



Predicting constructive communication using the theory of planned behavior



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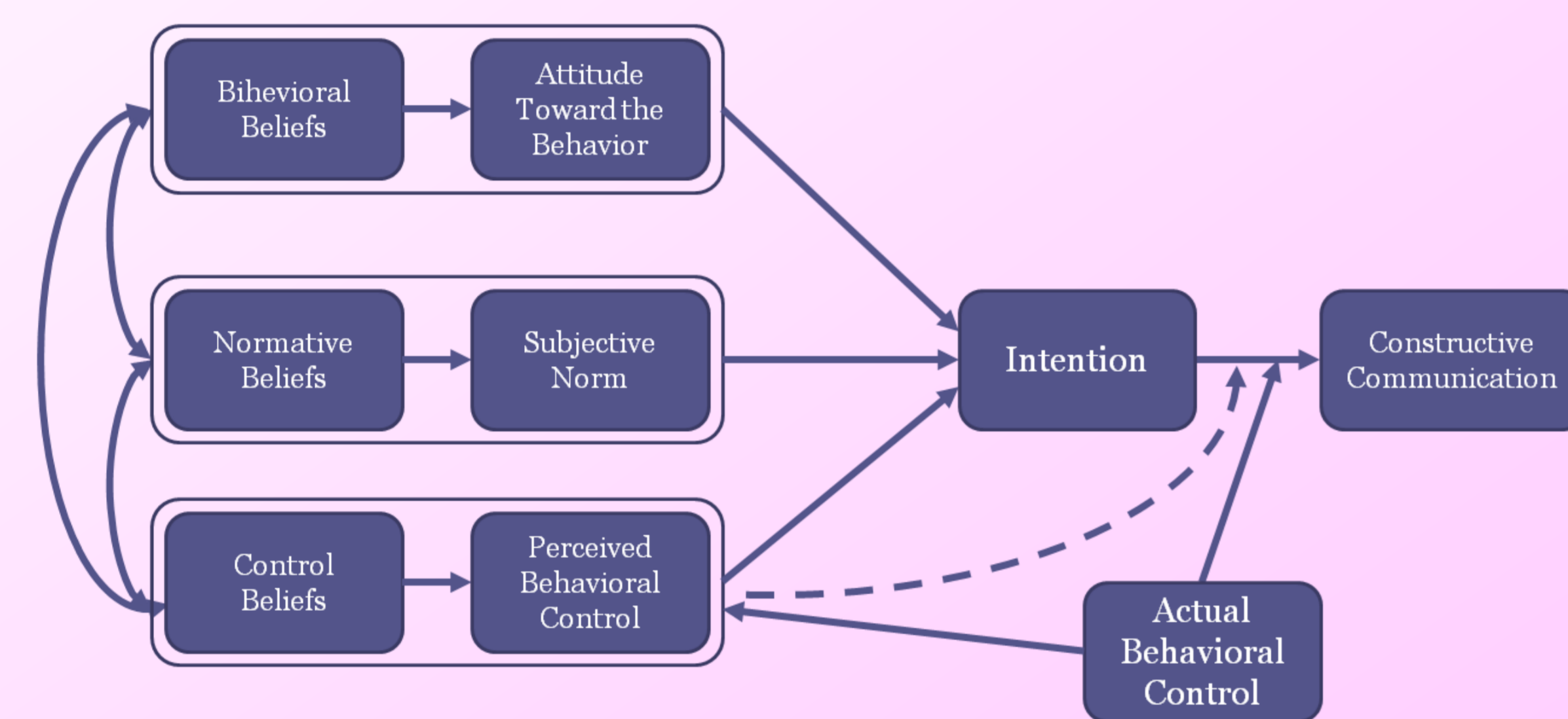
Research project “Development of a new model of communication during conflicts in close relationships”

Introduction

The theory of planned behavior, which emphasizes cognitive self-regulation as an important aspect of human behavior, is one of the most frequently used models in predicting human behavior. According to this theory, human behavior is guided by three types of considerations: *behavioral beliefs*, *normative beliefs* and *control beliefs* (see model below). Behavioral beliefs produce a favorable/unfavorable *attitude toward the behavior*, the result of normative beliefs is *subjective norm*, while control beliefs give rise to *perceived behavioral control*. When combined, these factors lead to the formation of a behavioral *intention*, which is usually the strongest predictor of actual behavior. However, this theory was not often considered to predict behaviors in close relationships. One of the main aspects of a healthy relationship is constructive communication, especially during conflicts. The ways in which couples resolve conflicts are predictive for divorce, and correlate with the satisfaction and quality of a relationship.

Aim

To examine whether constructive communication during conflict, measured by The Communication Patterns Questionnaire, can be predicted by the variables proposed in the theory of planned behavior.



Method

The sample consisted of 168 young adults currently in a relationship, aged between 18 and 30 years (55% female, 44% male).

Measures

- The *Theory of planned behavior questionnaire*, constructed following Ajzen's (2006) instructions, consisting of 40 items
 - 1. Behavioral Beliefs, 4 items, $\alpha = .754$
 - 2. Attitude Toward the Behavior, 9 items, $\alpha = .875$
 - 3. Normative Beliefs, 8 items, $\alpha = .858$
 - 4. Subjective Norm, 3 items, $\alpha = .730$
 - 5. Control Beliefs, 5 items, $\alpha = .556$
 - 6. Perceived Behavioral Control, 7 items, $\alpha = .755$
 - 7. Intention, 3 items, $\alpha = .857$
- A month later the actual behavior during conflicts was assessed using the 7-item *Constructive Communication subscale* from the *Communication Patterns Questionnaire* (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), $\alpha = .626$

Results

	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. Deviation
Attitudes	34	91	73.97	9.79
Norm	23	77	54.33	8.83
Control	17	83	40.58	9.61
Intention	5	21	17.38	3.21
Behavior	-15	20	6.70	6.99

	Attitude	Norm	Control	Intention
Intention	.602**	.467**	.097	1
Behavior	.103	.076	-.074	.220**

Predictors	β	$R^2 = .504^{**}$
Attitude	.556**	
Norm	.275**	
Control	.029	

Predictors	β	$R^2 = .029$
1 Attitude	.086	
Norm	.001	
Control	-.148	$R^2 = .059^*$
2 Attitude	-.047	
Norm	-.059	
Control	-.153	
Intention	.237*	

The results (Table 1) indicate that participants have mostly positive attitudes towards constructive communication (theoretical scale range 13 – 91). They also express an existing norm of constructive communication, believing they should communicate constructively and that it is expected of them (theoretical range 11 – 77). At the same time, it seems they believe constructive communication is not a behavior they have much control over (theoretical range 12 – 84). The participant intend to communicate constructively in the future (theoretical range 3 – 21).

Attitude and norm as the predictors explain 50.4% of total variance of intention. Intention explains 4.8% of total variance of constructive communication. However, no correlation was established between attitudes, norm, and perceived control with behavior as a criterium (constructive communication during conflict). In the two-step hierarchical regression analysis only Intention entered in the second step proved to be significant predictor of behavior, explaining only 5.9% percent of the variance.

Discussion and conclusion

Our participants have positive attitudes toward constructive communication during conflict and they perceive social pressure to engage in the behavior. However, they do not believe they have much control over the behavior. Nevertheless, they report behaving constructively during the conflict.

The results mainly confirm the model proposed by the Theory of planned behavior. Attitudes and subjective norm (but not perceived control) explain more than half of the total variance of intention to communicate constructively during conflict. However, the predictive power of intention for the actual behavior is lower than expected, and somewhat lower than reported by other researchers for other actual behavior. Although researchers have often used regression analysis to validate the Theory of planned behavior model, predicting only the behavioral intent, our results suggest it is not a valid method to predict actual behavior. Since the main objective of the theory is to predict behavior, and not intent, actual behavior should be included in the model. Our results indicate that attitude and norm predict intention, and intention predicts behavior, but the whole sequential relationship should be examined by structural equation modelling in further research.

