinger's dissonance book. There's a bunch of smoking examples. And I put out this YouTube video years ago and routinely people comment like, "I don't get the smoking example." And I go, "I know. It's just that's the thing Festinger used to describe it." And I get it, it's changed since then. Anyhow, but give people a choice. Which records do you want?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. Right. So, which record do you want? They go through some mishigas that's supposedly part of the study. Comes to the end and they say, "Oh my gosh. I'm so sorry. We actually gave a way," and they always make it sort of funky, but we gave away either your first choice or your second choice of record and we've only got these couple of records left, right? And then they sort of observe. What do they do? Which one do they choose? And one of the key findings was they end up derogating the record that they initially wanted but is now being threatened. They say, "Oh, I actually didn't want that one. Joni Mitchell? Nobody likes Joni Mitchell. My original fifth choice, The Rolling Stones? That's the one I really want." So, they're changing their choice to regain their freedom was the thought.

So, it would be really great, I think, for the field to get back to some studies like that, where we're actually threatening people's freedom. And you know, there's ethical issues, there's IRB issues, so there's issues with that, but I think in terms of to long circle back to your point, to get back some of the experimental realism, to get at some of these real contexts that might be threatening people's freedoms in their everyday lives, I think it's gonna be something like that is what's gonna have to happen.

Andy Luttrell:

The version of that that I thought it was going to, which does feel realistic, is you give people a choice and then you say, "Out of these 10, which do you want?" And I go, "Oh, this one sounds great." And I go, "Oh, actually we're out. Here, you can have this one." And you go, "Well, wait. You're not gonna let me pick now what I'm gonna get? Now you're deciding for me?" I feel like that happens a lot too, where they're like, "Oh, here. Take this." And you go, "Well, I don't... Maybe that's fine, but I don't love that you're the one who decided what it was that I am supposed

to have.” Which, I actually want to... Speaking of circling back, one thing I think that I missed or we missed together was like what happens when these freedoms go away? So, we’ve talked a lot about people don’t like it, but okay, boohoo, you don’t like it. And it sort of seems like, “Oh, you just disregard it or whatever.” But what I think makes reactance especially interesting is the implication that you might actually be provoking exactly the wrong kinds of responses to it.

So, what happens when we take people’s freedoms away? Or at least people feel as though that’s happened?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Right. So, the response that you mentioned, the boomerang effect, as it’s called, is this desire to do the opposite, right? Somebody’s telling you, “Hey, Andy. You should just eat salads for the next month.” And that’s you saying, “Nah, you can’t tell me what to eat. I’m gonna eat doughnuts for the next month instead.” So, that’s the-

Andy Luttrell:

I would never eat a salad again.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. Right. Exactly. That’s the classic sort of behavioral response that folks love to study. It’s again, with these lab studies, easier to gauge than it is with say an online MTurk study. It’s harder to gauge those boomerang effects if you’re not looking at real people in the real world. So, we can look at like behavioral intentions, like, “Oh, I intend to do the opposite of what you’re telling me,” which we do often, which is great. Not quite as fun as the actual behavior.

I think what’s cool and what’s interesting about reactance is there are other responses that people may have, as well, right? So, there’s an emotional response that people might have. They might get angry, like, “You can’t...” To your point from earlier, “You can’t tell me what to do! That pisses me off. That makes me upset when somebody’s telling me that I can’t act in the way that I want to act or believe the thing that I want to believe.” And there’s also a more cognitive piece, as well, where my thinking about the freedom threatening agent might change, so I might come to derogate the source of the freedom threat, like, “Ugh. I hate that Andy. He told me that I can only eat salads for the next week or whatever.”

And there’s also the thinking sort of like in the experiments I was describing before that might change our perception of the freedom, right? This is sort of dissonance-y in a way, right? We may change how much we actually wanted the freedom to allay some of the reactance, right? We might convince ourselves, “Well, I didn’t really want the Joni Mitchell record. I actually wanted this other one. And if my top choice isn’t being threatened anymore, or if I can convince myself of that, then I don’t need to feel reactant anymore.” Right? It kind of gets rid of some of those reactant uncomfortable feelings.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. If it’s not a boomerang, because part of the whole theory is that people are now seeking to reassert their freedom, right? Like, “You’ve taken this away. I need to prove to myself and others that I call the shots.” And the boomerang is just this very satisfying way of doing that, right? You

say like, “Oh, you tell me I can’t do this? Well, guess what I want to do. I’m gonna do exactly that thing that you told me not to do.” And that’s very freedom asserting the same way that the kid goes, “Oh, I can’t have that cookie? Well, I’m gonna just scream and run around. You can’t stop me from doing that. I get to choose that that’s my reaction.”

And so, it sounds like it almost seems anticlimactic in some of these to just go like, “I just don’t agree with your point.” Would you say that? Would Brehm be satisfied with that kind of study that just goes, “And then people do not change their minds in the face of this new information?” Is that freedom reasserting or is that something else?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

It’s probably not quite freedom reasserting in the behavioral sense. I think it can be freedom reasserting in the more cognitive or maybe affective emotional sense, right? So, maybe it’s not, and you know, maybe I haven’t totally thought this out, but maybe we can almost rank these things in terms of their ability to bring my freedom back, right? And so, the top rank is do the thing that I’m being told not to do, right? Do the opposite. So, that’s number one, right? That’s like the guaranteed one-to-one substitution, get my freedom back.

And then maybe on a slightly lower tier, to your point, are these other options. It’s like, “Well, in the absence of my ability to do that, if I am a four-year-old and I really don’t have that much control over my life, and I can’t eat the damn cookie, I’m gonna do something else because I can’t do that, so I’ll run around, or I’ll tell dad he’s a poopoo head,” or whatever it is. These things maybe aren’t quite as good as doing the thing that’s being threatened, but they serve as a substitute to kind of get me through, to help me move onto the next thing, and not get hung up on these negative feelings or these aversive feelings of reactance.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah. Right. It’s not... This domain is threatened. You’ve taken it all away. I can’t do anything. But certainly, there are other ways in which I have freedom, and so I’m just gonna cash in on those for now to remind myself that I have that ability.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. And Brehm talked about that. He said if freedom is threatened in this one important domain, but you can’t feasibly get it back, one way to get rid of the reactance is to reassert your freedom in a different domain as you were talking about. That’s one of these, and there’s several of these things, but that’s one of those things in Brehm’s theory that never was really fully tested. So, I don’t talk about it that much. It’s hard to really hang your hat on that one and say, “Yes, this is definitely what happens.” I think it does make a lot of intuitive sense and perhaps we would find it if there was better evidence for it, but it is something that Brehm theorized, that he talked about, right? And again, that does make some sense.

Andy Luttrell:

So, why do you do any of this? What is it about... You show up to grad school day one and you go, “I’m interested in freedom.” What set you down this path?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

It was actually a circuitous route. I mean, I didn't start with reactance. I actually didn't get interested in reactance until about maybe three years before my dis. And I had been doing some similar but not totally related stuff in sort of the kind of crossover between motivation, goal-directed behavior, but also some persuasion stuff, and my advisor, Jason Siegel, was doing... We were trying to make a theory, basically. I don't know if you've ever tried to come up with a theory, Andy, but it's a shitload of work, and it's really fun and interesting. We were like second year grad students and we're sitting outside of a coffee shop that has a black window and we're like drawing. Literally, we had these... We're like drawing constructs, and arrows, and all this crazy stuff, and so we're trying to come up with this theory which actually... Side note, we're getting some really cool daily diary longitudinal data on right now, which hopefully will get out there in the ether at some point.

So, we were doing some kind of theory building stuff, and we published a couple papers on it. It was fun. It was interesting. But you know, the sense in grad school as you near the end is like, "I need something of my own to grab onto." And I'm talking... I was just kind of shooting ideas around with my advisor about what to do and he was like, "What about reactance? Reactance is cool. I know there's a lot of stuff on it. It's a nice melding between motivation and persuasion, kind of two things you're interested in." I was like, "All right, let me go read about it." I'm sure I'd learned about it in my overview of social psych class or whatever in grad school, but I hadn't really thought much about it before that.

So, he's like, "Just go read some stuff." Yeah, so I go, and I find the review, and I'm intrigued enough that I order Brehm's 1966 book off of Amazon, and you know, I just start reading and I'm like, "This is pretty fascinating stuff." And what really kind of roped me or really got me interested in it was the lack of... What I perceived, at least, as a lack of people looking at moderators of reactance effects, right? And so, Brehm talked a lot about this important piece that we were talking about before. This like, "How vested am I in the freedom that's being threatened," really mattering. But people hadn't looked a ton at other things that moderated this relationship. It was like freedom threat, reactance, boomerang effects, other stuff happens. Nobody had looked, or few people had looked much, at what happens in the intermediary there. What else is occurring?

So, what are the things that might make it so in this context or in this affective state I don't feel that reactant when I'm feeling happy, or whatever, or if I'm feeling in a certain state do I feel more reactant than I might normally, right? Nobody really looked at that stuff. It was like you're a blank slate and if somebody threatens an important freedom, then you become reactant. There wasn't a lot of other work. So, that's what really got me interested and I looked at uncertainty as one potential moderator for my dis, which was cool, and of course that finally got published like six years after my dissertation, which is how it goes.

And so, that was fun, right? That sort of sent me down this road to like, "Okay, let's think about what are some other things that might moderate this portion of the relationship." And then the other piece, and this was sort of a zoomed out motivational look at reactance as, and again, this is a motivation theory in my view, at least, zoomed out look at, "Well, if reactance is considered a negative motivational state which tends to sort of narrow our focus, what other effects might it have? Are there other things that happen when the reactant, beyond the few that we've talked

about, beyond trying to get my freedom back, feeling angry maybe with kind of cognitive impacts. Is there other stuff that happens? Can we consider this truly sort of core inconsistency-based motivational state that has broader ranging effects?”

And so, those things at sort of the boundaries of the theory, because it seemed so well established, was what really kind of fired up my scientific juices, I guess.

Andy Luttrell:

Yeah, so in terms of it being a motivational theory, sometimes that word, motivation, the way psychologists use it, isn't always super intuitive. So, what do you mean exactly by saying it's important we think about reactance as a motivational theory?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

To me, motivation is about, I think hopefully folks would agree, it's different than the common way of using motivation. Motivation is about what prompts us to act and then what keeps us persisting in our actions, right? And so, when I think about reactance, I think of it as something that could prompt us to act, right? Getting freedom removed is something that could motivate me, could push me toward action. And it's also something that could make me persist, right? If I'm unable to get my freedom back, that feeling being motivational might be something that makes me keep doing stuff, whether it's asserting a different freedom, whether it's changing how I feel. That feeling might keep me acting, right? Keep me persisting.

So, those are the two things, right? It's like what prompts me to act in the first place and then what keeps my action going. What makes me persist in whatever behavior it is? And so, again, I think reactance fits the bill if you think about it from that perspective.

Andy Luttrell:

In that freedom is a goal or agency is a goal, so that when we're trailing behind we feel like we're not there, that incentivizes... Not incentivizes us, but it prompts us to move toward that state. But then weirdly when we have it... So, in the maintenance portion, if we said that people aren't thinking about freedom day to day, does it play that role? That keeps me acting role? Or is it only once it's gone it prompts a behavior but doesn't sustain a behavior?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Brehm would argue, and I think I would agree, that it's when it's gone, right? When we notice that inconsistency. And in general, goal setting works in the same way, right? It's the inconsistency between where we want to be and where we are now that motivates and sustains behavior. And I think in this case, reactance would act similarly, right? If we're not going around trying to gather up freedoms it's noticing the inconsistency. It's noticing that, "Wait a second, I had that freedom and now somebody's telling me I can't do it. I can't have it anymore." That's what's gonna prompt us to try to close that gap, as you said.

Andy Luttrell:

Okay, so now I think everybody is on the same page to appreciate the title of this paper that you co-wrote that's a culmination of your advisor saying, "Go read this. Just read a couple things." And all of a sudden we have a sweeping review of reactance. So, anyone listening hopefully should

understand why this is a beautiful title. A 50-Year Review of Psychological Reactance Theory: Do Not Read This Article. Obviously, do not read this article being a freedom threatening sort of a statement, so I told you before that I see this as sort of in the pantheon of great academic paper titles. And so, I'm curious, where did it come from? At what point were you writing this, and you were like, "Oh my God. You know what we have to call this?" Was it before any words were written or was it once you're about to hit submit you go, "Wait. Wait. We have to call it this." What's the backstory on that?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

This was early on. I mean, this was like how could we not have a cheeky title for a paper about threatening freedom? It just... It seemed like it was low-hanging fruit. It was like, "We have to do this." The funny part, though, is... So, we submitted it to Motivation Science, and we got reviews back, and you know, overall, they were positive. They gave us some great feedback. Whatever. And one of the reviewers, though, goes, "I see what you're trying to do with your title. It's just not funny." And we're just like, "Oh, okay." So, of course he was trying to threaten our freedom, I think.

Andy Luttrell:

Totally. Right.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

He or she was trying to threaten our freedom. So, obviously we decided to keep the title in. The editors thought it was fine. And you know, I just couldn't imagine having a paper about reactance, such as you said, a sweeping review of 50 years of scholarship without some sort of cheeky title. And you know, I think in a broader sense it does fit my personality, as well as Jason's personality, who I wrote it with, who was my dissertation advisor. We're both... I don't know. Sort of fun and kind of... We enjoy the little things in science like that, you know what I mean? It's like I knew that if I was reading it I would appreciate it, and Jason knew he would appreciate it. He once tried to get the names of as many superheroes in a paper as he could. You know, it's like stuff like that, I think it's the little things that keep you going sometimes.

So, we were very excited when the editors were cool with it and decided to go with it in the published version.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, what's great about it too is like if you then read the article, you have offered supportive evidence of reactance for you, right? That is the boomerang effect, right? You told me not to read it. If I end up reading it, I go, "Got it. Interesting. So, Brehm was onto something."

Benjamin Rosenberg:

And if... You know, citations are meaningless, but if citations are anything, this article's been cited like 200 times already, right? In the three years since it came out. Or geez, five years since it came out now. 2023. It's crazy.

Anyways, it's been cited quite a few times, right? And I know a lot of that is people write a sentence and then they're like, "Oh, need a full review C right here." But perhaps it has led people to read it.

Andy Luttrell:

I love the part of it with the reviewers because I've often thought of them myself, and we don't have to get into the trait reactance stuff, because I know that's a contentious idea among people who study this, but to the extent that there are people who are more prone to reactance, I feel like I'm personally off the charts. I don't know where it comes from, but I've always just had such a distaste for giving up any sense of autonomy. So, if that were me, if I was the one getting that review, I would be like, "Oh, we have to keep that in the title." It's just like the perfect reason to put that in the paper because it's like exactly the right evidence of my own petty reactance.

Anyhow, all right, I don't know where I'm going with any of that. Otherwise, other than just to say this has been great. Thanks for taking the time to talk reactance. Is there any... I'm curious, like things on the horizon for you? Things that are new questions in this area that you find interesting?

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. So, few kind of avenues that we're looking at now. One is, and this is slow going, my lab is basically undergrad, so it's just... It takes a long time to run any given study, which is totally fine, but you know how it is. So, we're looking at... I was talking earlier about moderators. We're looking at positive emotions as potential moderators of reactance effects, so if I put you in a good mood, are you less likely to perceive something as a freedom threat? Which, for various reasons, seems to make some sense. There's a smattering of evidence around it. We've chosen a couple specific emotions that we think will hopefully be the most likely to help us find these effects, so that's one thing on sort of the one side of the theory, I guess.

The other side is what I was alluding to before, thinking about reactance as a motivational framework. What are the array of things that may also occur when people become reactant when their freedom is threatened? You know, again, not just limited to boomerang effects or freedom restoration attempts. What other affective or cognitive responses do people have to becoming reactant? So, playing a little bit on each side of the theory in terms of more scholarly work.

I mean, the other thing I've been doing a lot throughout the pandemic is just thinking a lot and writing some... I've written a couple of op-eds and other kind of pieces just thinking about the role that freedom threat plays in the things that we've been observing over the last three-plus years, and most of that has been in the COVID sandbox because I think it's just so amenable to talking about this stuff. But yeah, there's I think a lot of other broad applications and that's gotten me more into the sort of public, writing for the public sort of... Persona is the wrong word, but you know, just sort of writing for the public piece of being a social scientist. And that's fun. I've been really enjoying that too, so that's obviously flavored and influenced by the reactance work as well in terms of the kind of topics that I choose to talk about or that I choose to write about.

So, those are the main avenues right now, I think.

Andy Luttrell:

Sounds great. Well, we'll look forward to seeing more of that, and thanks again for talking reactance with me.

Benjamin Rosenberg:

Yeah. Thanks so much for having me, Andy. It's been fun.

Andy Luttrell:

Alrighty, that'll do it for another episode of Opinion Science. Thanks to Dr. Rosenberg for getting down and dirty with reactance theory. You can check out the webpage for this episode for links to his website and other things that came up today.

Let's see if I can use reactance to my benefit here. Okay. Hey, whatever you do, I forbid you from subscribing to this podcast. You are absolutely not allowed to follow @OpinionSciPod on Twitter. And so help me god, you need to lay off the online reviews. I can't have you telling people online how much you love this show.

Did it work? Alright, that's it for me. Thanks for listening. And I'll see you in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Buh bye...