

The Theory of Planned Behaviour: considering drives, proximity and dynamics

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Today, in part because of the work done by Ajzen, Fishbein and their colleagues, the core of their theory seems obvious - individuals are more likely to perform the behaviours that they feel positive toward and intend to perform.

Many models of behaviour share the assumption that behaviour results from a reasoned process, where individuals consider their options, evaluate the consequences and make decisions about how to act. Clearly, as the evidence presented by Morgan and Bachrach in this volume (Morgan and Bachrach 2011) attests, the Theory of Planned Behaviour is the most widely used social science framework of this type (Fishbein and Ajzen 1975). Born as the „Theory of Reasoned Action“, it was reformulated as the „Theory of Planned Behaviour“ (TPB), specifically in order to account for some of the reasons why individuals may not behave as they intend. However, the core of the theory remains the same - general attitudes, beliefs and preferences related to a behaviour predict intentions, and intentions predict behaviour. Demographic theories of fertility decline draw on similar concepts - for example, Lesthaeghe's „Ready, Willing, and Able“ (Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoeft 2001; Lesthaeghe and Wilson 1986) and Ansley Coale's „Three Conditions for Fertility Decline“ (Coale 1972). No doubt due to its popularity, many other extensions to the TPB have been suggested (e.g. Barber 2001; Bagozzi and Warshaw 1990; Fazio 1986; Liska 1984; Wright 1998).

There is no doubt that a substantial fraction of births results from just such a process - a couple decide they *want* a baby, form the intention to behave accordingly, become pregnant and give birth. However, behaviours that are not goal-oriented or do not result from such a reasoned process are also common, even within the realm of childbearing. Unintended childbearing, by definition, does not fulfil individuals' or couples' goals of delaying or avoiding childbearing. In the United States, estimates suggest that approximately one-half of all pregnancies may not be the result of a reasoned process. Conversely, in many European countries, women or couples report the desire or intention to have a baby but do not act on those intentions.

The critique of the TPB as being too 'logical' or 'rational' is common. The authors eloquently argue, in their new book (Fishbein and Ajzen 2010) as well as

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elsewhere, that the TPB does *not* assume that behaviour is rational. They admit that individuals may hold irrational, unreasonable, untrue or any other types of beliefs. Further, they argue that people may form intentions to behave in ways that are irrational.

The Prototype/Willingness model, an alternative model discussed at some length in Fishbein and Ajzen's (2010) most recent book, was designed specifically to apply to unplanned behaviours, such as adolescent smoking (Gibbons et al. 1998). In this model, behaviour is socially reactive rather than planned. Gibbons and colleagues argue that intentions, per se, are not at the forefront of one's mind when taking some specific types of decisions. Rather, they argue for prototypes and willingness. In fact, the Prototype/Willingness model has been applied to adolescent childbearing - for example, the extent to which a teen's image of the typical or 'prototype' unwed teenage parent is similar to the teen's own self-image is positively related to willingness to engage in unprotected sex, *beyond* intentions to use contraception (Gibbons et al. 1995). Although individuals may not intend to engage in risky behaviours, they may find themselves in situations where the opportunity to do so arises. Applied to unintended childbearing, then, rather than ask, „Do you intend to have a birth?“, this model asks, „Would you be willing to engage in sexual intercourse without contraception?“. The primary distinction they attempt to make is the reactive rather than deliberate nature of the decision (Gibbons et al. 1995). However, in the end, this model distils down to something like the TPB - perceptions that others engage in the behaviour and would approve of the behaviour (subjective norms), as well as positive attitudes toward the behaviour, increase intentions to engage in the behaviour (sex without contraception). In fact, Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) make a persuasive case that „willingness“, particularly as measured by Gibbons and colleagues, is simply another way to measure intentions.

Having established that intentions are, in fact, strongly related to behaviour, and that intentions may very well be unreasonable or irrational, I think it is time to turn our attention to a more detailed investigation of when and why intentions are *not* translated into behaviour. The confrontation between intentions and the physical, social or psychological constraints that prevent individuals from their realisation is a long-standing topic of theoretical inquiry in sociology (Alexander 1989, 1990; Alexander et al. 1987; Coleman 1994; Giddens 1984). Fishbein and Ajzen themselves point to a wide range of domains that, upon deeper investigation, may provide fruitful answers to these questions.

This pursuit is not inconsistent with the abundant evidence that, in the aggregate, intentions and behaviours are highly related.

I will focus briefly here on *one* of these domains - hinted at in Fishbein and Ajzen's (2010) discussion of strong emotions and sexual arousal. Our point of departure is that individuals may form intentions to behave in one way, and not another way, but when confronted with actual situations and actual choices, they may be guided by emotions, sexual arousal, or something else. For example, a

young woman may desire to avoid pregnancy and thus may form the intention *not* to have sex without contraception. However, in the ‘heat of the moment’, other desires or intentions may take precedence. The interesting question here, in my opinion, is how we can predict, or even understand, which intention will trump the others.

Although I am relatively new to considering the problem in this way, my recent thoughts have been influenced greatly by Warren Miller’s work on traits (Miller 2011), and also by biology. In the context of my own work, what traits might explain a young woman’s intentional sex without contraception in the face of her intention to avoid pregnancy? In other words, what is so important that she either *changed* her intention to avoid sex without contraception, or *ignored* that intention? Consider three potentially relevant ‘drives’: sex, affiliation and nurturance. Sex drive may be the most obvious - clearly a person can get carried away during the events that precede sexual intercourse, perhaps to the extent that even important, well-reasoned, strong intentions are put aside. There appears to be individual variance in sex drive, which could help to explain why some individuals’ intentions and behaviours are better matched. But what about a person’s *affiliative* drive, or the desire to bond and mate with others? This could also play an important role, particularly when faced with a partner who wants sex, even if the young woman herself does not (or vice-versa). Perhaps the desire keep a boyfriend or please him at a particular moment might trump the desire to avoid pregnancy. Again, there is likely to be individual-level variance in this drive, and it might explain why some women (or men) are better able to implement their intentions. Finally, particularly in the case of why some women (or couples) do not implement their desire *to have* a baby, perhaps the drive to nurture, or lack thereof, may provide some explanatory power. In other words, although a woman or a couple may desire a baby, may even state an intention to have a baby, those who lack a particularly strong nurturance drive may be less likely to implement those specific intentions.

I am not suggesting here that the TPB cannot handle these additional considerations. I am not even suggesting that the theory be modified. As explicitly noted in the TPB, intentions must be measured temporally proximate to behaviour. At the extreme, if we were able to measure intentions at the moment when the decision is made to have sex in the absence of contraception, the intention-behaviour match would undoubtedly be better. This is a bit like understanding that someone died because his heart stopped - not very interesting. Instead, it is illustrative to take a step back and attempt to understand how the less proximate determinants affect those more proximate. The TPB does a good job of explaining the behaviours of a majority of individuals at most points in time. Building upon this theory, we also need to focus on the behaviour of a unique subset of individuals for whom intentions and behaviour are mismatched, at least in some particular circumstance.

Of course, whatever type of model we might use to predict behaviour is complicated by the fact that attitudes and intentions are dynamic; they change over time in response to the forces of socialisation and everyday social experience. The experiences most likely to produce these changes in the context of childbearing include dating and sexual relationships with the opposite sex, school, work, new living arrangements and other forms of social interaction (Axinn and Barber 1997; Mead 1934; Morgan and Waite 1987; Schoen et al. 1997; Waite et al. 1986). New experiences in all these domains occur at a particularly high rate during the transition to adulthood (Rindfuss 1991). As a result, it is quite likely that attitudes and intentions change rapidly in these ages. Morgan and Bachrach's contribution to this debate focuses, in part, on the recursive interrelationships among attitudes, intentions and behaviours. Of course, the TPB is not necessarily at odds with these dynamics. If one has dynamic data, and the statistical methods to analyse such data, one can apply the TPB to these recursive relationships. If intentions have changed in response to recent behaviours or experiences, one simply needs to update the measures of intentions, and those measures will predict subsequent behaviour. Of course, as Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) acknowledge on page 307, it is „rarely if ever possible in practice“. That, however, is a data collection problem rather than a theoretical problem. To document these dynamic relationships, we need frequent measures of attitudes, intentions and related behaviours.

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