Approach and Avoidance Motives and Close Relationships

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Abstract

Despite the fact that humans have a deep motivation to pursue and maintain close relationships, little research has examined social relationships from a motivational perspective. In the current paper, we argue that any model of close relationships must simultaneously account for people's tendencies to both approach incentives and avoid threats in close relationships. To that end, we review research stemming from Gable's (2006) social and relationship model of motivation on both the antecedents and the consequences of approach and avoidance goal pursuit in the context of close relationships. We conclude with recommendations for future research in this area.

The Centrality of Close Relationships

Close relationships are a central component of the human experience throughout the lifespan. The quality of close relationships is intricately entwined with psychological health (e.g., Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Bersheid & Reis, 1998). Several studies have shown that relationships are an important – perhaps the most important – source of life satisfaction and emotional well-being (e.g., Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Diener & Seligman, 2002). These empirical findings echo what people say when asked what currently gives their lives meaning or when asked to think back on their lives and what made them fulfilling (e.g., Klinger, 1977; Sears, 1977). Indeed, many theories of well-being view positive and fulfilling close relationships as a *necessary* component of well-being (e.g., Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008; Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1995).

However, even though close relationships contribute substantially to psychological health, they can also be the source of considerable suffering and emotional pain. People often cite relationship conflicts and problems when they are asked what is going "wrong" in their lives (Veroff, Douvan, & Kulka, 1981) or as a reason for seeking psychotherapy (e.g., Pinsker, Nepps, Redfield, & Winston, 1985). Relationship problems also contribute to psychopathological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (e.g., Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997; Whisman, 2001; Whisman, Uebelacker, & Settles, 2010). Threats such as rejection, abandonment, and conflict have a significant impact on psychological processes (e.g., Baron et al., 2007; Downey, Feldman, & Ayduk, 2000; Mikulincer, 1998), and relationship disruptions are among the most painful events people experience (Holmes & Rahe, 1967).

The benefits and risks of relationships are not limited to psychological and behavioral outcomes – close relationships also get under the skin (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; Kiecolt-Glaser, Gouin, & Hantsoo, 2010). Several lines of research have shown that both the existence of social connections and the quality of those connections are closely linked to health and recovery from illness (see Cohen & Herbert, 1996; or

Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996; for reviews). For example, being socially connected decreases the likelihood of succumbing to the common cold virus, emotionally supportive relationships facilitate recovery from illness, and marital conflict increases the likelihood of cardiac death (Cohen, 2005; Eaker, Sullivan, Kelly-Hayes, D'Agostino, & Benjamin, 2007; Wilcox, Kasl, & Berkman, 1994). Researchers have begun to unravel the specific physiological processes that are associated with both the negative and positive aspects of close relationships (e.g., Carter, 1998; Dickerson & Kemeny, 2004). For example, hostility during marital interactions is associated with down-regulation of the immune system (e.g., Kiecolt-Glaser, 1999); whereas oxytocin is released in response to positive social interaction in both animals and humans (e.g., Carter, 1998; Taylor et al., 2000).

In short, while there is a great deal of evidence suggesting that close relationships have the potential to positively impact psychological and physical health, the research also clearly shows they can be detrimental to health and well-being. In other words, close relationships can be a source of both important incentives and threats. The potential rewards of close relationships include companionship, passion, and intimacy, whereas the potential pitfalls of close relationships include betrayal, jealously, and criticism. In this paper we present a model of how people regulate these incentives and threats. The model rests on two basic observations in the literature: close relationships provide important incentives and threats which impact health and well-being, and there is a fundamental distinction across the motivational literature that the motive to approach incentives is distinct from the motive to avoid threats. Specifically, we review the evidence that people are motivated to both obtain the incentives and avoid the threats of relationships, and that these two motivations are independent and separate but operate simultaneously. Each motive is sensitive to different stimuli (i.e., potential incentives, potential threats), and is primarily associated with different types of outcomes that are mediated by different psychological processes.

The Fundamental Need for Interpersonal Bonds

One way to avoid the pitfalls of relationships would be to forgo them completely and live without the opportunities for the rewards of social connection. This is not a particularly viable option because social isolation is associated with poor mental health and increased mortality (e.g., Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; House et al., 1988). Indeed, as we detail in this section, people have a deeply rooted and fundamental need to seek out and maintain stable close relationships, as has been documented in numerous reviews. Reis, Collins, and Berscheid (2000) concluded that because humans evolved in a social context, many of our most important basic psychological processes concern the formation and maintenance of social bonds. Baumeister and Leary's (1995) review of the literature revealed that cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses were designed to regulate interpersonal relations (see also Bugental, 2000). They concluded that human beings have a fundamental need to belong; that is, we are *motivated* to form and maintain strong and stable interpersonal relationships. Motivation refers to the reason or reasons why people behave and are moved to a certain action (e.g., Bargh, Gollwitzer, & Oettingen, 2010). People routinely list successful close relationships among their most important life goals (e.g., Emmons, 1999), and those who do not place social needs in the top tier of life goals have poorer mental and physical health (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). In short, human beings possess a powerful motivation to form and maintain strong and stable interpersonal relationships (e.g., Cantor & Malley, 1991; McAdams, 1982).

Recent research has also shown that our basic motivation to form and maintain close relationships does more than fulfill our social needs. Interpersonal goals seem to have a far greater influence on cognition, emotion, and behavior than previously anticipated. Several lines of research show that the motives and goals people have for their close relationships affect numerous psychological processes in seemingly unrelated domains (such as performance on achievement tasks), often without our explicit knowledge of their power (Shah, 2003). Social motives and goals and the internal representations of the status of close relationships influence how people think, feel, and act (e.g., Andersen, Reznik, & Manzella, 1996; Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990; Mikulincer, 1998). For example, Andersen and her colleagues have shown that when people are cued (consciously or subliminally) with a few descriptors of a significant other prior to interacting with a stranger, they are more likely to infer that the stranger has many of the qualities of that significant other, and behave in accordance with those beliefs (e.g., Andersen et al., 1996; Berk & Andersen, 2000; Glassman & Andersen, 1999).

In summary, there is compelling evidence that people are motivated to form and maintain stable interpersonal bonds. This motivation has a broad influence on cognition, affect, and behavior, both in social and nonsocial contexts. However, as reviewed in the previous section, just as close relationships can provide people with many benefits such as social support and connection, they can also hurt us when they go awry by leaving us feeling lonely and hurt. Because it is apparent that relationships provide both incentives and threats, our position is that people should be motivated to both approach the rewards and avoid the punishments inherent in close relationships. Moreover, as we review in more detail in a later section, these motivational systems are likely independent of one another. Therefore it is imperative that any model of social motivation or the need to belong account simultaneously for the regulation of incentives and threats.

Approach and Avoidance Motivational Systems

The distinction between the motivation to approach rewards and the motivation to avoid threats has a long and important history in psychological theory and research (for reviews see Elliot, 1997; Higgins, 1998). For example, Pavlov's (1927) description of two separate systems that orient an organism toward versus away from a stimulus foreshadowed recent cognitive neuroscience evidence that documents different regions of activity in the brain that are associated with presentations of incentive and threats (e.g., Harmon–Jones & Allen, 1997; Reuter, Stark, Hennig, et al., 2004; Sutton & Davidson, 1997). Indeed several contemporary theories of motivation and behavior regulation explicitly distinguish between approach and avoidance motives.

For example, in their model of self-regulation, Carver and Scheier (1990; see also Carver, 1996) describe a feedback process in which information from the environment is compared to an internal reference (i.e., goal). Behavior is aimed at either reducing the discrepancy between the input and the goal (i.e., approach) or behavior is aimed at enlarging the discrepancy between the input and the goal (i.e., avoidance). Similarly, as part of his theory on regulatory focus, Higgins (1998) distinguishes between self-regulation of behavior that is focused on positive end-states (promotion-focus) and self-regulation of behavior that is focused on negative end-states (prevention-focus). In the specific domain of achievement motivation, Elliot (1997) has made the distinction between approach and avoidance focused achievement motivation, describing approach motives as those consisting of the need for achievement which is incentive-based, and avoidance motives as those focused on a fear of failure which is threat-based.

Chronic individual differences in the strength of approach and avoidance motivation and situationally-induced approach or avoidance goal states have important implications for understanding perception, cognition, emotion, behavior, and health (e.g., Derryberry & Reed, 1994; Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). For example, in a basic visual perception task, Derryberry and Reed (1994) found that individuals with strong approach motivation showed automatic biases in attention toward cues of incentives (i.e., indicating gain), and those with strong avoidance motivation showed automatic biases in attention toward punishment cues (i.e., indicating loss). In laboratory experiments, Higgins et al. (1997) found that promotion-focused goals (approach) produce cheerfulness-dejection responses and prevention-focused goals (avoidance) produce calmness-agitation responses. In a 2-month longitudinal study, Elliot and Sheldon (1998) found that higher numbers of avoidance personal goals predicted lower well-being and higher physical symptom reports over time.

A consistent finding in work on approach and avoidance motives and goals is that they are relatively independent of one another. For example, in support of a two-factor model of approach and avoidance constructs, Gable, Reis, and Elliot (2003) conducted a series of confirmatory factor analyses on individual difference measures of threat and reward sensitivity from the domains of personality, motivation, and emotion. They consistently found evidence that the threat sensitivity measures (e.g., neuroticism, fear of failure, negative affectivity) loaded on a separate, independent factor from the reward sensitivity measures (e.g., extraversion, need for achievement, positive affectivity). The fact that these measures did not load on opposite ends of one continuum or factor means that, approach is not simply the absence of avoidance, and avoidance is not equivalent to not approaching. Moreover, the independence of the two factors indicates that the strength of people's approach motivation does not reliably predict their avoidance motivation; perhaps most importantly, the processes that mediate the links between approach motivation and outcomes are likely different than the processes that mediate the links between avoidance motivation and outcomes.
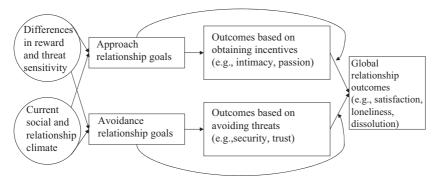
Social and Relationship Model of Motivation

Although the approach and avoidance distinction has been heavily investigated in other domains, such as achievement (e.g., Elliot, 1997), the majority of work on *social* motivation has not separately examined incentive-based and threat-based social motives and goals. However, based on the work of early social motivation theorists (e.g., Boyatzis, 1973; Mehrabian, 1976), who did distinguish between approach and avoidance social motivation, Gable (2006) proposed a model of social motivation to understand a variety of processes and outcomes in close relationships. Whereas approach social goals direct individuals toward potential positive outcomes such as intimacy and growth in their close relationships, avoidance social goals direct individuals away from potential negative outcomes such as conflict and rejection. For example, in a discussion about childcare, a husband who has strong approach goals may be concerned with wanting the discussion to go smoothly and wanting both partners to be happy with the outcome. In contrast, a husband with strong avoidance goals may be more concerned with avoiding conflict about childcare and preventing both partners from being unhappy with the outcome. Although the content of the goals in both of these examples are very similar, the manner in which the individuals frame their goals makes all the difference.

The association between distal motives and short-term goals

The approach-avoidance social motivational model posits that individual differences in dispositional threat and incentive sensitivities (i.e., relatively stable traits) as well as aspects of a person's current social environment (e.g., recent events in a person's particular relationship) influence the short-term goals – approach or avoidance – that people adopt (see Figure 1). For example, three studies by Gable (2006) showed that individual differences in distal motives predicted more proximal goals. In these studies the strength of chronic distal approach social motives (i.e., *Hope for Affiliation*; "I go out of my way to meet people.") and avoidance social motives (i.e., *Fear of Rejection*; "I seldom contradict people for fear of hurting them.") were assessed and people either generated their own short-term social goals (e.g., In the next few months, I… "want to make more friends.", "don't want to be lonely") or rated the importance of several possible short-term goals (e.g., "Make new friends", "To not be left out of social activities"). The results of these studies showed that people with strong approach motives were more likely to adopt short-term approach social goals such as wanting to make new friends, whereas those with strong avoidance motives were more likely to adopt short-term avoidance social goals such as not wanting to be lonely. In addition, in a daily experience study of sacrifice in romantic relationships, people who were high in *hope for affiliation* (i.e., high in the desire and need for social connection) were more likely to sacrifice for their partners for approach goals such as to feel closer to their partner or make their partner happy. In contrast, those people who were high in *fear of rejection* (i.e., high in the fear of conflict and rejection) were more likely to sacrifice for avoidance goals such as to avoid conflict or avoid the guilt of turning their partner down. Thus, individual differences in the strength of distal motives influenced the manner in which people set their short-term social and relationship goals.

Another important source of distal motivation concerns people's attachment orientations in romantic relationships. Several studies have pointed to the role of adult attachment orientations in shaping people's short-term goals in their relationships. An important component of adult attachment theory is the idea that a romantic partner's responsiveness can shape an individual's interaction goals, relational cognitions, and interpersonal behavior (see review by Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Attachment researchers have shown that attachment involves two relatively stable dimensions, namely, the extent to which people are "needy" and clingy in romantic relationships (i.e., attachment anxiety) and the extent to which people are uncomfortable with intimacy and closeness (i.e., attachment avoidance). Gable's (2006) model of social motivation suggests that the

Figure 1   Model of approach-avoidance interpersonal motivation.

anxiety dimension of attachment would be most strongly related to avoidance social goals, whereas the avoidance dimension of attachment would be negatively related to approach social goals. In keeping with this perspective, several studies have shown that people who are high in attachment anxiety tend to pursue goals in their romantic relationships focused on avoiding negative outcomes such as conflict, tension, or a partner's loss of interest in the relationship, as well as to obtain positive outcomes such as increased intimacy (Impett & Gordon, 2010; Impett, Gordon, & Strachman, 2008; Impett & Peplau, 2002). In short, people who are anxiously attached to a romantic partner often engage in behaviors, both to obtain the closeness and intimacy that they so highly desire, but also to avoid the conflict and rejection that they so highly fear. In contrast, people who are high in *attachment avoidance* are less likely to pursue approach goals in their romantic relationships such as the pursuit of intimacy, as these goals are likely to involve an increased level of intimacy with which they may be uncomfortable. Other research on approach and avoidance interpersonal goals (Locke, 2008), reward and threat orientations in romantic relationships (MacDonald, 2011), and caregiving goals (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2006; Feeney & Collins, 2003) provide converging evidence for the important role of attachment orientations in shaping people's short-term goals in their romantic relationships (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2006; Feeney & Collins, 2003).

Motives, goals and social outcomes

Gable's (2006) model also predicts that approach and avoidance goals should be linked with different outcomes in close relationships, and a variety of studies provide evidence for this claim. In one study, Gable (2006) asked participants to generate a list of goals, three for their romantic life and three for any other aspect of their social life; these goals were later coded as approach or avoidance in nature. Whereas approach goals were associated with more satisfaction with social life and less loneliness, avoidance goals were associated with increased anxiety and loneliness 8 weeks later. Following up this initial work, Elliot, Gable, and Mapes (2006) developed an eight-item measure of approach and avoidance social goals, and found that approach social goals were associated with greater subjective well-being, whereas avoidance social goals were associated with more self-reports of physical health symptoms three and a half months later.

Researchers have also investigated the influence of pursuing approach and avoidance goals in *specific relationship contexts*, including sacrifice and sexuality. In a daily experience study of individuals in dating relationships, on days when individuals made sacrifices or engaged in sexual activity for approach goals, they reported greater feelings of satisfaction, but on days when they did so for avoidance goals, they reported less relationship satisfaction (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). Further, in a short-term longitudinal study and two daily experience studies, people with strong approach goals in their romantic relationships maintained high levels of sexual desire on a daily basis and over a 6-month period of time in their relationships (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, and Gable, 2008).

Recent work on approach–avoidance motivation in relationships goes beyond the use of self-report measures and includes data from both relationship partners. In a combined daily experience, behavioral observation, and short-term longitudinal study of both members of dating couples, Impett et al. (2010) found that people who were high in approach relationships goals and their partners were rated as more satisfied and responsive to their partners' needs by outside observers than were people who were less motivated by approach goals. In contrast, people who scored high in avoidance goals were seen as

relatively less satisfied and responsive than were people low in avoidance goals. Both part-ners' goals for the relationship mattered too. In particular, both partners had to be high in approach goals in order for couples to experience satisfying relationships over time. In other words, one partner being high in approach goals was enough for both partners to experience enhanced positive affect and relationship quality in the moment, but both partners needed to be equally committed to pursuing positive outcomes in the relation-ship for relationships to succeed and thrive over time. In contrast, it only took one part-ner to be high in avoidance goals for both partners to experience a dissatisfying relationship, both in the moment and over time. And, it was particularly dissatisfying to be involved in a relationship with a *partner* who was merely focused on avoiding negative outcomes in the relationship, highlighting the difficulties of being in a partnership with a person pursuing avoidance goals.

Mediating Processes: Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral

Given the strong and important links that exist between approach and avoidance motiva-tion and interpersonal outcomes, it is important to examine the processes that account for these links. Because approach and avoidance relationship goals are relatively independent, the processes that link approach goals to outcomes are not necessarily the same processes that link avoidance goals to outcomes (Gable, 2008). Consistent with this point, one pro-cess investigated was differential experience of positive and negative social events. Specifi-cally, Gable (2006) found that that people with strong approach relationship motives and goals reported a higher frequency of the occurrence of positive social events than those with weak approach relationship motives and goals. Approach relationship motives and goals did not predict the frequency of negative social events, and more importantly the frequency of positive events mediated the link between approach relationship motives and outcomes. For example, people who had stronger *Hope for Affiliation* motivation at one time point reported experiencing a greater number of positive social events (e.g., ''Went out socializing with friends/date'' ''Did something special for a friend/ romantic partner'') 2 months later, but they did not report experiencing fewer negative events (e.g., ''Had a disagreement with friend/romantic partner/family member'', ''A friend/romantic partner/family member insulted me''). *Fear of Rejection* scores did not pre-dict the frequency of positive or negative event occurrences (Gable, 2006; Study 1). The frequency of occurrence of positive social events partially mediated the association between approach social motivation and social outcomes, such as loneliness and satisfac-tion with social relationships. That is, those with high *Hope for Affiliation* at one time point had more positive social outcomes 2 months later partially because they experi-enced a greater number of positive social events.

Avoidance social motives and goals, however, seem to primarily influence outcomes through a reactivity process. Although avoidance motives and goals have not consistently predicted the occurrences of positive or negative events, when negative social events did occur, those with strong avoidance relationship motives and goals rated them as more important and showed greater dips in well-being than those with weak avoidance goals (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006). For example, in Gable's (2006) work detailed in the previous section, participants provided ratings of both the frequency of events as well as the importance of events if they did occur. Avoidance motives and goals predicted the importance ratings, but did not predict the frequency ratings. In addition, avoidance goals did not predict reactivity to positive social events, nor did approach goals predict reactiv-ity to social events. In short, the results pointed to a process of *exposure to positive social*

events as a mediator between approach motivation and outcomes but a process of *reactivity to negative social events* linking avoidance motivation to outcomes.

Another mediator between social motivation and outcomes is memory for social information (e.g., Neuberg, 1996). This mechanism is especially salient in close relationships because repeated interactions with the same partner leave ample opportunity to form memories and expectancies regarding that partner. Strachman and Gable (2006) predicted that approach goals would bias people to be more aware of and expectant of the potential incentives in their social environment and recall this information more readily. In contrast, avoidance goals should bias people to be more aware of and expectant of the potential threats in their social environment and recall this information more readily. They found evidence in support of these hypotheses in two studies. First, individual differences in the strength of social goals predicted what participants recalled from a story about two relationship partners that contained positive, negative, and neutral information. People with strong avoidance social goals recalled more of the negative information in the story than those with weak avoidance goals (Strachman & Gable, 2006; Study 1). In the second experimental study, participants who were randomly assigned to have an avoidance social goal for an upcoming interaction with a stranger (e.g., try not to make a bad impression) recalled more negative information from a self-description ostensibly written by the other person than those assigned to have an approach goal (e.g., try to make a good impression). Although Strachman and Gable (2006) did not test a meditational model on a social outcome, previous work in social cognition has shown repeatedly that expectations formed by memories (accurate or not) influence the outcomes of social interactions (see Neuberg, 1996, for review).

Even before goals can bias memories of social cues, those cues must be interpreted in terms of their meaning for the individual. Some social information is unambiguous but most of it is ambiguous. For example, when a new friend declines an invitation to dinner, is it indicative of a hectic work schedule or waning interest in the friendship? Strachman and Gable (2006) predicted that the expectancies associated with approach and avoidance goals would bias the initial interpretation of information. Consistent with this prediction, people with strong avoidance goals were more likely to interpret neutral and positive information from hypothetical stories more negatively than those with weaker avoidance goals. For example, a seemingly neutral statement in the story like "he picked her up at 10:00 PM," was likely to be interpreted by those with high avoidance goals as her being picked up "late."

Emotions are also likely to be an important mediating process in the link between goals and relationship outcomes, especially given the central role that affect plays in motivational processes (Keltner & Lerner, 2009). In research on domain–general threat and reward sensitivity (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2000), strong approach motives predicted higher levels of positive affect on a daily basis than weak approach motives. And, strong avoidance motives were associated with more negative affect on a daily basis than weak avoidance motives. More importantly, approach goals did not predict negative affect and avoidance goals did not predict positive affect (Gable et al., 2000; Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). In research on goals in romantic relationships, Impett et al. (2010) focused on positive emotions as a mechanism. Within the framework of Fredrickson's (1998, 2001) broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, positive emotions broaden people's attention and thinking and these broadened outlooks help people to discover and build consequential personal resources such as social support and enhanced feelings of satisfaction (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek, & Finkel, 2008). In line with this model, in a dyadic daily experience study, (Impett et al., 2010) found

that one reason why people high in approach goals experienced greater feelings of satisfaction with their relationships on a day-to-day basis is because they also tended to experience greater daily positive emotions. Further, not only did people with high approach goals experience more positive emotions, but their romantic partners did as well, in turn contributing to enhanced feelings of satisfaction with the relationship.

A final mediating mechanism that has been investigated is the manner in which incentive-based relationship qualities such as passion combine with threat-based qualities such as security to form global evaluations of relationships. Gable and Poore (2008) hypothesized that having strong approach goals should lead to weighing the presence (or absence) of incentives more heavily in global evaluations of relationships than weak approach goals. In contrast, having strong avoidance goals should lead to weighing the presence (or absence) of threats more heavily when making global evaluations of relationships than weak avoidance goals. In a signal-contingent daily experience study, participants in dating relationships were beeped at several random intervals throughout the day and reported their feelings of passion and security in their relationships at that very moment. At the end of each day, they also reported their overall satisfaction with their relationship. Individuals with strong approach goals weighed passion more heavily than those low in approach goals in their end of day reports of relationship satisfaction, whereas those with strong avoidance social goals weighed security more than those with weaker avoidance social goals in their end of day reports of satisfaction (Gable & Poore, 2008).

Future Directions

In this paper we attempted to highlight the value of understanding motivation in close relationships from a framework that explicitly describes the regulation of the inherent incentives and threats in close relationships. We presented a model based on two basic pillars. There is a solid foundation of evidence that the approach and avoidance distinction is fundamental to motivation; and there is clear evidence that close relationships provide important incentives and threats that have a large impact on health and well-being. Thus, the domain of close relationships is particularly in need of models that simultaneously address the regulation of both types of motives because the motivation to approach interpersonal incentives differs from the motivation to avoid interpersonal threats. Moreover, we have shown that these motives differentially influence how people perceive their relationships, feel about their relationships, and behave in their relationships. Despite the progress in this area, there are some unanswered questions that top our list of future directions in research on approach and avoidance social motivation.

One important direction for future research on approach and avoidance social motivation will be to focus on understanding some of the situational influences on interpersonal goal pursuit. Several studies have focused on understanding dispositional influences on the types of goals that people adopt in their relationships, including individual differences in hope for affiliation, fear of rejection, and attachment sensitivities (e.g., Gable, 2006; Impett & Gordon, 2010; Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). In contrast, relatively little work has investigated situational influences on goal pursuit, despite the fact that situational influences are in important part of Gable's (2006) social model of motivation (see also Figure 1). What are the kinds of situational cues necessary to bring about approach and avoidance interpersonal goals? For example, would a particularly pleasant and rewarding interaction with a romantic partner make someone more likely to pursue approach-related goals, or would perceiving a friend giving you an evil glance at a dinner party make you more vigilant to future signs of rejection? This

question is also directly related to another important question for future work; given the benefits of approach goal pursuit, is it possible for people with chronically low levels of approach goals or high levels of avoidance goals to learn to focus on the positive things to be experienced in their relationships? It is important to note that, by definition, goals are short-term cognitive representations of wants and fears that should be malleable and sensitive to situational cues (Elliot et al., 2006; Gable, 2006). Similar to Strachman and Gable's study (2006, Study 2) that manipulated goals for a particular interaction, experimentally manipulating goals for a particular relationship and uncovering the naturally-occurring situational influences on goal pursuit are ripe areas for future research.

Another important future direction is to examine how motives and goals unfold over time in long-term relationships. There are two issues of interest here. First, the majority of studies in this area have examined friendships and romantic relationships in young adults. In addition, the relationships in most of these studies were characterized by high levels of satisfaction. It is possible that the associations between relationship motivation and relationship quality may be different in relationships of greater duration and commitment, such as couples who have been married for some time, or in relationships with low levels of intimacy or satisfaction, such as family members who do not get along but feel forced to maintain their relationships. It may be that when relationship quality is low to begin with, avoidance goals may have a less harmful or even a positive influence on relationship satisfaction than found in previous studies. The second issue related to understanding the role of motives in long-term relationships centers on understanding how progress on goals is evaluated over time, across repeated interactions with the same person. It is likely that the cues of progress and rate of that progress are likely to be assessed differently for approach compared to avoidance goals. For example, a husband who has the goal of not arguing with his wife is only one disagreement away from failure at any given time, regardless of how many fun and pleasant interactions he experiences with his wife. However, a husband who has an approach goal of spending quality one-on-one time with his wife grows closer to his goal with each date night scheduled. Moreover, Carver and Scheier's (1982, 1990) work has shown that evaluations of progress are strong predictors of behavior, affect, and cognition.

Concluding Comments

Consider the following descriptions of two equally dissatisfied couples. Diane and Chris met in college and got married the summer after graduation. Over the years, their relationship has been secure and comfortable. They try not to argue, and they trust one another to not intentionally harm the relationship or give hurtful criticisms. However, each has an unsettling feeling that something is missing in their relationship; that they have drifted apart and become less intimate. Diane and Chris both enjoy their own separate activities, and they seldom laugh together or have interesting conversations. They are considering separating. Rich and Mary also met in college and married shortly after graduation. Over the years they have done a lot of fun things together and had many intimate and interesting conversations. They feel passion for one another, and some of their friends have commented on how much they appear to enjoy each other's company at parties. However, they also often criticize one another and complain about each other's habits. Indeed, the smallest disagreements somehow escalate into major brawls, and neither completely feels secure that the other will not cause emotional pain or be there when times get really tough. They are also considering separating.

We feel that a full understanding of approach and avoidance interpersonal motives and their related processes have direct implications for these two couples. The first couple can be described as being low in threats but lacking incentives, whereas the second relationship can be described as being high in potential rewards but also chock full of threats. These two different relationships may reflect the strength of both partners' approach and avoidance motives and goals in the relationships. In addition, the current state of these two relationships may also contribute to the strength of the partners' approach and avoidance motives. Any attempt to better these and other relationships needs to address both incentives and threats, as well as the processes that mediate those outcomes.

Acknowledgment

Short Biographies

Shelly L. Gable is a Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She conducts research on motivation, close relationships, emotion, social support, and health. Her work has appeared in journals such as Psychological Science, the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Emotion, Personal Relationships, Journal of Personality, and Advances in Experimental Social Psychology. Her current research focuses on positive interactions in close relationships, health behaviors, and social support. Her work has been funded by the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Templeton Foundation. Before coming to the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she currently teaches, she was a tenured faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has a B.A. in Psychology from Muhlenberg College, a M.A. in Psychology from the College of William & Mary, and a Ph.D. in Social and Personality Psychology from the University of Rochester.

Emily A. Impett is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto Mississauga. She conducts research on motivation and close relationships, prosocial emotions, and authenticity in relationships. Her work has appeared in journals such as the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Psychological Science, Developmental Psychology, and Personal Relationships. Her current research focuses on the topic of sacrifice, investigating when sacrifice has benefits versus costs for interpersonal relationships. Her work has been funded by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Canadian Fund for Innovation, and the University of Toronto. Before coming to the University of Toronto Mississauga, where she presently teaches, Emily held postdoctoral fellowships from the University of California, Berkeley and the Center for Research on Gender and Sexuality at San Francisco State University. She has a B.S. in Psychology from James Madison University and a PhD in Social Psychology from the University of California, Los Angeles.

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