

## **MOTIVATIONAL PREFERENCES IN ACTION ORIENTATION. THEIR RELATIONSHIPS WITH SEX AND GENDER VARIABLES (1)**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In everyday life, the distinction between intentional and volitional processes seems to be pretty clear. Most people know that the formation of an intention is not enough to reach a goal. For instance, if I make the decision to give up smoking I know that to have the intention is a necessary step indeed, but is not usually enough to carry the decision out and to guarantee the result.

However, psychological research has not always taken into account those differences. Theoretical and experimental psychology have mainly dealt with the intentional topic, and have considered intentions as a motivational dimension of behaviour. But most psychologists have often neglected the ability to control the enactment of intentions to be mediated by volitional processes. Only clinical psychology has included the role of volition, usually in a practical way, related, for example, to behaviour modification treatments such as to lose weight or to give up smoking.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyse the relationships and the differences between motivational states (intentions) and actual behaviour (actions). Our principal interest is to study the role of volitional processes in the

enactment of intentions. Generally speaking, to execute or maintain any intention against other competing forces is a very easy issue for some individuals. For instance, if they make any decision about whatever aspect of their life, every behavioural plan follows the way to attain their desired-goals, step by step. Nevertheless, that process seems to be very different for other individuals, and they have considerable difficulty in enacting their intentions.

I am particularly interested in seeking individual differences in the difficulty level of enacting intentions, and also differences in relation to sex (male & female) and gender (masculinity, femininity, & psychological androgyny) variables. Furthermore, my aim is also to find out some academic implications of those differences, particularly related to achievement behaviours. That is if people with high or low level of difficulty in enacting an intention reach better or worse results in different academic tasks.

## LIMITS OF COGNITIVE MODELS IN MOTIVATIONAL EXPLANATIONS

We usually say that behaviour is motivated, that is guided by some motives. There have been quite different viewpoints in psychological analysis of motivation. Behaviourism, for example, has mainly explained human motivation from drive reduction, trying to build up a general theory on the basis of hunger and thirst's needs. Psychoanalysis, however, has explained human actions to be guided by unconscious motives.

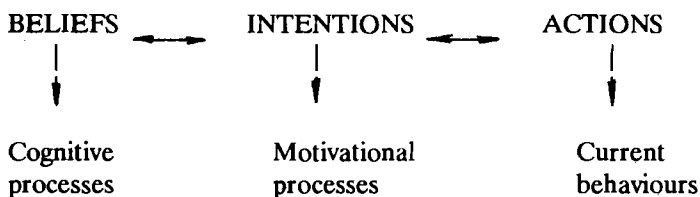
But, for a long time, there appears to have been general agreement among social psychologists (Heider, 1958; Weiner, 1986; Nuttin, 1987) that most human behaviour can be described as goal-directed, following specific plans. From the cognitive perspective, human actions are controlled by beliefs, cognitions, and intentions. Therefore, the main aim is to find out the specific ways in which personal goals and plans guide behaviour, and the factors that induce people to change or maintain their actions.

For the last two decades, Expectancy-Value (E/V) models have dominated motivational explanations (Feather, 1982). This one-level theory explains both the decision-making process and the temporal changes in the tendency by the individual to perform an action from two cognitive parameters: expectancy and valence (Atkinson & Feather, 1966). In recent years, motivational research has pointed out some methodological problems (Kuhl, 1982, 1986) and several limitations (Mayor & Barberá, 1987) in E/V models. The two main methodological problems are related (1) to the specific kind of relationship between expectancy and valence variables (e.g. if they have positive or negative relation to each other, or if they can be considered independent variables), and (2) the kind of mathematical combination between expectancy and valence to determine the tendency to perform.

Furthermore, all of these models have neglected the study of volitional processes implied in the transformation of a motivational tendency into an actual behaviour. There have been difficulties concerning the functional differences among specific degrees of motivational states (wishes, obligations, intentions), on the one hand, and also concerning the connections between motivation and action, on the other.

### COGNITIVE PROCESSES, MOTIVATIONAL STATES, AND CURRENT ACTIONS

To examine different ways in which goals and plans guide behaviour, I shall start establishing the relationships between three well developed areas: Beliefs, intentions, and actions. Each of these are closely related to the cognitive, motivational, and behavioural domains, respectively.



The links between cognitive processes and motivational tendencies have received considerable attention and empirical research from different levels of analysis (Lazarus, 1982, 1984; Anderson, 1983; Zajonc, 1984; Kuhl, 1986). But, the relationships between intentions and actions have been less fully documented since Lewin's (1922) criticism of German "Will Psychology" (Ach, 1910). Recently, Ajzen (1985) has emphasized that actions are controlled by intentions, but not all intentions are carried out. Some are abandoned altogether, while others are revised to fit changing circumstances.

#### Cognitive - Motivational Processes

Most theories of human motivation assume that there are close interactions between cognitive and motivational processes. These occur on at least three levels: a) motivational processes operate on the representation of the world, b) cognitive processes are affected by motivational states, and c) motivational states may be represented on various levels of the cognitive system (Kuhl, 1986).

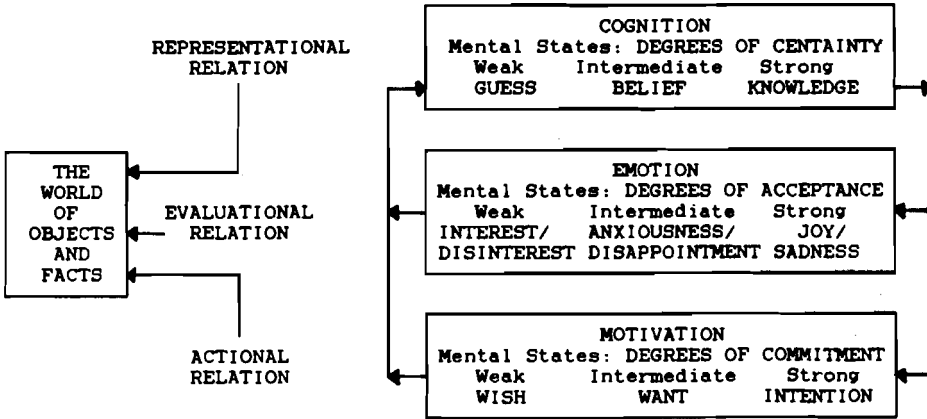


FIGURE 1.- A TAXONOMY OF COGNITIVE, EMOTIONAL, AND MOTIVATIONAL STATES

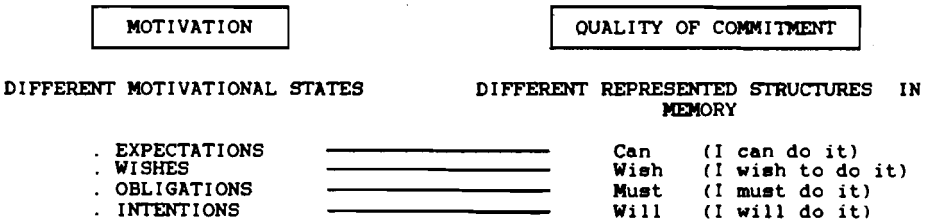


FIGURE 2.- CLASSIFICATION OF COMMITMENT LEVELS OF FOUR MOTIVATIONAL STATES.

However, several psychologists (e.g. Lazarus, 1984; Kuhl & Atkinson, 1986) recognize that cognition and motivation are different systems, and support several structural and functional differences between motivational and cognitive processes. For instance, whereas ordinary representational memory structures are subject to rapid decay after being activated, aroused goal-states persist for a long time (Anderson, 1983). This property of persistence is the basis for maintaining the distinction between motivational and cognitive processes, despite the close interactions between them.

Kuhl (1986) establishes strong connections between cognitive, emotional, and motivational processes. But he assumes that these three subsystems are related to the world of objects and facts in three different ways, as shown in Fig. 1.

The relationship between cognition and the world is a representational one. The different levels of mental states (guess, beliefs, and knowledge) depend on the degree of certainty. However, emotional processes evaluate the personal acceptance or rejection of those objects and facts. The different emotional states (interest, anxiousness, and joy) depend not on the degree of certainty, but the degree of acceptance. Finally, the relationship between motivational states and the world is an actional one. Motivational states relate to the quality of commitment a person has in his/her attempts to produce desired changes in the environment.

Several motivational states can be classified: expectations, wishes, obligations, and intentions. For Kuhl (1986, 1987) these four types are concerned with different levels of commitment, and are encoded in memory by the four verbs: can, wish, must, and will. Thus the specific kind of commitment in intentional states (I will do it) is represented as a declarative knowledge structure stored in the long term memory, and supports a stronger level of commitment than expectations (I can do it), wishes (I wish to do it), and obligations (I must do it), as shown in Fig. 2.

### **Intentions - Actions**

For a long time, many psychologists have neglected the connection between intentions and actions. Quite recently, however, some authors (e.g., Kuhl & Beckmann, 1985; Halisch & Kuhl, 1987) have paid attention to these issues from Action Control Perspective. They support the view that the choice, maintenance, and enactment of intentions are mediated by self-regulatory mechanisms and by different modes of control.

Self-regulatory mechanisms and strategies are closely related to selective attentional processes, encoding control, emotional control, or environmental control, and they protect a behavioural intention against internal and external pressures. By internal pressures we refer to some other competing action tendencies. For instance, somebody who has just decided to lose weight might still feel a

strong urge to eat. But he/she may control his/her feelings as a result of a control process in favour of the intentional commitment. By external pressures we mean social norms or instructions to perform alternative actions. If, for example, you choose to follow drama as a career, you will probably be pressurised from all sides to choose a safer career, such as law, medicine, and so on.

The amount of self-regulating ability needed to enact a current intention is a function not only of internal and external pressures, but also of different modes of control. Kuhl's (1985, 1986, 1987) model distinguishes two main types of action control orientation: The catastrophic mode and the metastatic mode. The catastrophic is characterized by great difficulty in enacting intentions, while the metastatic is characterized by facility in indicating changes and in maintaining or executing intentions.

Kuhl also describes some individuals whose behaviour is not identical but is close to these two types. There are some people for whom deciding on a particular action is a very easy process. When they must do something, they do not usually delay their performance, and their behaviours follow from their established plan in order to reach particular goals. Those kind of individual are called "Action Orientated". In contrast, if a person's attention is focussed on some internal or external state, Kuhl calls such a person "State Orientated". Such people have difficulty in the decision-making process or in performing and action plan. When they try to solve a problem many ideas related to past failures, aspects of self-esteem, or future desired goals interfere, making the enactment of previous intentions difficult.

It is possible to summarize that while "Action Orientation" is characterized by a) active action control, b) facility to enact intentions, and c) facility to focus the attention on a realistic action plan, "State Orientation" is characterized by a) passive action control, b) great difficulty in enacting intentions, and c) unrealistic plans.

## **ACADEMIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF STATE VERSUS ACTION ORIENTATION**

The development of different action control modes affects most or our cognitive processes and motivational systems. Experimental studies (Beckman & Kuhl, 1984; Kuhl & Geiger, 1986) have shown that compared with state orientated people, action orientated people 1) carry out a greater proportion of their intentions, 2) have more positive expectations of success, 3) achieve better performances in complex problems, 4) are quicker at making decisions, and 5) do not show generalized performance decrements after being exposed to learned helplessness treatments.

Nevertheless, state orientation can not always be described as a maladaptive kind of behaviour, even if we have referred to some disadvantages of state orientated individuals. These people usually deal with their decision-making process, and it can sometimes be very useful for them. State-orientated individuals can also use efficient and sophisticated self-regulatory mechanisms to maintain unrealistic intentions. Therefore, the evaluation of state orientation as adaptive or maladaptive depends on the perspective a given individual takes.

The development of Action or State Orientation has considerable implications for everyday life and for almost all of our activities. One of the most important areas is, of course, academic achievement and educational pursuits. Matching action control modes to specific learning procedures and teaching techniques seems to be an unexplored field, with plenty of possibilities for further research. Two different ways can be distinguished: 1) to design specific learning techniques for action or state orientated students, and 2) to manipulate state versus action orientation to improve various academic performances.

At the moment, no educational research has been carried out on matching teaching and learning techniques to different orientations in students. But, perhaps, it may be useful to interchange academic activities among state orientated students much more often than action orientated students, because they feel tired more quickly after concentrating on a cognitive task for any length of time.

The possibility of manipulating state versus action orientation might sometimes help us to improve academic achievement. Action orientation has been induced by instructing individuals to keep verbalising their hypotheses during a problem solving task (Kuhl & Weib, 1983) or by informing individuals of what to expect in an experiment (Kuhl, 1984).

The distinction between action and state orientation depends on a dispositional factor of personality. But it also depends on some proximal determinants in relation to educational patterns, and it can be analysed from masculine and feminine social roles (Gilligan, 1982).

## **SEX AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ACTION CONTROL ORIENTATION**

For a long time, any attempt to build up a general theory of human motivation has only been concerned with men, apparently forgetting women or considering female behaviour to be a function of male actions (Barberá et al., 1988). Little by little, economical and social changes, on the one hand, and the rise in feminism and a more egalitarian attitude toward females, on the other, have led us to recognise and include women's performances in motivational explanations.

Psychological research and new arguments have been sought to explain observed differences between males and females in motivational patterns. Theoretical and empirical literature has been built up concerning the importance of social skills in females socialization and explaining how needs for affiliation in females take the place of the male's achievement needs and competence.

The instrumental-expressive role dichotomy has parallels in stereotypes about gender differences in personality. Not only are females seen as warmer, more expressive, and people-oriented, and males as more assertive, rational, and task-orientated, but the male instrumental roles are perceived as more socially desirable. Thus gender tradition (Block, 1973; Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) addresses this topic within the context of achievement aspirations and social strivings.

The specific motivational strategies used by women and men are analysed in relation to the psychological traits masculinity and femininity. It is important to point out that, since the early 1970's, the gender dimension has been revised, and masculinity/femininity are considered as separate aspects of personality which may vary more or less independently. This new interpretation has made it possible to introduce "psychological androgyny", and this variable refers to those individuals with great levels of masculine and feminine personality traits (Martínez, Barberá, & Pastor, 1989). Furthermore, androgynous people usually seem to be better adapted individuals in terms of various behaviours and psychological abilities.

Until now, no empirical study has been carried out to confirm the hypothesis that the socialization process causes a tendency toward Action Orientation in men and State Orientation in women. It can be very interesting for further research not only to relate different action control modes to the sex variable (male/female) but also to refer action and state orientation to masculine, feminine, and androgynous personality traits. By using gender questionnaires (Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) and Kuhl's scale to measure individual differences in action control modes, we shall be able to start a new and fascinating research area.

## CONCLUSIONS

According to the "Action Control Perspective", beliefs, goals, and intentions guide behaviour. But, for a long time, psychology has neglected the relationships between intentions and actions, and especially the role of volitional processes in enacting intentions. Kuhl's model distinguishes two main types of action control modes, related to the difficulty level in executing intentions and making decisions.



The development of action or state orientation depends on some interactions between situational and structural (male/female or personality traits) factors, and can be analyzed in relation to the psychological concepts of masculinity and femininity. But, until now, the study of individual differences in action orientation has received only little attention.

The instrumental/expressive role dichotomy from Parsons (1958) and Bakan (1966) will find parallels in gender differences, in relation to several psychological areas, such as motivational patterns, achievement behavior, moral development, or distributive justice perceptions. Thus, gender tradition (Block, 1973; Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978) will address this topic within the analysis of masculine, feminine, and androgynous traits.

At this moment, the hypothesis that the socialization process encourages a tendency toward action orientation in men and masculine individuals, and toward state orientation in women and feminine individuals has not been confirmed. It may be useful to explore this topic for further research. As we have seen, most of our cognitive processes and motivational tendencies are affected by the development of different action control modes. The consequences for educational science of making students more flexible in their orientation to the action seem to be very important, for instance, in order to play attention on some school-tasks for a considerable time.

Matching modes of control (state or action orientation) and gender variables (masculinity, femininity, and androgyny) to specific learning procedures is an unexplored area, in which several ways can be analysed:

- 1) To measure both individual differences and differences in relation to sex (Women and men) and gender (femininity, masculinity, and psychological androgyny) variables in Action Control Modes.

- 2) To design specific learning procedures for action and state oriented students. Perhaps these kinds of students may profit from different teaching techniques with respect to social versus individual norm orientations (Martín, 1989). It may be useful to interchange academic activities among state oriented subjects more often than among action oriented students, because those individuals feel tired more quickly, after concentrating on a cognitive task for any length of time.

- 3) To manipulate state versus action orientation to improve academic performances. Sometimes, increasing action orientation might contribute to an increase in students' achievement.

Action orientation has been induced by instructing individuals to keep verbalising their hypotheses during a problem solving task (Kuhl & Weiss, 1985) or by informing individuals of what to expect in an experiment (Kuhl, 1981, 1985). These are examples of possible ways of inducing changes in rigidity versus flexibility in control modes.

## NOTES

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