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**Outcome Expectancies**

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**Title of entry:** Outcome Expectancies

**Synonyms:** anticipated outcomes, expected consequences, outcome beliefs, outcome expectations

**Definition:** Outcome expectancies are defined as the believed consequences of a person's behavior. More specifically, outcome expectancies refer to the anticipation of physical, self-evaluative (or affective), and social outcomes of one's behavior.

**Introduction:** Human behavior is driven by forethought as a temporal extension of agency reflecting forward-directed planning (Bandura, 2001). Forethought is not only expressed by setting goals (Locke & Latham, 1990), but also by constructing outcome expectancies from people's "observed conditional relations between environmental events in the world around them" (Bandura, 2001, p. 7). Outcome expectancies are the believed consequences of a person's prospective behavior (Bandura, 1986, 2001), and relevant for behavior and actions of all kind ranging from health and well-being related actions (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2016) to self-directed career and organizational behavior (Lent, 2013).

**Main Text:**

***Outcome Expectancies in Expectancy-value Theories***

When people decide upon performing a behavior, they consider what they will likely gain or lose as a consequence of their behavior. Expectancy or expectation referring to an outcome therewith refers to the "perceived likelihood that an action will be followed by a particular consequence" (Feather, 1982, p.1). The weighing of expected consequences of a person's behavior is a central element of expectancy-value theories (for a review, see Feather, 1982), including for example Atkinson's (1957) theory of achievement motivation. For

Atkinson (1957), expectancy—the subjective probability that performing a behavior will have a certain consequence—is one factor in the multiplicative function of motivation to perform behavior ( $Motivation = f(Motive * Expectancy * Incentive)$ ).

Different expectancy-value theories have in common that behavior and its related consequences are based on cognitive means-end structures involving beliefs about the consequences of a person's behavior. Feather (1982) uses the analogy of a map to highlight the cognitive process involved when deciding on a course of action. He argues that people have cognitive maps to examine the likely implications of alternative actions and to evaluate the anticipated consequences. When people plan their vacation, they use a geographical map and take into account that some cities may be more attractive to visit than others, some routes may take additional time and expenses (perhaps beyond a person's available resources), and some routes need to be passed before others can be reached. Similarly, people construct and use cognitive maps to estimate their behavioral implications of possible actions and its anticipated consequences in other matters.

### ***Outcome Expectancies in Social Cognitive Theory***

The concept of outcome expectancies is a central element of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. In its core, social cognitive theory describes an interaction between person, environment, and behavior. While earlier approaches in psychology have seen behavior as a function of an interaction of person and environment, this three-way interaction revealed behavior as a bidirectional feedback mechanism (so called triadic reciprocity), which means that a person's behavior both effects and is effected by person and environment factors. Whereas environmental factors capture external resources, personal factors capture internal capabilities including a person's cognitive, emotional, or physical resources.

In this regard, Bandura (1986) highlights self-efficacy and outcome expectations as important cognitive resources for self-directed behavior. While self-efficacy refers to

perceived capabilities to perform a behavior, “can I do this?”, outcome expectations refer to the perceived consequences of performing the behavior, “what happens if I try?”. In his original work, Bandura (1986) states that self-efficacy influences outcome expectations. However, newer research has critiqued this approach as several studies also show the possibility of a reverse causality (Williams, 2010).

### ***Different Types of Outcome Expectancies***

Some scholars distinguish outcomes from consequences, in a way that defined consequences, such as better working conditions or higher pay are a likely result of a given outcome, such as career success (Feather, 1982). Moreover, outcome expectancies may be organized along the three dimensions, (a) valence, (b) temporal proximity, and (b) area of consequences (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2016). *Valence* captures whether the expected consequences are positive or negative in nature, as in people expect to benefit or suffer from their behavior. *Temporal proximity* refers to short-term vs. long-term consequences, describing when people expect the consequences of their behavior to happen. Some research suggests that short-term outcome expectancies that seem more proximal to a person are more powerful in motivating behavior than long-term outcome expectancies that are more distal (e.g., Rhodes & Conner, 2010 for health behavior), yet individual differences exist with regard to considering future consequences when deciding upon performing or changing a behavior (e.g., Orbell & Kyriakaki, 2008 for health behavior; Strauss & Parker, 2018 for organizational behavior).

Furthermore, *area of consequences* captures the anticipation of physical, self-evaluative (or affective), and social outcomes of one’s behavior. Physical outcome expectancies refer to the perceived likelihood of what will be experienced after performing a behavior and may include positive and/or negative and short-term and/or long-term consequences (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2016). For example, immediately after engaging

in self-promoting behavior at work, one may receive the opportunity to lead a high prestige project (positive consequence), but also higher job stress due to the additional career engagement (negative consequence). In the long run, this self-promoting behavior may lead to higher pay (positive consequence) or chronic stress and burnout (negative consequence). Self-evaluative (or affective) outcome expectations refer to the perceived likelihood of emotional experiences after performing a behavior, such as being satisfied (at work), proud of one's (work) achievements, or feeling guilty or ashamed based on internal standards (Schwarzer & Luszczynska, 2016). Social outcomes expectancies capture the perceived likelihood of social responses after performing a behavior. At work, for example, self-promoters may expect envy or social undermining behavior from their (less self-promoting) colleagues (negative consequence), or they may expect social approval from others, as in their supervisor to congratulate them on their achievements and (positive consequence).

**Conclusion:** To conclude, people try to understand the links between their behavior and its subsequent outcomes when deciding upon a course of action. Physical, self-evaluative (or affective), and social outcome expectancies can be influential beliefs to a wide range of behavior from health and well-being related actions to self-directed career and organizational behavior. Outcome expectancies are therewith central to people's motivation to perform or change a behavior.

**Cross-References:** Related chapters to be added later selected from the table of contents (i.e., Expectancy-value Theories, Motivation, Social Cognitive Theory, Self-efficacy, Theory of Achievement Motivation)

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