

Chapter 98

Ajzen and Fishbein's Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) (1980)

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides an overview of the TRA and the main variants on this model, considers the main criticisms and limitations of the theory, and discusses examples of empirical studies that have helped validate this theoretical perspective and contributed to its development over time. It also considers the relevance of these theories for Library and Information Science. Potential future research directions relating to the TRA and related theories are discussed. These include additional meta-analyses using statistical techniques to refine the underlying structure of the theory and enhance understanding of its applicability in different contexts, and the use of qualitative research to improve understanding of the thought processes involved in behavioral decision-making and the factors that influence these.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-nineteenth century, psychologists have been investigating the links between attitudes and behaviors, but by the 1960s little consistent evidence of these relationships had emerged. Fishbein's work (1967), which refined understanding of the types of attitudes that influence behavior, and the role of social influences on these, represented a major advance in this area.

Fishbein's research (1967) drew on Dulany's (1962) theory of propositional control, which had identified the importance of conscious intention

in contributing to behavior, as well as the influence of expected outcomes on the strength of intention. Fishbein added a social dimension to this cognitive perspective on behavior, by incorporating the influence of "subjective norms" or social pressures. He also distinguished between an individual's attitude towards an "object" such as cancer, and their attitude towards performing an action relating to that object, such as having a mammogram, and demonstrated that attitude towards performing the action is a more effective predictor of actual behavior.

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These ideas formed the basis of The Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980), which also incorporated the important intervening role of intentions. According to the theory, individual behavior can be predicted by intentions, which in turn are determined by personal attitudes and subjective norms.

The TRA has been further revised and expanded over time (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen, 2002) and is now widely considered to be one of the most influential theories on human behavior. It differs from similar cognitive theories due to its emphasis on behavioral intentions and inclusion of social norms as significant influencing factors (St. Lawrence and Fortenberry, 2007).

OVERVIEW OF THE THEORY

According to the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA), behavior can largely be predicted by the individual's attitudes towards performing the behavior in question, through the intervening effect of behavioral intention. The important attitudes in this process are those that are specific to the specific behavior being studied, it is not sufficient to consider the individual's attitudes more generally (Ajzen 1988; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975).

The theory also postulates that a person's intentions about performing a behavior (which ultimately determine whether they will do so) are influenced by social pressures or "subjective norms", which arise from their individual's

perceptions of what others will think about them performing the behavior in question (Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier, Pelletier, & Mongeau, 1991).

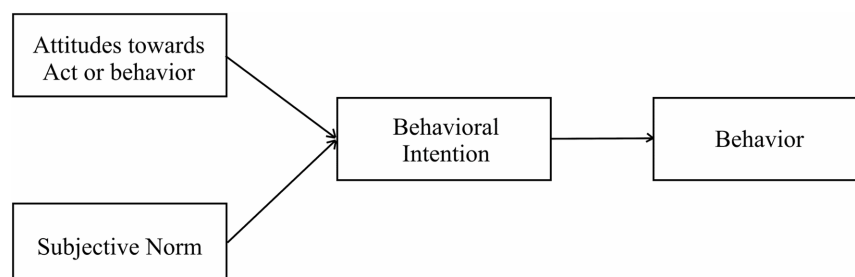
In this theoretical model, both personal attitudes and social or "normative" factors exert a direct influence on behavioral intentions, which are the strongest predictor of actual behavior (Figure 1). All other factors in the external environment influence behavior only indirectly, through their influence on attitudes and subjective norms (Tsai, Chen, & Chien, 2012).

The TRA is underpinned by the general assumption that individuals are rational and develop beliefs by systematically using the information that is available to them (Zhang & Ng, 2012). It uses an "expectancy value" approach to understanding individual behavior, which assumes that an individual will evaluate the likelihood of a particular outcome of their behavior and whether this is a good thing or not before deciding whether to act. If the person expects an outcome from their behavior that is perceived to be desirable or valuable, they will be more likely to hold a more positive attitude towards performing that behavior and have the intention to do so than someone who doesn't hold the expectation of desirable outcomes.

The evaluation process involved in deciding whether to perform a behavior is influenced, according to the TRA, by the combination of two types of beliefs: "salient beliefs" and "normative beliefs."

Within the wide range of beliefs that an individual may have about a specific behavior, salient

Figure 1. Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).



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