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

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

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Abstract

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.

Introduction

A person’s mental and physical well-being is closely linked with the quality of his or her interpersonal relationships (Prigerson, Maciejewski, & Rosenheck, 1999). Romantic relationship satisfaction is closely linked to personality traits such as agreeableness and conscientiousness (Heil, Watson, & Illes, 2004), and emotional intelligence (Mayer, Salovey, & Caruso, 2008).

Another key predictor of relationship satisfaction may be social motivations, such as tendencies to approach or avoid certain situations (Elitt & Sheldon, 1997). More specifically, a person with a high drive to receive rewards may have more satisfying relationships than a person who has a high drive to avoid consequences (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 1997). These tendencies seem to be somewhat stable, as they are strongly correlated with personality traits such as extraversion and agreeableness (Gable, 2006). It is also possible, however, that aspects of the relationship may also affect tendencies to either approach or avoid.

Using components of the Investment Model (Rusbult, Martin, & Agnew, 1998), this study examined situational factors as well as personality variables that may influence approach and avoidance actions.

Research Question

Will people’s responses to conflict situations in romantic relationships be more affected by the situation or their personality?

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Avoidance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big Five Inventory (Rammstedt &amp; John, 2007)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• 10 items, 1-5 scale</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Measures openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Example items: “tends to be lazy” and “is generally trusting”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Examples: “include: “I worry about making mistakes,” and “I often act on the spur of the moment”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Achievement Goals (Elliot &amp; Sheldon, 1997)</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 24 items, 1-4 scale</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Measures behavior activation and behavior inhibition tendencies.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Example items: “Avoid procrastination” and “efficient”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Experience (Author-Generated)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Current relationship status, duration, cohabitation, love, satisfaction, partner’s gender, how many serious relationships they have been in</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demographics</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Race, gender, age, year in school, major, and parents’ marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

- People were more likely to use approach than avoidance goals overall (Figure 1), \(d = 1.60, p = .001\).
- Level of investment was the only situational factor that influenced the likelihood for people to avoid, \(F(1,8) = 18.96, p = .001, \eta^2 = .24\).
- People were more likely to report approach intentions when relationship investment was high \((M = 5.48, SD = 1.24)\) vs. low \((M = 5.16, SD = 1.05)\).
- People were less likely to report avoidance intentions when relationship investment was high \((M = 2.05, SD = 1.09)\) vs. low \((M = 2.41, SD = 1.05)\).
- 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 characterizations.

References


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