

Chapter 2

From Intentions to Actions: A Theory of Planned Behavior

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There appears to be general agreement among social psychologists that most human behavior is goal-directed (e. g., Heider, 1958; Lewin, 1951). Being neither capricious nor frivolous, human social behavior can best be described as following along lines of more or less well-formulated plans. Before attending a concert, for example, a person may extend an invitation to a date, purchase tickets, change into proper attire, call a cab, collect the date, and proceed to the concert hall. Most, if not all, of these activities will have been designed in advance; their execution occurs as the plan unfolds. To be sure, a certain sequence of actions can become so habitual or routine that it is performed almost automatically, as in the case of driving from home to work or playing the piano. Highly developed skills of this kind typically no longer require conscious formulation of a behavioral plan. Nevertheless, at least in general outline, we are normally well aware of the actions required to attain a certain goal. Consider such a relatively routine behavior as typing a letter. When setting this activity as a goal, we anticipate the need to locate a typewriter, insert a sheet of paper, adjust the margins, formulate words and sentences, strike the appropriate keys, and so forth. Some parts of the plan are more routine, and require less conscious thought than others, but without an explicit or implicit plan to guide the required sequence of acts, no letter would get typed.

Actions, then, are controlled by intentions, but not all intentions are carried out; some are abandoned altogether while others are revised to fit changing circumstances. The present chapter examines the relations between intentions and actions: the ways in which goals and plans guide behavior, and the factors that induce people to change their intentions, or prevent successful execution of the behavior. The first part of the chapter deals with prediction and explanation of behavior that is largely under a person's volitional control. A theory of reasoned action is described which traces the causal links from beliefs, through attitudes and intentions, to actual behavior. Relevant empirical research is reviewed, with particular emphasis on the intention-behavior link and the factors that may produce changes in behavioral intentions. The chapter's second part deals with a behavioral domain about which much less is known. There, an attempt is made to

extend the theory of reasoned action to goal-directed behaviors over which an individual has only limited volitional control. First, internal and external factors that may influence volitional control are identified. Next, a behavior-goal unit is defined, and the theory of reasoned action is modified to enable it to predict and explain such goal-directed behavior. The modified theory, called “a theory of planned behavior,” differs from the theory of reasoned action, in that it takes into account perceived as well as actual control over the behavior under consideration.

Predicting and Explaining Volitional Behavior: A Theory of Reasoned Action

A great many behaviors of everyday life may be considered under volitional control in the sense that people can easily perform these behaviors if they are inclined to do so. To illustrate, under normal circumstances most people can, if they so desire, watch the evening news on television, vote for the candidate of their choice in an election, buy toothpaste at a drug store, pray before going to bed, or donate blood to the Red Cross. The theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) is designed to predict volitional behaviors of this kind and to help us understand their psychological determinants.

As its name implies, the theory of reasoned action is based on the assumption that human beings usually behave in a sensible manner; that they take account of available information and implicitly or explicitly consider the implications of their actions. Consistent with its focus on volitional behaviors, the theory postulates that a person’s *intention* to perform (or not to perform) a behavior is the immediate determinant of that action. Barring unforeseen events, people are expected to act in accordance with their intentions. Clearly, however, intentions can change over time; the longer the time interval, the greater the likelihood that unforeseen events will produce changes in intentions. It follows that accuracy of prediction will usually be an inverse function of the time interval between measurement of intention and observation of behavior.

Since we are interested in *understanding* human behavior, not merely in predicting it, we must next identify the determinants of intentions. According to the theory of reasoned action, a person’s intention is a function of two basic determinants; one personal in nature and the other reflecting social influence. The personal factor is the individual’s positive or negative evaluation of performing the behavior; this factor is termed *attitude toward the behavior*. Note that the theory of reasoned action is concerned with attitudes toward behaviors and not with the more traditional attitudes toward objects, people, or institutions. The second determinant of intention is the person’s perception of the social pressures put on him to perform or not perform the behavior in question. Since it deals with perceived prescriptions, this factor is termed *subjective norm*. Generally speaking, people intend to perform a behavior when they evaluate it positively and when they believe that important others think they should perform it.

The theory assumes that the relative importance of these factors depends in part on the intention under investigation. For some intentions, attitudinal considera-