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Approach and Avoidance Behavior in Interpersonal Relationships

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Abstract

Social relationships are intricately tied to health and well-being and people are motivated to form and maintain interpersonal bonds. While it is clear that social relationships can be highly rewarding, it is equally clear that social relationships or the lack thereof can be the source of much distress. In this article a conceptualization of social motivation that reflects the basic necessity for people to simultaneously manage approaching the incentives and avoiding the threats in social relationships is presented. We then review evidence that the strength of approach and avoidance social motives and goals is strongly linked to social outcomes through several behavioral, cognitive, and affective processes.

Keywords

close relationships, health, motivation, well-being

Social Bonds Run Deep

A recent meta-analysis found that the influence that social bonds have on mortality was as powerful (or more powerful) than other well-established contributors to mortality risk such as smoking behavior and obesity status (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010). Although the myriad pathways linking social bonds to health are not all clear, what is clear is that the quality of social relationships is what matters and the mere existence of social relationships do not necessarily contribute to health. For example, one of the largest effect sizes found by Holt-Lunstad et al. (2010) was the average effect reported in studies that compared high- to low-quality social support, and one of the smallest effect sizes was the average effect reported in studies that merely compared living alone to living with others on a dichotomous variable. In addition to physical health, many theories of psychological well-being posit that the quality of social relationships is central to happiness and life satisfaction, and empirical data support this notion (e.g., Keyes, 1998; Pinsky, Nepps, Redfield, & Winston, 1985; Ryff, 1995).

Social bonds and close relationships are strongly linked to health and well-being because they present the potential for powerful rewards as well as the potential for potent threats (Gable & Reis, 2001). Potential rewards include social support, companionship, and intimacy, while the hazards include rejection, conflict, and exploitation. The knife of social bonds cuts both ways,

such that the rewards of social bonds contribute to health and well-being whereas the hazards of social bonds undermine health and well-being. In terms of health, for example, research has shown that emotionally supportive relationships facilitate recovery from illness, but marital conflict increases the likelihood of cardiac death (Eaker, Sullivan, Kelly-Hayes, D'Agostino, & Benjamin, 2007; Wilcox, Kasl, & Berkman, 1994). In terms of well-being, research has shown that social bonds are perhaps the most important source of life satisfaction and emotional well-being (e.g., Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001), but problems in social relationships contribute to psychopathological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (e.g., Whisman, 2001). Finally, "opting out" of social bonds does not seem to be an alternative. Likely reflecting our long evolutionary history of group living, social isolation and loneliness are strongly associated with poor psychological and physical health (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988).

Regulating Social Rewards and Social Threats

The nature of social bonds is that they simultaneously offer both incentives and threats. In this article we briefly review evidence in support of a model of social motivation that centers on the regulation of the promises and pitfalls of social bonds (Gable, 2000, 2006; Gable & Berkman, 2008; Gable & Impett, 2012).

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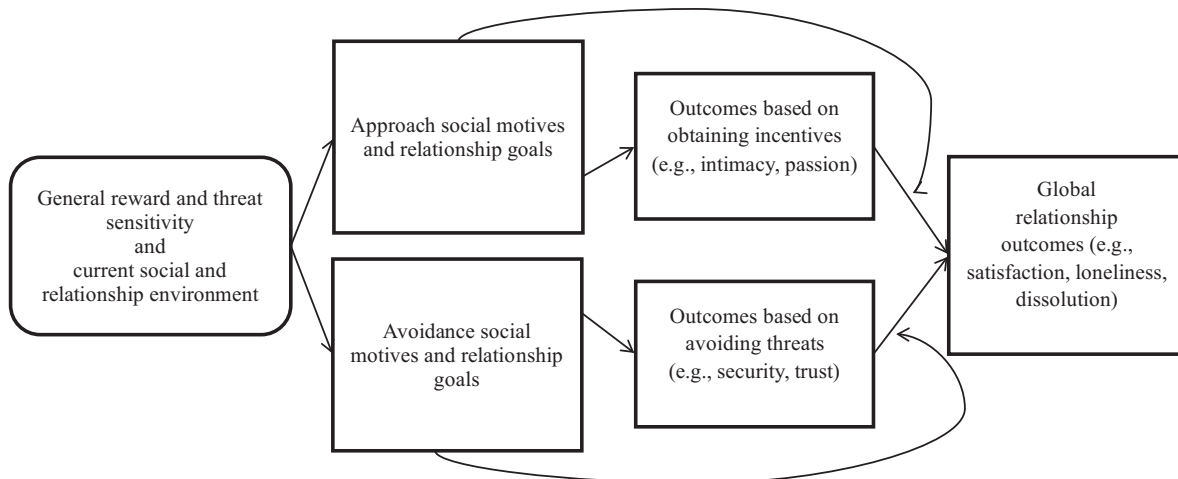


Figure 1. Model of approach-avoidance interpersonal motivation.

The model is depicted in Figure 1. This working model is rooted in the long and important history in psychological theory and research that established the fundamental distinction between the motivation to approach rewards and the motivation to avoid threats (for reviews see Elliot, 1999; Higgins, 1998). Although the lion's share of research on approach and avoidance motivation has not focused specifically on the interpersonal domain, over the years some research programs have focused specifically on social motivation (e.g., Boyatzis, 1973; Mehrabian, 1976).

Gable (2006; Gable & Berkman, 2008) conceptualized social motivation as a hierarchical model (e.g., Elliot, 1999) in which individual differences in general reward sensitivity are associated with the strength of approach social motivation (e.g., need for affiliation). Individual differences in general threat sensitivity are associated with the strength of avoidance social motivation (e.g., a general fear of rejection; Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003). The two social motivations are independent and separate, but operate simultaneously. The hierarchical nature of this model predicts that individual differences in dispositional social approach and avoidance motives, which are relatively stable traits, influence the type of short-term goals—approach or avoidance—that people adopt for the establishment and maintenance of social bonds. Approach social motives are associated with the strength of short-term approach social goals (e.g., “to make friends,” “to spend more quality time with my spouse”), while avoidance social motivations are associated with the strength of avoidance social goals (e.g., “to not be lonely,” “to not argue with my spouse”).

Consistent with the model, several studies found that differences in approach social motives (i.e., hope for affiliation) and avoidance social motives (i.e., fear of rejection) predicted short-term goals (e.g., Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable, 2006). Specifically, in these studies participants completed measures of chronic approach and avoidance social motives (e.g., hope for affiliation: “I go out of my way to meet people” [Jackson, 1974],

and fear of rejection: “I seldom contradict people for fear of hurting them” [Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1974], respectively), and either rated the current importance of a series of possible short-term goals (e.g., “make new friends,” “to not be left out of social activities”) or generated a list of short-term social goals (e.g., In the next few months, I ... “want to be fun to be around,” “don't want my boyfriend to break up with me”). As predicted by a hierarchical model, those with strong hope for affiliation motives were more likely to adopt short-term approach social goals, such as the desire to make new friends, and view approach goals as important. Those with strong fear of rejection motives were more likely to adopt short-term avoidance social goals, such as not wanting to be lonely, and view avoidance goals as more important. In a similar vein, other studies have found links between chronic individual differences in the adult attachment dimensions and the tendency to pursue approach and avoidance goals in close relationships (e.g., Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008).

In addition, social motives and goals are sensitive to different stimuli (i.e., potential social incentives and threats), such that the current social environment should also influence the strength of different social goals and the salience of approach and avoidance social motives. In addition, social motives and goals are primarily associated with different social outcomes. In particular, approach social motives and goals are primarily associated with outcomes that are defined by the presence or absence of incentives, such as intimacy and passion. Avoidance social motives and goals are primarily associated with outcomes that are defined by the presence or absence of threats, such as security and trust. These two general classes of outcomes influence more global relationship outcomes such as general satisfaction, loneliness, and dissolution. The model also predicts that the associations between motives and goals and their outcomes are mediated by distinct psychological processes. We first review evidence on the links between social motivation and goals and outcomes and then review evidence on several of the mediating processes associated with these links.

Approach and Avoidance Motivation and Social Outcomes

As predicted by the model outlined in Figure 1, research has shown that approach and avoidance motives and goals are linked with different social outcomes. For example, Gable (2006) assessed approach and avoidance motives (hope for affiliation and fear of rejection) and the importance of more proximal approach and avoidance social and relationship goals (using both open-ended goal-listing measures and responses to a list of goals). Across three studies, the stronger participants' social approach motivation was and the more importance they placed on their approach goals, the more satisfaction they had with their social lives and the less loneliness they experienced. The stronger participants' avoidance social motivation was and the more importance they placed on avoidance goals, the less satisfaction they had with their social lives, the more lonely and insecure they felt, and the stronger negative feelings they had about their social relationships. Similarly, Elliot et al. (2006) found that the strength of approach social goals was associated with higher subjective well-being and the strength of avoidance social goals was associated with illness symptoms.

In addition to studies investigating people's motives and goals regarding social relationships in general (i.e., across friends, family, romantic partner), some research has examined how approach and avoidance goals for particular relationships affect outcomes in that relationship. For example, several studies have examined approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships. These studies found that strong approach goals were associated with a variety of positive relationship outcomes such as responsiveness to the partner's needs, positive affect, and increased sexual desire. Strong avoidance goals regarding a romantic partner or relationship were associated with less satisfaction for both the self and the partner (Impett et al., 2010; Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008). Other work has found that when people cited approach goals as reasons for behaviors towards romantic partners (e.g., sacrificing, having sex) they had greater relationship satisfaction than when they endorsed avoidance goals for the same behaviors (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005).

It should be noted here that although both general threat and incentive sensitivities (e.g., behavioral activation system [BAS] and behavioral inhibition system [BIS]) and attachment differences predict social motives and social goals, the associations between social motives or goals and outcomes have been documented above these general dispositions. Thus, general temperament is an unlikely explanation for the findings (e.g., Gable, 2006). Moreover, thus far work on approach and avoidance social motivation has largely focused on the additive effect that approach and avoidance motivation have on outcomes. However, it is also possible that the two systems interact in a complex manner, such as the activation of one motive inhibiting or augmenting the other. For example, Nikitin and Freund (2010) found that when participants had strong approach and strong avoidance social motivation they experienced heightened engagement but also greater ambivalence during a social interaction compared to those with low approach and/or low

avoidance motivation. This coactivation of motivation may be particularly likely during periods of social transition (e.g., Nikitin & Freund, 2008). More work is needed to investigate the interaction of the two motivational systems.

Linking Social Motivation to Outcomes

Several studies have been aimed at understanding the processes that link approach and avoidance motivational constructs to interpersonal outcomes. These studies have focused on differential experiences, behavior, emotion, cognition, and attention as potential mediators of the motivation-outcomes associations. As predicted by the model outlined in Figure 1, processes that link social approach motivation to outcomes may or may not be the same processes that link social avoidance motivation to outcomes (Gable, 2006). Results of empirical studies, which are reviewed in this section, have been consistent with this prediction.

Targeting differential experience, one series of studies examined the associations among social motivation and the frequency and impact of positive and negative social events 2 months later (Gable, 2006, Study 1). The frequency of negative social events experienced (e.g., "My friends were not available when I wanted to socialize," "Something happened that made me feel awkward in public") was not associated with either approach or avoidance social motives. However, those with strong approach social motives reported experiencing a higher frequency of the occurrence of positive social events (e.g., "Went out socializing with friends/date," "I laughed a lot when I was with my friends") than those with weak approach relationship motives and goals. In addition, the frequency of positive events mediated the link between approach relationship motives and outcomes such as satisfaction with social ties and loneliness. Avoidance goals did not predict the occurrence of positive social events.

Although avoidance motives were not strong predictors of the occurrence of positive or negative events, avoidance motives and goals have been associated with the importance people place on negative social events when they do occur (Gable, 2006). Specifically, people with strong avoidance social motives and goals rated negative events as more important and showed greater dips in well-being than those with weak avoidance goals (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006). Avoidance motives and goals, however, did not predict the impact of positive social events. In addition, social approach motives and goals were unrelated to the impact of either event type. Thus, in terms of how motives and goals relate to the experience of events, research has shown that social approach motivation is primarily linked to outcomes through exposure to positive social events, whereas avoidance social motivation is associated with reactivity to negative social events. These findings are consistent with previous research examining the links between individual differences in general reward and threat sensitivity and positive and negative daily life events (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000).

The findings regarding social events are interesting; however, these studies either assessed events that were more or less unambiguously positive (e.g., received a compliment) or negative (e.g., was criticized) or had participants report on events

they had already encoded as positive or negative in valence. The nature of social information is that, in the moment, it is often ambiguous. Therefore, perhaps an important process linking motivation to outcomes is the interpretation of social information. For example, is a boyfriend's lateness due to a genuine misunderstanding of the agreed-upon meeting time or his "just not being that into the relationship"? Strachman and Gable (2006) examined how approach and avoidance social goals might bias the interpretation of information about a social exchange presented in a vignette story.

Consistent with the findings on avoidance goals and reactivity to social events, the results indicated that participants with strong avoidance social goals were more likely to interpret parts of the story that had been independently rated as positive or neutral as more negative than those with weak avoidance goals. In addition, they found that individuals with strong approach goals were more likely to interpret neutral information positively, recalling neutral social events from a story in a more positive light. Downey and Ayduk and their colleagues have done extensive research on individual differences in rejection sensitivity, which they define as the tendency to anxiously expect, readily perceive, and intensely react to rejection (e.g., Ayduk, Downey, & Kim, 2001; Downey & Feldman, 1996). The construct of rejection sensitivity overlaps with avoidance social motivation but is focused specifically on the very powerful social threat of rejection. Work on rejection sensitivity has shown that individuals who are high in rejection sensitivity are more likely to interpret ambiguous behaviors from others negatively, specifically viewing it as an act of rejection.

In addition to interpretative biases, it is also possible that social motivation is linked to social outcomes via memory for different types of events (Neuberg, 1996). That is, approach social motivation might be associated with the likelihood of remembering social rewards received (or missed), whereas avoidance motivation might be associated with the likelihood of remembering social threats received (or eschewed). Research has been consistent with these ideas. For example, Strachman and Gable (2006) found that those with strong avoidance social goals recalled more of the negative information presented in a social vignette than those with weak avoidance goals (Strachman & Gable, 2006, Study 1).

Another process potentially linking motivation to outcomes is differences in what features define a good and a bad social relationship. It is likely that people with strong approach social motivation define good social bonds as those that contain incentives, whereas unsatisfying social bonds lack incentives. On the other hand, people with strong avoidance motivation likely define positive social bonds as those that lack threats, whereas negative social bonds present threats. Gable and Poore (2008) examined this hypothesis in a daily experience study of individuals involved in a romantic relationship. Participants were randomly signaled throughout the day and rated the passion (incentive) and insecurity (threat) they felt about their partners at that moment. At the end-of-day they also provided a global measure of their overall relationship satisfaction. The results showed that approach goals predicted the degree that incentives

were weighted in the end-of-day relationship satisfaction ratings, and avoidance goals predicted the degree that threats were weighted in the end-of-day relationship satisfaction ratings. Specifically, compared to people with weak approach social goals, those with strong approach goals weighed passion more heavily in their end-of-day relationship satisfaction. However, compared to people with weak avoidance goals, those with strong avoidance social goals weighed insecurity more heavily in their end-of-day relationship satisfaction (Gable & Poore, 2008). Thus, there is evidence that social motivation dictates the very definition of high and low relationship quality. This process is represented in Figure 1 by the influence of motives and goals on the connections between incentive-based and threat-based outcomes and general outcomes.

Finally, in addition to the behavioral and social-cognitive processes described thus far, research has also examined whether emotions might be important mediating links between social motivation and social outcomes. Although not specific to social motivation, Gable et al. (2000) found that general threat and reward sensitivity levels predicted the experience of negative and positive affect, respectively, on a daily basis. Specific to social motivation, Impett et al. (2010) found that people high in approach goals experienced more positive emotions (and so did their partners), which in turn predicted daily feelings of satisfaction with the relationship. In short, several possible mechanisms linking different social motives and goals to social outcomes have been investigated and the results of these studies have been largely consistent with the model outlined in Figure 1.

Future Directions and Concluding Comments

Despite recent progress in understanding approach and avoidance social motivation, there remain several unexplored topics. One critical area of future research should examine how social motivation influences social bonds over the long term via repeated interactions involving the same people. It is possible for social motives to have compounding effects as they influence processes such as interpretation, memory, and affective experiences in repeated interactions. It may be that through these processes more elaborate expectancies about the behavior and intentions of long-term social partners form. For example, if memory is biased to primarily recall only the negative aspects of previous interactions, one might have an especially pessimistic and detailed expectation of how a future interaction will transpire with the close other.

Another area that needs to be addressed in future work is how the motivational dispositions of both members of a social dyad interact and influence one another's outcomes. For example, is the impact of strong approach motives in both members of a dyad additive or interactive? And to what extent does one partner's motives influence the other's experience of their interactions and the relationship more broadly? Finally, the paradoxical effect of avoidance motivation is puzzling. The evidence suggests that people with chronic and persistent avoidance motives and goals are unable to avoid the very threats they are trying to escape. This is consistent with previous research on the

self-fulfilling prophecy and rejection sensitivity in which those high on rejection sensitivity elicit rejecting behavior from close others by acting negatively in anticipation of possible rejection (e.g., Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998). These findings are also consistent with the more general observation from Carver and Scheier's (1982) self-regulatory models. These models involve a feedback process in which people try to reduce the discrepancy between their current state and their goal (i.e., approach) or they try to enlarge the discrepancy between their current state and their goal (i.e., avoidance). Avoidance goals thus provide less of a definitive pathway toward goal completion than approach goals. In addition, avoidance goals may have no end in that one might be only one interaction away from being hurt, criticized, abandoned, or frustrated. These possibilities need to be more explicitly examined in future work on approach and avoidance social motivation.

The gaps in the current literature notwithstanding, recent research on social motivation has provided a bounty of insights into the formation and maintenance of social bonds. Given the important implications that the existence and quality of social bonds have on health and well-being, continued work in this area is critical. A model of social motivation that is grounded in the long and prolific history of work on approach and avoidance motivation in other domains will likely continue to offer a rich empirical yield. The potential of the approach-avoidance framework lies in the explicit acknowledgment of the need for people to simultaneously regulate the inherent incentives and threats in close relationships. After all, the adage that we only hurt the ones we love holds a great deal of truth.

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