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Original article

Intention stability: Literature and methodological review

La stabilité de l'intention : revue de la littérature et méthodologique

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. – It has been argued that intention stability is a pre-eminent determinant of individuals' ability to direct their behaviour over time.

Objective. – The aim of the review was to detail the existing literature and examine whether the relationships described are reliably indexed by the array of operationalisations of the construct.

Methods. – Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed, and EMBASE were searched for English language articles reporting use of the construct in moderating a relationship between an IV and behaviour.

Results. – Eleven studies met the inclusion criteria. We identified six methods of estimating intention stability. The ostensible finding of the review was that greater intention stability associated with a stronger positive relationship between intention and behaviour. These findings are, however, largely invalidated by the serious flaws in measurement methods.

Conclusion. – Further thought must be given to the construct as an attribute of the individual, and how this attribute should be operationalised. The usefulness of "intention stability" will not be able to be evaluated prior to definition of a measurement model and its psychometric validation.

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R É S U M É

Objectif. – Il a été avancé que la stabilité de l'intention est un déterminant prédominant de la capacité qu'ont les individus à orienter leur comportement au fil du temps. L'objectif de cette analyse était de détailler la littérature existante et de vérifier si l'on peut rendre compte des relations décrites entre intention et comportement par les différentes opérationnalisations du concept de « stabilité de l'intention ».

Méthodologie. – Web of Science, PsycINFO, PubMed et EMBASE ont été passés en revue à la recherche d'articles (en langue anglaise) rapportant l'utilisation du concept de stabilité de l'intention pour modérer le lien entre une variable indépendante et un comportement.

Résultats. – Onze études se sont révélées conformes aux critères d'inclusion. Nous avons identifié six méthodes visant à estimer la stabilité de l'intention. L'apport majeur de cette étude réside dans le constat qu'une stabilité d'intention plus élevée est associée à un lien positif plus fort entre intention et comportement. Ces résultats doivent, cependant, être relativisés en raison de sérieux biais dans les méthodes de mesure analysées.

Conclusions. – Une plus ample réflexion devra être menée sur le concept de stabilité de l'intention en tant qu'attribut de l'individu et sur la manière dont cet attribut devrait être opérationnalisé. L'utilité de la stabilité d'intention ne pourra être correctement évaluée tant qu'un modèle de mesure n'aura pas été défini et psychométriquement validé.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Intention is a powerful cognitive determinant of behaviour, and is specified as the most proximal determinant of behaviour by several theories, including the Theory of Reasoned Action, the Theory

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of Planned Behaviour, and Protection Motivation Theory (Ajzen, 1991; Rogers, 1983; Webb & Sheeran, 2006). The theory of planned behaviour posits that intention to perform a behaviour (e.g. I intend to exercise energetically for 30 minutes or more on at least 3 days a week) is the proximal determinant of said behaviour. Intentions embody the individual's commitment to strive to perform a behaviour, representing the sum of their motivation towards its accomplishment. Intentions are proposed to be determined by, and mediate the effect of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control.

Meta-analytic studies indicate that the TPB accounts for between 39% to 42% of the variance in intentions (Ajzen, 1991; Armitage & Conner, 2001; Conner & Armitage, 1998; Conner, Norman, & Bell, 2002; Godin & Kok, 1996; Sheeran & Orbell, 1998), indicating that the construct is well understood in the context of the model. Moreover, in prospective studies examined in a meta-analysis of ten meta-analyses (Sheeran, 2002), the sample-weighted average correlation between intention and behaviour was .53, with intention accounting for 28% of the variance in behaviour, suggesting that a change in intention should have a large effect on behaviour. Webb and Sheeran (2006) note that despite the problematic nature of inferring causality from correlational designs, the assumption that changes in intention causes changes in behaviour has led to the use of intention as a proxy for behaviour in intervention outcome evaluations. However, in their meta-analysis of 47 experimental tests of the intention-behaviour relationship, they found that medium to large changes in intention resulted in only small to medium changes in behaviour.

It has been suggested that the apparent discrepancy between intention and behaviour may be the result of a failure to take account of variables that may moderate the (Conner et al., 2002) intention-behaviour relationship (Sheeran & Abraham, 2003). Ajzen (1991) has noted that the TPB could be extended if further constructs are found to enhance its predictive validity. Constructs that have been found to moderate the strength of cognition-behaviour relationship include accessibility (Bassili, 1996; Fazio & Williams, 1986), direct experience (Millar & Millar, 1996), personal relevance (Verplanken, 1989), certainty (Bassili, 1993), ambivalence (Armitage & Conner, 2000), temporal stability (Conner et al., 2002), past behaviour (Kashima, Gallois, & McCamish, 1993), self-schemas (Kendzierski & Whitaker, 1997), and attitudinal versus normative control (Sheeran, Norman, & Orbell, 1999). A recent meta-analysis (Cooke & Sheeran, 2004) confirmed that accessibility, certainty, direct experience and temporal stability significantly moderate the intention-behaviour relationship, with temporal stability having the largest moderating effect, and being significantly stronger than certainty and direct experience, with the difference between it and accessibility approaching significance ($p = .07$). Furthermore, a recent study (Sheeran & Abraham, 2003) concurrently tested intention stability, intention certainty, past behavior, self-schema, anticipated regret, and attitudinal versus normative control for moderating effects upon the intention-behaviour relationship. Each was found to be a significant moderator of the relationship. Additionally, intention stability was found to mediate the moderating effects of the other constructs upon the intention-behaviour relationship. It was concluded that the moderating effects of these constructs were due to their associations with intention stability, in that each of them are associated with intention strength, and that temporal stability is the defining property of strong intentions.

1.2. Intention stability

The concept of intention stability stems from prior work on attitude stability (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Stability is one of many meta-properties considered to be related to construct strength

(Prislin, 1996). In the context of attitudes, Sheeran, Orbell, and Trafimow (1999) suggest that "the extent to which an attitude remains unchanged over time regardless of whether or not it is unchallenged" (p. 722) encapsulates the concept. As such stability may be operationalised as an operative measure, based on a computation, rather than a direct meta self-report; consequently, it may be less likely to be swayed by self-presentation processes (Conner, Sheeran, Norman, & Armitage, 2000; Sheeran, Orbell, et al., 1999).

In addition to the strength related properties of intention stability, other explanatory mechanisms by which intention stability may account for additional variance in behaviour have been posited. Studies have found that the time between intention measurement and behaviour is negatively related to the strength of the intention-behaviour relationship (Sheeran & Orbell, 1998; Trafimow & Miller, 1996). This attenuation may be the result of the additional opportunities to encounter new information or obstacles that alter motivation between the measurement of intention and the performance of a behaviour. Additionally, studies have found that past behaviour is the pre-eminent predictor of behaviour (Ouellette & Wood, 1998). However, it may be that relationship between the two is a function of the relationship between past cognitions and past behaviour (Sutton, 1994). As such, inclusion of intention moderated by intention stability would reduce this relationship, and intention stability would moderate the past behaviour-future behaviour relationship (Sheeran, Orbell, et al., 1999).

It is arguable then that stability of intention may be viewed as a pre-eminent determinant of individuals' ability to direct their behaviour over time. This conclusion is compatible with Ajzen's (1996) acknowledgment that intention stability is a precondition of the relationship between intention and behaviour: "to obtain accurate prediction of behaviour, intentions and perceptions of behavioural control must remain reasonably stable over time until the behaviour is performed" (p. 389).

1.3. Measurement

As has been previously described elsewhere (Sheeran, Orbell, et al., 1999) two early studies of the effects of intention stability were flawed (Bagozzi & Yi, 1989; Doll & Ajzen, 1992). The results were mixed, with Bagozzi and Yi (1989) found no moderating effect, whereas Doll and Ajzen (1992) did find that intention stability was operating as a moderator. However, rather than calculating intention stability from measures of intention taken prior to the performance of the focal act, they used pre-behaviour and post-behaviour intention measures to calculate intention stability. This approach confounds intention stability with experience and its attendant effects on cognition, albeit that Conner and Godin (2007) report that re-analysis of datasets indicates that using this approach doesn't affect findings compared to when the intention and behaviour measures are temporally separate. Studies have indicated it to a key moderator (Cooke & Sheeran, 2004) and mediator of other variables that moderate the intention behaviour relationship (Sheeran & Abraham, 2003). Moreover, a recent review re-analysed eight datasets from studies that had previously not reported effects of intention stability on the intention-behaviour relationship. It found that in six studies that varied across a range of health behaviours, from general health goals to specific acts, there was a significant interaction between intention and intention stability. Higher stability associated with a stronger intention-behaviour relationship, with an overall correlation of .6 between intention and behaviour for stable intentions compared with .27 for unstable intentions.

Given the apparently well-established status of intention stability as a key construct in understanding behaviour, it seemed worthwhile to examine the operationalisation of the construct and

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