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Aspects of identity and their influence on intentional behavior: Comparing effects for three health behaviors

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of dispositional aspects of identity on intentions and behavior in the context of the theory of planned behavior (TPB) for three health behaviors: exercise, dieting, and binge drinking. It was expected that personal and social identity orientations would predict intentions via the mediation of attitude/perceived behavioral control (PBC) and subjective norms, respectively. It was also hypothesized that aspects of identity will predict behavior directly, reflecting spontaneous, unplanned influences on behavioral engagement. Participants ($N = 525$) completed measures of personal and social identity in conjunction with measures of attitude, subjective norm, PBC, and intention from the TPB for the three behaviors. Structural equation models showed that personal identity influenced PBC for all three behaviors, affected attitude and subjective norms positively in the exercise sample, and influenced attitude and subjective norms negatively in the binge drinking sample. Social identity positively affected attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC in the binge drinking sample only. There were no direct effects of the identity constructs on intentions and behavior. Results are in keeping with the TPB and suggest that these identity aspects are influential in the decision-making process for these health behaviors.

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Keywords: Aspects of identity; Theory of planned behavior; Theoretical integration; Motivation

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1. Introduction

The theory of planned behavior (TPB, Ajzen, 1985) has emerged as an influential social cognitive model that aims to understand the processes leading to the performance of intentional behaviors. The theory posits that an individual's intention to act is the most proximal predictor of behavior and reflects a person's willingness to perform a given target behavior. Intention is hypothesized to be a function of three other belief-based components; attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control (PBC). A person's attitude reflects his or her personal evaluation, positive or negative, regarding the target behavior. Subjective norms are an individual's beliefs that significant others expect them to engage in or avoid the behavior. PBC is a summary of an individual's beliefs that the target behavior is easy or difficult to perform and whether he or she has the personal resources to successfully engage in the behavior. Importantly, the effects of attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC on the target behavior are hypothesized to be completely mediated by intentions.

Empirical support exists for the hypothesized relationships among the TPB constructs and the theory has successfully accounted for variance in intentions and behavior in contexts like exercise (Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Biddle, 2002), following a low-fat diet (Armitage & Conner, 1999), and binge drinking (Norman, Bennett, & Lewis, 1998). A recent meta-analytic review reported that the TPB accounted for 39% and 27% of the variance in intentions and behavior respectively in a wide cross-section of behaviors (Armitage & Conner, 2001). In addition, research has consistently supported prominent roles for attitudes and PBC in the prediction of intention, with a lesser role for subjective norms, and the mediation of the effects of these constructs on behavior by intentions (Armitage & Conner, 2001).

1.1. Dispositional influences in the TPB

Despite considerable success in predicting intentional behaviors, the TPB does not account for all the variance in social behavior and considerable variance remains unexplained (Armitage & Conner, 2001). Furthermore, recent research has indicated that attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC do not fully account for the effects of external variables on intentions and may be an inadequate account of the social processes that give rise to intentions. Ajzen (1985) suggests that the TPB be viewed as a flexible theoretical framework to explain the psychological influences on intentional behavior and further independent variables can be encompassed provided they increase the predictive validity of the theory.

Recent research seeking to augment the TPB to form a more comprehensive model of intentional behavior have focused on the role of trait-like, dispositional constructs such as personality. Contrary to Ajzen's (1985) original theorizing, research has found that dispositional constructs such as conscientiousness influence behavior directly, independent of the intention construct but also via more indirect path mediated by the attitudes and intentions (Conner & Abraham, 2001). Conner and Abraham (2001) suggested that such direct effects may reflect unplanned, spontaneous processes leading to behavioral engagement. The direct effect may reflect people taking advantage of opportunities to engage in the behavior as they arise, while indirect routes encompass more reflective, deliberative paths to behavior. This is consistent with recent social psychological theories which incorporate "dual-route" models of social behavior (e.g., Hagger, Chatzisarantis, & Harris, 2006; Strack & Deutsch, 2004).

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