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Abstract

Since the 1970s, researchers on motivation and behavior have taken the stance that important human behaviors are determined by specific attitudes, intentions, and goals. In the present article, we review evidence suggesting that, in addition to specific motivational constructs, general goals of action and inaction are also vital determinants of many important human behaviors. This research examines the effects of these goals on motor behavior, cognitive performance, and political participation. Furthermore, we connect these general action and inaction goals with other important areas in psychology, including affect, approach/avoidance, energization, material resources, mindsets, and power. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of individual and regional/cultural differences in action and inaction. Overall, general goals for action and inaction are shown to influence a vast array of important behaviors, suggesting that in addition to considering specific attitudes, intentions, and goals, researchers may gain important insight into human behavior by considering general motivations.

Keywords

action, goals, inaction, motivation

In the United States, average sleep hours decreased from 1998 to 2005, while clinical levels of hyperactivity simultaneously increased (for a review, see Albarracin et al., 2008). Some regions (e.g., Mediterranean and Latin American countries) have higher prevalence of afternoon naps than other regions (Masa et al., 2006), and, compared to Eastern European cities, Western European cities display faster walking and postal speed in downtown areas (Levine & Norenzayan, 1999). Moreover, people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and bipolar disorder manifest more pronounced levels of energy across all behavioral domains than unaffected individuals. Put simply, regional- and individual-level variations in general activity levels may exist. Somewhat surprisingly, scientific inquiry has been circumscribed to specific behaviors, and the possibility of general motivations that can simultaneously influence a wide range of behavioral domains has largely been ignored.

Although this narrow focus has proven to be very useful for researchers, it has steered scientists away from investigating broad motivations that have the potential to influence a vast array of otherwise unrelated behaviors. Specifically, recent work has discovered that behavior can often be guided by goals to pursue general action or inaction. General goals for action

and inaction are motivational end states that regulate the pursuit of high-effort, active behavior versus low-effort, inactive behavior, regardless of the specific behavior in question (Albarracin et al., 2008; Albarracin, Leeper, & Wang, 2009; Gendolla & Silvestrini, in press; Laran, 2009). These goals may be socially and culturally influenced and have the capacity to influence both desirable and undesirable behaviors.

Action and inaction goals are likely to exist as a natural consequence of evolutionary pressures (Albarracin et al., 2008). Upon encountering new situations, for example, mere activity goals permit exploring solutions that are not facilitated by specific goals. Eventually, a useful activity that reduces the need for generalized activity and allows for refocusing on specific behaviors may develop. Further, when one specific course of action fails, there are advantages to taking a general approach to the problem, which may involve seeking new actions or avoiding damaging behaviors via inaction.

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Table 1. Summary of Experimental Effects of Action and Inaction Goals

Experiment	Goal manipulation	Outcome of interest	Action condition	Control condition	Inaction condition	Effect size (<i>d</i>)*
Albarracin et al. (2008)						
Experiment 1 (<i>N</i> = 98)	Word completion	Choice of active (doodling) vs. passive (resting) task	62% active task		36% active task	0.91
Experiment 2 (<i>N</i> = 38)	Word completion	Eating grapes (# of grapes eaten)	13.11 grapes		9.28 grapes	0.61
Experiment 3 (<i>N</i> = 136)	Word completion	Number of times participants freely pressed a keyboard button	35.85 responses	29.02 responses	26.67 responses	0.36
Experiment 4 (<i>N</i> = 37)	Subliminal priming	Memory (proportion of facts correctly recalled from a passage)	.58 correct		.45 correct	0.46
Experiment 5 (<i>N</i> = 36)	Scrambled sentence task	Number of SAT problems correctly solved	12.83 correct		10.78 correct	0.32
Albarracin, Leeper, & Wang (2009)						
Experiment 1 (<i>N</i> = 53)	Exposure to exercise (control) ads	Eating raisins (kcal consumed)	18.42 kcal	11.98 kcal		0.54
Experiment 2 (<i>N</i> = 51)	Subliminal priming	Eating M&Ms, peanuts, and raisins (kcal consumed)	108.65 kcal	87.77 kcal		0.34
Noguchi, Albarracin, & Handley (in press)						
Experiment 1 (<i>N</i> = 97)	Word completion	Intention to vote in presidential election (1, not at all, to 10, extremely likely)	5.05	4.27	3.86	0.26
Experiment 2 (<i>N</i> = 76)	Word completion	Intention to volunteer time for political cause (1, not at all, to 10, extremely likely)	3.82		3.00	0.53
Gendolla & Silvestrini (in press)						
Experiment 1 (<i>N</i> = 48)	Subliminal priming	Reaction time in milliseconds (ms) for a memory task	834.10 ms	891.22 ms	974.66 ms	.28

Note. *Values near .50 represent medium effects.

Definition and Effects of Action and Inaction Goals

A number of lab experiments have demonstrated that when individuals have a general action (or inaction) goal, they ultimately pursue more active (or inactive) behaviors. In order to manipulate participants' states of action versus inaction goal pursuit, studies have used various types of priming procedures, in which the participants are somehow exposed to concepts linked to general action (e.g., "active" and "go") or general inaction (e.g., "rest" and "stop"). After being primed with one of these goals, participants then engage in some subsequent task in which relative levels of activity and effort can be assessed. Tasks that have been used include decision making, drawing, eating, exercising, learning, and political participation. As an illustrative example, in Experiment 1 of Albarracin et al. (2008), participants were primed with action or inaction during a word-completion task (e.g., "Fill in the missing letter(s): ac_ive") and were then given the option to participate

in an active task (drawing on a piece of paper) or an inactive task (resting with eyes closed). Whereas 62% percent of participants primed with action chose to draw, only 36% of participants primed with inaction chose the drawing task over the resting task. For a succinct summary of related effects across a variety of behavioral tasks, see Table 1. A meta-analysis of these experiments provided a mean effect of $d = .45$, which corresponds to a moderate effect size.

Additional studies (e.g., Experiments 6 & 7 in Albarracin et al., 2008; also see Laran, 2009) demonstrated that these effects are not direct prime-to-behavior effects but, instead, that they display goal properties, such as (a) stronger goal pursuit when participants are delayed from pursuing the goal, (b) goal satisfaction and temporary suppression in response to completing goal-relevant behaviors, and (c) inhibition of incompatible goals. Furthermore, it appears that these goals influence behavior by modulating the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). Energization refers to physiological

resources (primarily SNS reactivity) that are mobilized in response to task demands. These resources have been linked to important aspects of goal pursuit, including perceived control over goal pursuit, subsequent evaluation of the goal, and ability to successfully pursue the goal (Brehm & Self, 1989). Recent work has demonstrated that simply being exposed to action words—even below the level of conscious awareness—can modulate this type of physiological activity, such that action goals increase resource mobilization to prepare for active goal pursuit, whereas inaction goals suppress resource mobilization (Gendolla & Silvestrini, *in press*). Although not yet tested, it is possible that these effects could reverse when inaction requires more resources than action; for example, inhibitory control is a behavioral inaction that requires a great deal of effort, energy, and resources.

Notably, motivation for general action and inaction can influence extremely important types of behavior. For example, Noguchi, Albarracin, & Handley (*in press*) demonstrated that participants primed with a general action (vs. inaction) goal had stronger intentions to vote in an upcoming election and volunteer their own time to lobby for a proposed university policy (see Table 1 for means). Albarracin et al. (2009) examined the role of general action goals in the domain of health communications. Two experiments demonstrated that after being exposed to messages from actual exercise campaigns (which often encourage people to “be active”) or after being surreptitiously exposed to words that are commonly associated with exercise (e.g., “active”), participants consumed a greater quantity of food compared to participants in the control condition who were not exposed to exercise-related action concepts. Unintentional and undesired effects such as these may be common consequences of invoking general motivations for action versus inaction, and therefore a greater understanding of how general action and inaction goals are connected to the broader network of psychological phenomena is vital.

General Action and Inaction Goals in Context: Relations With Psychological and Social Resources

General action and inaction goals have important connections to psychological and social resources identified in related literatures. These resources can be organized along a continuum from intrinsic (related to the person) to extrinsic (related to the environment).

Intrinsic resources

Intrinsic resources for action/inaction include affect, alternative goals, and mindsets. Work by Laran (2009) has connected general goal pursuit with affect (emotion). Specifically, participants in a laboratory decision-making experiment were primed with general action or inaction goals and were then asked to make a decision based on some information provided to them. Importantly, the information varied from simple to complex, and the results suggested that when the task matched

the participants’ general goal (i.e., action goal + complex information or inaction goal + simple information), participants’ postdecision affect was the most positive. The postdecision affect mediated (was responsible for) intentions to engage in the behavior at a later point in time, indicating that the operation of general goals can have important downstream consequences. This finding is similar to work demonstrating that positive affect motivates people to pursue specific goals (e.g., Aarts, Custers, & Holland, 2007) and should be explored further in the domain of general goals.

One important set of goals related to action versus inaction is that of approach and avoidance—goals that facilitate moving toward versus away from a target (Carver & White, 1994). Although at a basic level it is easy to confuse action with approach and inaction with avoidance, these sets of motivations are actually separable. For example, someone can avoid an undesirable object by not seeking it out (an inaction) or by escaping it (an action). Similarly, it is possible to approach a desirable object by seeking it out (an action) or by not escaping the object when it is present (an inaction). Thus, both approach and avoidance goals are potential precursors for initiating inactive or active behaviors, depending on context.

Mindsets are collections of behavioral procedures associated with particular action stages. There are deliberative and implemental mindsets, which consist of procedures to decide on versus implement a course of action (Gollwitzer & Bayer, 1999). In our context, as action goals influence both cognitive and motor procedures, action goals should energize deliberation and implementation as a means of goal satisfaction, whereas inaction goals should decrease these activities.

Extrinsic resources

Extrinsic resources for action and inaction include power, capital, and space. Social power depends on people’s relative position in a social group and is defined as the ability to get desired responses from others. Higher power has been linked with action and with approach motivation (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Furthermore, powerlessness has traditionally been linked to general behavioral inaction, including inhibited speech, decreased expression of ideas, and lack of emotional expressivity (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003; Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). However, power may not always be positively correlated with action. For example, if power is perceived as illegitimate, then it is less likely to motivate action (Smith, Jost, & Vijay, 2008). Also, if inaction is conceptualized as a goal in itself (e.g., via behavioral inhibition), then power may actually lead to inaction.

Finally, resources such as social/financial capital and physical space may also influence individual goal setting. For example, wealth can increase the ability to engage in action by allowing one to access certain behavioral opportunities, as well as minimizing time that must be spent working. Additionally, having physical space (e.g., living in a rural area as opposed to a city) can increase the amount of active, physical behavior in which people are motivated to engage.

Variations in Action and Inaction Goals as a Function of Person and Environment

Individual differences

People who are high on impulsivity-related traits report moving and talking fast and frequently switching from one task to the next, even before the first task is completed. These traits seem to be partially genetic, as an estimated 40% to 60% of the variance in impulsive traits is inherited (Bouchard, 1994). However, the degree of active behavior is related not only to temperament but also to attitudes. Individuals vary in the degree to which they consider specific behaviors to be active, as well as in their evaluations of active/inactive behaviors (McCulloch, Hong, & Albarracin, 2010). These attitudes toward action/inaction can be measured with evaluations of simple action or inaction words, or based on explicit agreement with items such as "To me, action is always better than inaction." There is some evidence that these attitudes are a stable individual difference and are distinct yet related to other individual differences, including the degree to which people are goal oriented and seek cognitive closure (McCulloch et al., 2010).

Regional differences

In two nonexperimental studies conducted by Noguchi et al. (in press), regional differences in general action tendencies were measured using activity and impulsiveness scales, an index of walking pace, and diverse archival indicators of activity level, including stimulant use, newspaper and movie production, phone and internet use, frequency of physical activity, and diabetes and obesity rates. These archival analyses were followed by the two experiments discussed earlier, in which participants were exposed either to action or to inaction words and were then asked to engage in various political behaviors. Based on the results of the archival analyses and experiments, it appears that political activity is positively associated with greater action tendencies, regardless of whether these action tendencies stem from naturally occurring differences or from laboratory inductions.

A country-level ranking based on the action-tendency index created by Noguchi et al. (in press) showed that Western countries ranked higher than African, Asian, and South American countries on the aggregate measure of activity level. Analyses indicated that the action-tendency index correlated positively with political participation but not political interest. These findings, which were replicated in a similar analysis of U.S. states, suggest that action tendencies vary across regions in meaningful ways and that these differences can predict important behaviors like political participation.

Regional differences are likely related to cultural differences that dispose individuals to prefer action versus inaction. As a broad system of belief and behavior, culture often serves as a guiding framework that provides informational and normative influences for behavior at the individual level. An important cultural difference that is known to influence goal setting and pursuit is religious background: A number of religions, most notably Protestantism, have a moralized view of action,

such that members of these religions are socialized to have strong, normative preferences for active and productive behaviors (Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Weber, 1904/1992). Furthermore, certain cultures may encourage individual members to personally take action in response to life circumstances, whereas other cultures may encourage a more passive, accommodating approach to life events (Cohen & Leung, 2011). Although the implications of these cultural attitudes toward action and inaction goals have yet to be explicitly tested, individuals who are part of a religion or culture that prescribes action at the expense of inaction should be likely to pursue action goals more frequently and intensely than inaction goals. The pursuit of these goals may not only produce high levels of work but also induce unexpected behaviors such as overeating.

Conclusions

Although a focus on specific attitudes, intentions, and goals has allowed researchers to make important progress in the science of motivation and behavior, recent work on general action and inaction goals has demonstrated that it is also vitally important to consider broad, domain-general motivations activated at the personal and environmental levels. Specifically, general action vs. inaction goals can influence behaviors as diverse as drawing, eating, and political participation. Moreover, general action vs. inaction goals can sometimes be induced accidentally, such as when exercise campaigns urge people to "be active"; this can have undesirable and counterproductive outcomes, such as increased food consumption following an exercise message.

Research on how these goals operate has begun to shed light on the physiological and affective mechanisms through which they ultimately influence specific behaviors. Furthermore, these goals share important connections with other areas of psychology, including specific goal pursuits, mindsets, power, the influence of material resources on behavior, and genetic and cultural precursors of behavior. The link between general action vs. inaction goals and these areas remains largely untested, but it is ripe for future research. Overall, the recent work on general action and inaction goals has unequivocally demonstrated that researchers must pursue an increased understanding of broad, general goals in order to provide a full account of human motivation and behavior.

Recommended Reading

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- Albarracin, D., Handley, I., Noguchi, K., McCulloch, K., Li, H., Leeper, J., et al. (2008). (See References). One of the first papers to raise attention about general action and inaction goals.
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- Declaration of Conflicting Interests**
- The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.
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