

ACTION TENDENCY

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Affective Science, Communication Theory

1. Core Definition

The concept of **Action Tendency** refers to the fundamental motivational state associated with an emotional experience, representing the immediate impulse or preparedness to engage in specific, goal-directed behaviors relevant to the eliciting situation. It is not merely a behavior itself, but rather the internal desire or readiness to perform an action that has evolved or been learned as appropriate for a particular feeling state. This concept bridges the gap between subjective feeling (the emotion) and observable response (the behavior), serving as a crucial component in understanding the function of emotion. For instance, the feeling of fear inherently carries the action tendency to flee or freeze, while the feeling of anger carries the tendency to fight or confront the source of the provocation.

Unlike concrete actions, which are often modulated by social norms, cognitive reflection, and regulatory processes, the action tendency is the raw, primal urge underlying the emotional response. It provides the initial directionality of the response system. According to major proponents in affective science, particularly those associated with the Appraisal Theory of Emotion, action tendencies are considered a central defining feature of an emotion, often preceding and partially determining the specific expressive or coping responses that manifest outwardly. Therefore, understanding the action tendency allows researchers to predict the general motivational state and desired outcome triggered by an emotional event, even if the final, observable behavior is suppressed or modified.

In a broader psychological context, action tendencies highlight the functional role of emotions in survival and adaptation. Emotions are evolutionary tools designed to signal internal states and prepare the organism for rapid response to environmental challenges or opportunities. The action tendency ensures that emotional activation translates immediately into mobilization--the physiological and psychological readiness to execute the appropriate action, such as withdrawal, approach, rejection, or exploration. This mobilization aspect is key, demonstrating that emotion is fundamentally tied to movement and interaction with the environment, rather than being purely a passive, internal feeling.

2. Theoretical Context: The Component Process Model

Action tendency gained significant theoretical traction within the frameworks of appraisal theories, notably Diderik Frijda's work in the 1980s and Klaus Scherer's comprehensive Component Process Model (CPM). Within the CPM, emotion is viewed not as a unitary event but as a dynamic synchronization of several components: cognitive appraisal, physiological changes, motor

expression, subjective feeling, and the motivational component, which is the action tendency itself. The CPM posits that the action tendency arises directly from the cognitive appraisal of the stimulus's relevance, urgency, and compatibility with the organism's goals.

Frijda specifically defined action tendencies as "states of readiness to achieve or maintain a particular relationship to the environment." This definition emphasizes the relational and goal-oriented nature of the impulse. Crucially, Frijda distinguishes between the tendency and the actual execution of the act, recognizing that the emotional system generates the impulse, but the execution is subject to control and constraints. For example, the action tendency of rage might be to strike an opponent, but cultural norms and personal safety concerns might inhibit the physical action, leaving only the internal motivational state. This separation allows researchers to study the motivational core of emotion independently of overt behavior.

Furthermore, the inclusion of action tendency as a core emotional component addresses a historical shortcoming in emotion research which often focused too heavily on physiological arousal or facial expression alone. By recognizing the action tendency, researchers acknowledge that the primary output of the emotional system is functional motivation, guiding future behavior. This intellectual positioning underscores the belief that if an emotion does not prepare the organism for some form of change or interaction, it is fundamentally non-functional. Thus, action tendencies provide the necessary teleological link--the purpose--of the emotional reaction.

3. Key Characteristics of Action Tendencies

Action tendencies possess several distinguishing characteristics that differentiate them from general motivation or simple behavioral reflexes. These characteristics relate to their specificity, goal-relevance, and temporal immediacy. They are inherently tied to the immediate situation and the individual's cognitive evaluation of that situation, making them far more nuanced than simple stimulus-response mechanisms.

One key characteristic is their association with specific emotional states. While two emotions might share similar physiological profiles (e.g., anxiety and anger both increase heart rate), they are differentiated by their action tendencies: anxiety demands avoidance or vigilance, whereas anger demands antagonism or removal of the obstacle. This specificity is crucial for the psychological definition of distinct emotions.

Action tendencies are also characterized by their motivational priority. When an emotion is triggered, the associated action tendency demands immediate resources and takes precedence over ongoing, non-emotional tasks. This prioritization is adaptive, ensuring that threats (e.g., the action tendency to flee) or critical opportunities are addressed immediately. This is often observed in the clinical realm, where intense emotional states override rational judgment, causing individuals to act primarily according to their immediate action tendency.

Relational Specificity: Action tendencies define a desired relationship with the environment (e.g., proximity, distance, inclusion, exclusion).

Impulse vs. Action: They are impulses or states of readiness, distinct from the actual behaviors that may or may not be executed.

Functional Goal: Each tendency serves a distinct functional goal, typically related to resource protection, restoration, or acquisition.

Physiological Mobilization: They are intrinsically linked to corresponding autonomic nervous system changes that prepare the body for the required exertion (e.g., increased muscle tension for fighting).

4. Specific Examples of Action Tendency Activation

The application of the action tendency concept clarifies many complex human behaviors by attributing the underlying drive to a specific emotional state. Consider the emotion of **disgust**. The action tendency associated with disgust is rejection or expulsion--the urge to push away, vomit, or recoil from a noxious stimulus. This tendency manifests in physical behaviors (e.g., wrinkled nose, turning away) that attempt to reduce sensory exposure and prevent contamination. This fundamental tendency applies whether the stimulus is spoiled food (physical disgust) or a morally objectionable act (moral disgust), illustrating the universality of the underlying motivational imperative.

In the context of **joy**, the primary action tendency is approach and communion--the desire to maintain contact with the source of the positive feeling, share the experience, and engage in playful or expansive behavior. This tendency promotes social bonding and resource optimization. Similarly, **sadness** is associated with the tendency toward withdrawal and passive coping, conserving energy and signaling to others the need for support, often manifesting as reduced motor activity and self-reflection, which can facilitate emotional processing.

The provided source content offers a clinical example: "Her action tendencies following the death of her father caused her to lash out and have periods of emotional breakdown." Here, the profound emotional state (grief, loss, or distress) likely activated a complex set of action tendencies, potentially including aggression (lashing out, a tendency often associated with frustration or helplessness) and withdrawal (emotional breakdown, a form of self-protective isolation). This exemplifies how action tendencies, when intense or unregulated, can drive maladaptive or socially disruptive behaviors that are nonetheless coherent responses to the internal emotional landscape.

5. Action Tendencies and Emotional Regulation

The relationship between action tendency and emotional regulation is pivotal in clinical and developmental psychology. Emotional regulation refers to the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express them. Since action tendencies are the immediate, powerful impulses generated by emotion, regulation often focuses directly on modulating or inhibiting these tendencies.

Effective emotional regulation often involves inhibiting an initial action tendency while simultaneously selecting an alternative, more appropriate behavioral response. For instance, a driver who experiences road rage might feel the powerful action tendency of aggression (to confront or fight). Regulation involves recognizing this internal impulse and overriding it with a controlled response, such as deep breathing or cognitive reframing. The success of regulation is determined by the capacity to decouple the internal urge (the action tendency) from the external execution (the behavior).

Conversely, failures in emotional regulation are frequently characterized by the uncontrolled discharge of action tendencies. Conditions such as generalized anxiety disorder or impulse control issues may be characterized by persistent or inappropriately executed action tendencies (e.g., chronic vigilance, hyper-avoidance, or sudden outbursts). Therapeutic interventions like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) often target the chain of events leading to the action tendency, either by modifying the initial cognitive appraisal or by strengthening inhibitory control over the resulting impulse.

6. Historical Development and Theoretical Lineage

While the term **Action Tendency** gained prominence through modern appraisal theorists like Frijda in the late 20th century, the core idea has deep roots in early psychological and evolutionary thought. Charles Darwin's work, particularly *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), implicitly linked emotional states to preparatory actions, arguing that emotional expressions were derived from serviceable habits--actions that once served a practical purpose in survival. For Darwin, the snarl associated with anger was a vestige of preparation for biting, a clear precursor to the modern concept of an action tendency.

Later, the functionalist school of psychology emphasized that mental states, including emotions, must serve an adaptive purpose. This functionalist perspective provided the philosophical foundation for viewing emotions as motivational systems designed to organize behavior towards adaptive goals. However, it was the shift away from purely physiological models (like the James-Lange theory) toward cognitive-appraisal models in the 1960s and 1970s that crystallized the concept. Appraisal theorists needed a mechanism to link the cognitive evaluation of a situation (e.g., "This is a threat") to the required behavioral output ("I must escape"). Action tendency served

as this crucial motivational link.

Frijda's work solidified action tendency as a formal construct by defining a taxonomy of these tendencies (e.g., moving toward, moving away, attending, rejecting, submitting). This taxonomy provided researchers with a standardized way to categorize and measure the motivational component of emotion, distinguishing it from related constructs such as coping mechanisms, which are often defined as the broader, executed strategies following the initial emotional impulse.

7. Significance in Psychology and Communication

The concept of action tendency is highly significant because it restores the focus on the functional and motivational aspects of emotion, moving beyond mere subjective experience. In clinical psychology, identifying a patient's dominant action tendencies--especially those associated with trauma or chronic stress--can inform therapeutic goals by revealing the underlying adaptive (or maladaptive) urges driving their behavior. Understanding that panic attacks are driven by the action tendency to escape, for instance, allows therapists to apply techniques designed to interrupt that specific impulse.

In the field of communication and social psychology, action tendencies are vital for understanding non-verbal behavior and social interaction. Emotional expressions, such as facial displays or vocal tone, are often interpreted as communicative signals of the underlying action tendency. A person displaying a hostile facial expression is communicating the action tendency of antagonism or confrontation, which serves to regulate the interaction by warning others away. This signaling function underscores how action tendencies help coordinate social life, allowing individuals to quickly infer the motivational state and likely subsequent behavior of others.

Furthermore, in research regarding moral emotions, action tendencies reveal the mechanisms behind prosocial and antisocial behavior. Emotions like guilt and shame carry action tendencies toward reparation and hiding, respectively, which serve the functional goal of repairing social standing. Conversely, contempt carries the action tendency of exclusion and superiority, which serves to degrade social bonds. By classifying emotions via their associated motivational impulse, researchers gain a powerful predictive tool for social outcomes.

8. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its utility, the action tendency concept is subject to certain debates and criticisms within affective science. One primary area of contention, as alluded to in the original source material, involves whether the action tendency is truly the "important determining feature" of an emotional response. Some advocates of purely cognitive or physiological models argue that the action tendency is merely a derivative effect of core appraisal processes or physiological changes, rather than a distinct, independent component of emotion.

A significant challenge lies in the difficulty of empirically measuring the action tendency itself, separate from its behavioral manifestation. Since the tendency is an internal state of readiness, researchers often rely on self-report (asking subjects about their urge to act) or inference from physiological data. Critics argue that self-reported urges are often contaminated by social desirability or cognitive reflection, making it difficult to isolate the raw, immediate impulse that the theory describes. Furthermore, different emotions can elicit similar action tendencies in complex situations, blurring the lines between them. For instance, both surprise and interest might involve an action tendency towards "attending" or "exploring," suggesting that the tendencies may not be unique markers for every single emotional category.

Finally, there is ongoing debate about the universality versus the cultural specificity of action tendencies. While the most basic tendencies (fight, flight, freeze) are assumed to be biologically universal, the specific execution and regulation of these tendencies are heavily influenced by cultural display rules and learned coping strategies. This interaction between innate impulse and cultural modification presents a complex challenge for researchers attempting to isolate the pure motivational component from the learned behavioral response.

9. Further Reading

[Appraisal Theory of Emotion \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Component Process Model \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Psychology Dictionary: Action Tendency](#)