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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 (Hell Heller, Watson, & Ilies, 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 (Elliot & 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, Martz, & 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?

### Participants & Procedure

- 114 undergraduate students from the University of Northern Iowa
- Read 3 of 6 scenarios:
  - Relationship investment (high vs. low)
  - Relationships alternatives (high vs. low)
  - Belief of relationship dissolution (high vs. low)
- Indicated how likely they were to do each of 2 approach and 2 avoid responses on 1-7 scale

### Example Scenario

"On a Saturday evening two of your close friends have invited you to go out to the bars with them to celebrate a 21st birthday. Your partner is out of town and you know that he/she becomes bothered at the thought of you going out and consuming alcohol without him/her. *You have been dating this person for almost three years now, and you are fully committed in this relationship/you have only been dating this person for a few weeks, and you haven't committed much of yourself to the relationship.*"

- Talk to your partner about the situation and don't go out
- Go out with your friends but don't tell your romantic partner
- Go out and make sure to text/call your partner throughout the night to keep him/her satisfied
- Don't say anything to your partner and stay in because you don't want to upset him/her

### Measures

#### Big Five Inventory (Rammstedt & John, 2007)

- 10 items, 1-5 scale
- Measures openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.
- Example items: "tends to be lazy" and "is generally trusting"

#### BAS and BIS tendencies (Carver & White, 1994)

- 24 items, 1-4 scale
- Measures behavior activation and behavior inhibition tendencies.
- Example items: "include: "I worry about making mistakes," and "I often act on the spur of the moment".
- **Achievement Goals** (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997)
- 51 items, 1-7 scale
- Measures approach and avoidance tendencies related to academic goals.
- Example items: "Avoid procrastination" and "Be efficient".

#### Relationship Experience (Author-Generated)

- Current relationship status, duration, cohabitation, love, satisfaction, partner's gender, how many serious relationships they have been in

#### Demographics

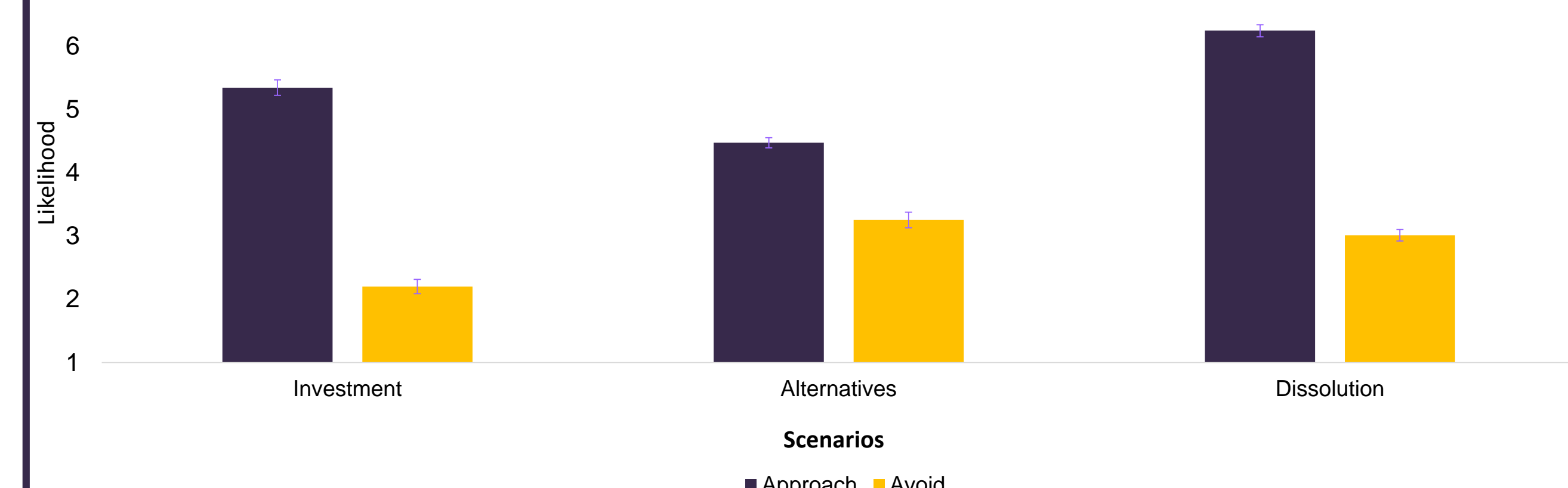
- Race, gender, age, year in school, major, and parents' marital status

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

	Approach	Avoidance
<b>Openness</b>	.05	-.07
<b>Conscientiousness</b>	.04	.05
<b>Extraversion</b>	.02	-.13
<b>Agreeableness</b>	.08	-.10
<b>Neuroticism</b>	.04	-.07
<b>Achievement Approach Goals</b>	.27*	.13
<b>Achievement Avoidance Goals</b>	.12	-.19*
<b>Behavior Inhibition</b>	.12	-.12
<b>Behavior Activation</b>	.15	-.27*

\*p<.05

**Figure 1. Likelihood of Approach versus Avoidance Tendencies by Scenario**



### Results

- People were more likely to use approach than avoidance goals overall (Figure 1)  $d_s=1.60-3.37, p<.001$ .
- Level of investment was the only situational factor that influenced the likelihood for people to approach or avoid  $F(1, 89)=18.96, p<.001, \eta^2=.04$
- 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 characteristics.

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