

Acceptance speech

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Icek Ajzen, awardee in the Social Sciences category (17th edition)

It is with sincere gratitude that I accept the Frontiers of Knowledge Award in Social Sciences. It's a great honor to be counted among the honored laureates who have significantly advanced our understanding of attitudes and attitude change.

This award is more than a personal milestone — it recognizes our collective effort to understand human behavior and apply that knowledge to improve people's lives.

My work has focused on the determinants of human action. It has led to the development of the theory of planned behavior, a theoretical framework that offers a clearly structured, testable model to explain why people behave the way they do. It holds that our actions are guided by our intentions, and that those intentions, in turn, are shaped by three key factors: our personal attitudes toward the behavior, the social pressure we experience, and our sense of control over the action. Simply put, we are likely to engage in a behavior if we believe that it will have positive outcomes, that significant people in our lives support it, and that we have the means to carry it out.

The theory has been adopted world-wide across a diversity of behavioral domains. It has been used to study such health-related behaviors as smoking cessation, drug use, healthy eating, physical activity, and cancer screening, as well as eco-friendly behaviors, like recycling, conserving energy, and using public transportation. In the workplace, it has guided research on employee productivity, adherence to safety protocols, technology adoption, and ethical decision making. The framework has also provided insight into a range of other behaviors, including online activities, gambling, donating blood, voting, entrepreneurship, and many more. Across these fields, it has served as an analytic tool as well as a practical guide for designing effective behavior change interventions.

Let me share just one concrete example. In an effort to increase vaccine uptake during the COVID-19 pandemic, public health professionals crafted outreach strategies that targeted the three core constructs of the theory. They disseminated clear, evidence-based information about the safety, efficacy, and benefits of the COVID vaccine; they engaged respected authorities to

endorse vaccination; and they worked to reduce logistical barriers. The intervention produced significant improvements in the intention to get vaccinated and in actual vaccine uptake.

Of course, the study of human behavior is an ongoing process. The theory of planned behavior has been expanded and refined over time, thanks to the dedicated work of many investigators. Research into the roles of past behavior, habits, emotions, and other background factors has enriched the model, highlighting the complex and dynamic nature of human action.

My work has greatly benefitted from the support and contributions of students and collaborators I have worked with over the years. First and foremost, I want to acknowledge my mentor, Martin Fishbein. Our joint work on the theory of reasoned action laid the foundation for the theory of planned behavior. His insistence on rigorous thinking, careful measurement, and real-world application still shapes the way I approach attitude theory and research today.

On a personal note, I want to thank my wife, Rachel, a clinical psychologist. Through all the ups and downs, Rachel has been my constant companion and source of strength, support, and encouragement. I truly could not have done this without her, and I share this honor with her.

Today, we face complex challenges that demand not only new technologies and forward-looking policies but also a good understanding of human behavior. Whether we are working to improve public health, protect the environment, or enhance productivity, we need to know how to help people make choices that align with their values and aspirations. I'm proud that the theory of planned behavior has been making a meaningful contribution to this effort.

I thank the BBVA Foundation once more for this extraordinary recognition. At a time when support for social science is under pressure, your commitment affirms the importance of understanding the human dimension of global challenges.

Thank you.