



Full Length Article

Self-efficacy vs. action orientation: Comparing and contrasting two determinants of goal setting and goal striving



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ABSTRACT

We compared and contrasted two dispositional determinants of adaptive goal setting and successful goal striving: *Self-efficacy*, the confidence in own abilities, and *action orientation*, the ability of intuitive affect regulation. Based on a theoretical comparison, we hypothesized that self-efficacy increases autonomous motivation, whereas action orientation reduces controlled motivation in goal setting. Furthermore, both self-efficacy and action orientation were hypothesized to facilitate goal striving, as indicated by a decrease in goal-related conflict (action crisis) over time. A longitudinal field study with 207 students supported the hypotheses and demonstrated substantial statistical overlap between trait self-efficacy and action orientation. The results indicate that both self-efficacy and action orientation promote adaptive goal setting and successful goal striving, albeit through distinct underlying mechanisms.

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1. Introduction

Personal goals direct and energize behavior (Locke & Latham, 2006) and provide a sense of meaning and identity, thereby contributing to subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). A goal serves these functions best if it is set in accordance with interests, values, or enjoyment (*autonomous motivation*) rather than motivated by rewards, punishments, or emotional pressure (*controlled motivation*; Gaudreau, Carraro, & Miranda, 2012; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). Conversely, a personal goal may also waste resources and cause severe stress if progress is hampered and the individual is torn between further goal striving and disengagement (*action crisis*, Brandstätter & Schüler, 2013). It is therefore important to understand the processes and determinants that promote adaptive goal setting and (un)successful goal striving.

Research on self-regulation in goal setting and goal striving has been considerably stimulated by *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1977) and *action (vs. state) orientation* (Kuhl, 1992); two concepts that are rooted in entirely different theories. Self-efficacy is the *belief in the ability* to perform the actions required to attain a given goal or cope with a specific situation (Bandura, 1997). In contrast,

“action orientation is conceived of as the *ability* [emphasis added] to self-regulate positive and negative affect” (Baumann, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2007, p. 246) and thereby “utilize one’s mental capacities under demanding conditions” (Jostmann & Koole, 2010, p. 334).

Self-efficacious individuals choose higher aspiration levels and set more valued goals (Bandura, 1991). Furthermore, self-efficacy is associated with less procrastination (Steel, 2007) and higher persistence in goal striving (Wright, Jenkins-Guarnieri, & Murdock, 2012). Similarly to self-efficacy, action orientation also affects goal-setting because it enables individuals to commit to more realistic and desirable goals (Brunstein, 2001). Additionally, action-oriented individuals easily overcome setbacks (De Lange & Van Knippenberg, 2009) and readily implement intentions (Kazén, Kaschel, & Kuhl, 2008). In the present paper, we posit that self-efficacy and action orientation have similar roles in self-regulation in that they are both antecedences of adaptive goal setting and successful goal striving, albeit by different underlying mechanisms.

Despite this resemblance, to the best of our knowledge, self-efficacy and action orientation have never been compared and contrasted systematically, neither theoretically nor empirically. In an effort to counteract the fragmentation of psychological theory (e.g., Gigerenzer, 2010), this article is the first – though not an exhaustive – attempt to identify the commonalities and differences of self-efficacy and action orientation. We first compare the two concepts from a theoretical perspective and demonstrate that the

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distinct concepts of self-efficacy and action orientation entail strikingly similar hypotheses regarding goal setting and goal striving. Second, we compare the roles of self-efficacy and action orientation empirically, using autonomous vs. controlled motivation as criteria of adaptive goal setting and (un)successful goal striving, respectively. Both with respect to goal setting and goal striving, we attempt to demonstrate that self-efficacy and action orientation impact distinct aspects of self-regulation.

1.1. Self-efficacy

The majority of research on self-efficacy uses Bandura's (1977) *social cognitive theory* as a theoretical framework. Opposing behaviorist theories, this theory supposes a proactive and self-reflective agent on the personal level and explains behavior in terms of concepts accessible to introspection, such as beliefs about the self (Pajares, 2002).

According to social cognitive theory, self-regulation involves three sequential processes: (a) *Self-monitoring* collects information about own behavior and its results. (b) During a *judgment process*, the individual compares these observations to set standards, such as personal goals. This process results in evaluative (c) *self-reactions* (e.g., emotions such as pride or guilt), which are determined by attributions of the behavior to internal or external causes and by the behavior's relevance to core values and well-being. Self-reactions "provide the mechanism by which standards [e.g., goals] regulate courses of action" (Bandura, 1991, p. 256) in that persons seek positive self-reactions and try to avoid negative ones. Self-monitoring and judgment processes may also result in an adjustment of existing or setting of new goals. Self-efficacy is a key mechanism in all of these processes as it partly determines the interpretation of own behavior, attainments, and failures (Pajares, 2002), thus influencing goal setting and goal striving.

1.1.1. Self-efficacy and goal setting

Efficacy beliefs "affect the slate of options people consider" (Bandura, 2012, p. 13) for goal setting and thereby influence both aspiration level and content of goals. Strong efficacy beliefs lead to higher achievement standards but also raise the limit regarding what options are subjectively realistic. Furthermore, people put higher value on activities they feel efficacious in (Bandura, 1991), because the belief in one's competence promotes internalization (Ryan & Deci, 2000) of activities, causing higher autonomous motivation. Thus, highly efficacious individuals may also have a wider array of autonomously motivating goal options.

1.1.2. Self-efficacy and goal striving

The tendency to set ambitious goals partially mediates the positive effects of self-efficacy on performance (Bandura & Jourden, 1991), as was shown for example in undergraduate students attending a statistics class (Diefendorff, 2004), but there are further effects of self-efficacy. Self-efficacious individuals tend to attribute failures or negative feedback to changeable causes (e.g., a lack of effort or learnable skills) instead of enduring properties (e.g., intelligence). This motivates them to invest more time and resources (Bandura, 1991) and reduces stress and anxiety due to setbacks (Bandura, 1992) or high demands (Parker, Jimmieson, & Johnson, 2013). Accordingly, it has been shown that self-efficacy is highly correlated with low stress reactivity (Schulz, Jansen, & Schlotz, 2005) and burnout (Pruessner, Hellhammer, & Kirschbaum, 1999).

1.2. Action orientation

Action (vs. state) orientation is rooted in Kuhl's *personality systems interaction theory* (Kuhl, 2000), which is based on a functional approach. That is, self-regulation is not considered the capacity of

one central executive on the personal level but the result of four subpersonal systems that entail different modes of processing when activated (Kuhl & Koole, 2004). Two of them deserve special mentioning: The *integrated self* or *extension memory* is a vast associative network of self-related representations such as needs and emotional preferences that are integrated simultaneously and holistically (Baumann & Kuhl, 2003). Due to the associative mode of functioning, the processes are implicit, but their outcomes – such as priorities and wishes – may reach consciousness. The *intention memory*, in contrast, has an analytical, sequential mode of functioning that is akin to inner speech. It maintains conscious, future-directed representations, such as goals, norms, and expectations (Kuhl, 2001). The remaining two systems are the *intuitive behavior control* and the *object recognition* systems, both of which we will not explain in detail. Crucially, the relative activation of all systems is modulated by positive and negative affect (Fuhrmann & Kuhl, 1998). Therefore, action orientation, the trait ability to regulate affect according to situational demands (Koole & Fockenberg, 2011), is a major determinant of goal setting and goal striving.¹

1.2.1. Action orientation and goal setting

In order to set goals in line with one's needs and wishes, the intention memory needs access to wishes and preferences originating from the integrated self, which requires *negative affect* to be low (Kuhl, 1992). High negative affect would activate more analytical functions focusing on error detection (object recognition system; Kuhl & Koole, 2004) that suppress the holistic processes of the integrated self. Therefore, whenever individuals cannot down-regulate negative affect, such as anger or anxiety, access to the integrated self is inhibited and self-incongruent goals are likely to be adopted (*self-infiltration*; Baumann & Kuhl, 2003). Additionally, self-infiltration may also arise from a state of *hesitation*, that is, when the individual cannot raise positive affect and action initiation is blocked. Hesitation typically involves prolonged pondering of plans (*over-maintenance*) that can alienate a goal from the underlying needs or values it originated from (Quirin & Kuhl, 2009). Accordingly, action orientation has been shown to reduce the risk of self-infiltration (Baumann & Kuhl, 2003). Likewise, Herrmann and Brandstätter (2013) found a correlation between action orientation and autonomous (vs. controlled) motivation (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) of students' academic goals.

1.2.2. Action orientation and goal striving

After goal setting, behavioral plans need to be designed by the intention memory and opportunities to act have to be anticipated. When an opportunity occurs, spontaneous action (initiated by intuitive behavior control) requires a rise in positive affect (*self-motivation*). Thus, successful goal-striving involves flexibly alternating phases of planning and acting due to continuous regulation of positive affect (Kuhl & Koole, 2004), which is easier for action-oriented individuals. Accordingly, action-oriented subjects procrastinate less (Blunt & Pychyl, 1998) and are quicker and more likely to implement own intentions (Kazén et al., 2008). Individuals low in action orientation, in contrast, often remain in a state of over-maintenance, that is, analytic deliberation and re-evaluation of action plans (Ruigendijk & Koole, 2014). An illustrative example is the student who constantly revises the question of a term paper, unable to commit to an outline and start writing.

¹ Two facets relating to positive and negative affect can be discriminated, termed *decision-related* and *threat-related* action (vs. state) orientation, respectively. The facets similarly influence both goal setting and goal striving, as is elucidated in Sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2. Therefore, and for the sake of brevity and comprehensibility, our theoretical and empirical comparison of action orientation to self-efficacy focuses on the higher-order construct.

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