

## Concept: Action control theory

### Brief overview of concept:

**Action control theory** (Kuhl, 1985; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994; Kuhl & Kazen-Saad, 1989) is a psychological framework that focuses on **goal-directed behaviour** and the role of **volitional processes** (self-regulation) in human action. Action control theory is particularly concerned with understanding how individuals control their actions, especially in situations where conflicting goals or motivations may arise.

### The importance of 'volition'

Action Control Theory places a significant emphasis on '**volition**' and '**volitional processes**', which involve the conscious and deliberate regulation of one's actions. Volition is defined by Kuhl & Saad (1989) as "mechanism that supports the maintenance of information related to the current intention and resolves conflicts between cognitive and motivational preference hierarchies". In other words, it refers to the ability to act according to one's own intentions, despite potential conflicts or distractions. Kuhl (1985) argues that people rarely face one single behavioural inclination at any given time, and there are usually several (often conflicting) drivers to people's behaviour. As a result, managing that behaviour to focus on key aspects of importance, or a '*goal*' (such as studying or learning) is challenging, and requires effort. Kuhl (1985) refers to this management process with interchangeable terms of '*action control*', '*volitional control*', and '*self-regulation*'.

### Personal Standards in Action Control

Kuhl (1985) proposes that individuals develop personal standards or norms that guide their behaviour. These standards are internalised and serve as reference points for evaluating actions and making decisions. Personal standards are influenced by cultural, social, and personal factors, but also through personal experiences. Kuhl introduces the concepts of *free won't* and *free will*. **Free won't** refers to the ability to resist temptations, distractions, and inhibiting actions that go against personal standards. **Free will**, on the other hand, involves the initiation and pursuit of goal-directed actions which align well with personal standards. The depletion of emotional resources may have an impact on action control (Gröpel et al., 2014), but this is mediated by the personality of the learner.

### Action-oriented vs. State-orientated

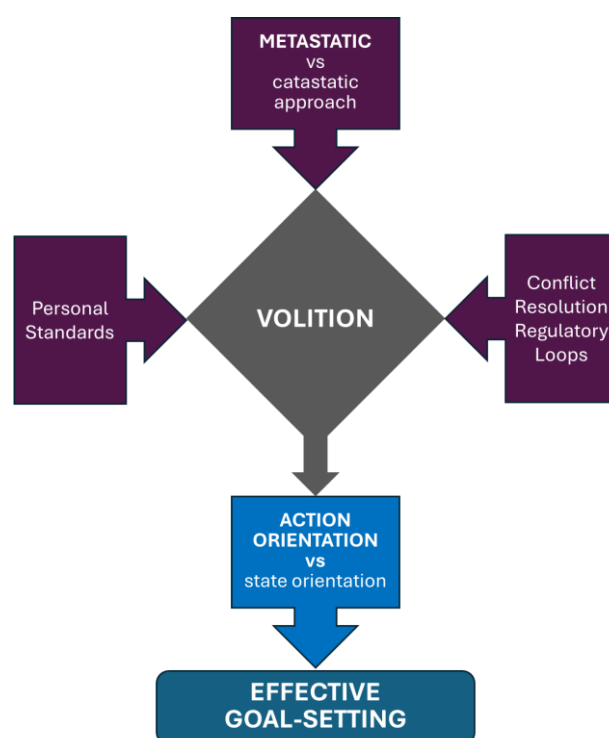
Action control theory distinguishes between action-oriented and state-oriented individuals (Kuhn, 1985). **Action-oriented** individuals are characterised by a focus on goal-directed behaviour and the pursuit of personal standards. **State-oriented** individuals are more focused on the immediate consequences and emotional states associated with their actions. Thought processes (cognitions) can be either *catastatic* (change-preventing) or *metastatic* (change-inducing). An individual who is in a *metastatic mode* will find it easier to undertake **action-oriented** activities, and work towards goal-setting and goal-achievement. This is particularly important in learning, and in assessment, as a learner needs to be able to identify their potentials and limitations, and have a metastatic approach to both (to further improve their successes, and to address their limitations).

## Conflict Resolution and Regulatory Loops

Action Control Theory is particularly interested in situations where conflicts arise between different goals or motivational states. The theory explores how individuals manage and resolve these conflicts to maintain goal-directed behaviour. The concept of regulatory loops, which represent the cyclical processes involved in self-regulation, is key to maintaining goal-direction. Regulatory loops involve the continuous monitoring of actions, constantly and iteratively comparing them with personal standards, and making (metastatic) adjustments as needed. Action control theory has been applied to understand how individuals cope with stress and manage their actions in challenging situations. The theory highlights the importance of volitional processes in maintaining adaptive behaviour under stress. Individuals learn from both successful and unsuccessful attempts at volition/self-regulation. Successful self-regulation reinforces their adaptive strategies, by exemplifying approaches which successfully initiate positive change. Conversely, failure provides opportunities for learning and adjustment in order to improve (provided that the failure is handled positively – a key factor when considering challenges such as the emotive response to feedback).

Action control theory is fundamentally linked to a learner's response to learning, and especially assessment and feedback. An **Action-oriented** individual can manage their learning, and set goals to achieve. This individual will potentially embrace the use of assessment (especially formative assessment) which enables them to set, and achieve, goals. An Action orientation also means that the learner has a metastatic attitude towards their learning, and is open to the potential of development and refinement of their capabilities. They may also be more willing to see failure or poor performance as a learning opportunity for improvement, rather than as a reason to give up.

Assessment design therefore needs to consider the potential impact of action control factors, and encourage learners to adopt an action-oriented approach, and to use regulatory loops to reflect on their achievements and limitations, and constantly set goals to improve these. Assessment therefore needs to be able to (a) identify strengths and weaknesses, (b) motivate the learner into addressing these, and (c) encourage the learner to believe that they have the capability to improve themselves and their learning.



The EAT Framework highlights the importance of action control particularly in the 'Assessment Feedback' sub-dimensions. AF1 (the provision of meaningful feedback) highlights that feedback needs to feed *forward* to the future use and development of skills, and has key formative impacts on the learner. If feedback is understandable, focused, relevant, and motivational, it will enhance the 'free will' perspectives of the learner, and encourage a metastatic mindset. Confusing, unhelpful, or confrontational feedback will encourage a state-oriented mode, and catastatic approach where they do not see opportunities to improve, and view any further effort as pointless (a '*free-won't*' approach). AF2 (provision of early feedback) underpins the need to support a 'free-will' metastatic approach, and to see the opportunities for making

changes in behaviour and outcomes. AF3 and AF4 (use of peer- and self-feedback) highlight mechanisms that support an action-control approach, with self-regulation of the learning, rather than a state-oriented approach, maintaining a status quo and not having a personal stake in learning.

Subdimension AL3 (clarifying student entitlement) and AL4 (highlighting the requirements of the discipline) also feed into transforming the learner from a catastrophic to a metastatic (agentic) position. Designing assessments that are meaningful and authentic (AD2) as well as inclusive (AD3) also heavily support the framing of the learner as a metastatic agent in their learning. Using the EAT framework to highlight self-control and an 'action' approach is a powerful way of designing assessments that enhance a student's 'volition', goal-setting, and willingness to learn.

## References

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