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The Power of the Situation: Approach and Avoidance Tendencies in Romantic Relationships

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114 undergraduates indicated how likely they were to respond in three romantic relationship conflict scenarios that varied the level of a person’s relationship investment, level of relationship alternatives, and perceived relationship repair/dissolution. We also measured participants’ personalities, goals, and relationship experience. Participants were more likely to report intentions to use approach strategies rather than avoidance strategies, especially when investment was high. Personality and general approach/avoidance tendencies were not strongly related to responses to the conflict scenarios.

Results

• People were more likely to use approach than avoidance goals overall (Figure 1) \( db=1.60-3.37, \ p < .001 \).
• Level of investment was the only situational factor that influenced the likelihood for people to report avoid goals \( \beta = 1.98, \ p = .001, \ \eta ^2 = .04 \).
• People were more likely to report approach intentions when relationship investment was high \( \beta = 5.48, S D = 1.24 \) vs. low \( \beta = 5.16, S D = 1.05 \).
• People were less likely to report avoidance intentions when relationship investment was high \( \beta = 2.05, S D = 1.09 \) vs. low \( \beta = 2.41, S D = 1.05 \).
• People who reported more approach intentions in romantic relationships were more likely to use approach goals in achievement/academic settings (Table 1).
• People who reported more avoidance intentions in romantic relationships were less likely to use avoidance goals in achievement/academic settings and tended to score lower on behavioral activation (Table 1).

Discussion

Regardless of situational factors, people were more likely to use approach goals than avoidance goals in romantic relationships. Level of investment was the only situational factor that impacted the use of an approach or an avoidance goal, with high investment linked to more approach and less avoidance. However, the lack of correlations among personality factors and approach/avoidance tendencies suggests that their usage may be affected by additional situational factors that were not assessed in this study.

Although general measures of approach and avoidance tendencies correlated with people’s responses to the scenarios, the relationships were not strong or always in the expected direction, suggesting that people’s likelihoods to approach and avoid may differ across domains.

People at least believe that they would be more likely to take active, approach responses to romantic relationship conflicts. These intentions, however, do not seem to be strongly predicted by personality variables or certain relationship characteristics.

Table 1. Average Within-cell Correlations of Personality Traits and Approach/Avoidance Responses to Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trait</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Openness</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscientiousness</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extraversion</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agreeableness</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuroticism</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Approach Goals</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement Avoidance Goals</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.19*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Inhibition</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>-.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Activation</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>-.27*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Average Relationships Between Extent of Investment and Probabilities of Approach/Avoidance Responses to Scenarios

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time of Relationship</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Phase</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Current Phase</td>
<td>.40</td>
<td>.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Phase</td>
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<td>.25</td>
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References