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Approach-Avoidance Conflict

Christian Ehrlich and Ulrike Fasbender

Oxford Brookes University

Authors' Note

Christian Ehrlich, Oxford Brookes University, Department of Business and Management, cehrlich@brookes.ac.uk, Oxford, UK; Ulrike Fasbender, Oxford Brookes University, Centre for Diversity Policy Research and Practice, u.fasbender@brookes.ac.uk, Oxford, UK

Title of entry: Approach-Avoidance Conflict

Synonyms: Intra-personal conflict; evaluation of desirable and undesirable consequences; positive and negative outcome expectancies; conflictive motivations; conflict arising from simultaneously occurring appetitive and aversive stimuli

Definition: Approach-avoidance conflict refers to a decision or a behaviour which is simultaneously associated with desirable and undesirable consequences.

Introduction:

The approach-avoidance conflict can be divided into approach and avoidance motivation; conflict arises when both of them emerge simultaneously. The classical distinction of approach and avoidance motivation can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers (e.g., Democritus, 460-370 B.C., and Aristippus, 435-356 B.C.), who introduced the pursuit of pleasure and the release of pain as guiding principles of human behaviour. More recently, approach and avoidance motivation is defined as a function of valence, where approach behaviour is directed towards a positive or desirable event and avoidance behaviour is directed away from a negative or undesirable event (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Trash, 2002).

Main Text:***1) Conceptualization of approach-avoidance conflict***

Approach motivation occurs if a goal is rewarding (i.e., appetitive stimuli), while avoidance motivation occurs if a goal is punishing (i.e., aversive stimuli; Corr, 2013). Now, some goals can be appealing and unappealing simultaneously. For example, a person might be offered a promotion with managerial responsibility, which would have a range of positive

consequences, such as higher salary and status (i.e., rewarding) but at the same time may require more time and flexibility to fulfil the new position resulting in negative consequences, such as less time for family and friends (i.e., punishing). In this example, the possible promotion functions simultaneously as appetitive and aversive stimuli. As a result, the person is likely to experience a conflict whether to approach or avoid the offered promotion. In psychology, the approach-avoidance conflict has been introduced by Kurt Lewin describing two competing forces of positive and negative valence that drive human behaviour in parallel (Lewin, 1935). There are also other types of conflicts, including the approach-approach conflict which arises when two rewarding forces are activated; for example if a person considers two events worth attending, and the avoidance-avoidance conflict which arises when two punishing forces are activated; for example if a person needs to decide between going to the dentist or doing unwanted house chores. All types of conflicts have been discussed throughout the different areas of psychology, including motivation psychology, occupational psychology, social psychology, and psychopathology.

2) Dynamics of approach-avoidance conflicts

According to Lewin (1935) three factors can be seen to influence the dynamics of an occurring approach-avoidance conflict; these are magnitude of valence, state of tension and psychological distance. With regard to magnitude of valence, the approach-avoidance conflict may result in approaching behaviour when the attractions of the approach tendencies are strong enough to counterbalance the unpleasantness of the avoidance tendencies or vice versa. Further, the way in which way an approach-avoidance conflict is solved also depends on the state of tension which is created by the two conflicting needs (e.g. being hungry vs. wanting to lose weight).

With regard to psychological distance, experiments by Miller (1944; 1959), who analysed the behaviour of rats when choosing between different values of food rewards and electric shock, as well as research by others (Epstein & Fenz, 1965) suggest that desirability and undesirability of approach and avoidance tendencies are not stable but change depending on the closeness to the event, in time or space. Here, Epstein and Fenz (1965) could show that for people with little experience with regard to the anticipated approach-avoidance conflict, the gradient of the avoidance tendency is steeper (i.e. the avoidance tendency increases stronger) when getting closer to the behaviour in question (in their study a parachute jump) compared to the gradient of the approach tendency. In other words, the closer one gets to the conflict-inducing event the stronger the increase of the avoidance tendency – relative to the approach tendencies. Therefore, at a distance, the behaviour in question seems more desirable (Blanchard & Blanchard, 1989). However, Epstein and Fenz (1965) could also show that for experienced parachute jumpers, the approach tendencies become stronger the closer one gets to the actual conflict-inducing event – relative to the avoidance tendencies, which shows that the steepness of the avoidance tendencies is not always given. The relative difference in steepness of approach and avoidance tendencies is typically explained by the greater evolutionary costs in failing to avoid a threat when compared to failing to approach a desirable outcome (LeDoux, 1996).

3) Individual differences in approach and avoidance tendencies

The extent to which a situation may lead people to act on their approach or avoidance tendencies is likely to be influenced by personality and individual differences. In fact, research suggests that the interaction of different personality traits can strengthen the experience of approach-avoidance conflicts. Among the Big Five personality traits (i.e., neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, conscientiousness, and agreeableness),

which are assumed to represent the surface of personality (Smits & Boeck, 2006), extraversion (i.e., being assertive, sociable, and enthusiastic) has often been linked with approach-oriented goals, whereas neuroticism (i.e., being emotional instable, anxious, and moody) has been linked with avoidance-oriented goals (e.g., Smits & Boeck, 2006; Zelenski & Larsen, 1999). It is assumed that extraverts have the tendency to respond to potential rewards, while neurotics tend to respond to potential punishments occurring in their environment (John & Srivastava, 1999). More recent research by Robinson, Wilkowski, and Meier (2008) revealed that the interaction of the two personality traits leads to higher levels of approach-avoidance conflict. In other words, if people are relatively equal in extraversion and neuroticism both approach and avoidance tendencies will be activated and therefore, they are likely to experience difficulties to react to motivational stimuli (i.e., approach-avoidance conflict). Because it is not possible to (physically) approach and avoid a stimulus at the same time, approach and avoidance tendencies are simply incompatible with each other. As a result, it can be seen as advantageous to have one dominant personality trait (either extraversion or neuroticism) to prevent distinct experience of approach-avoidance conflicts (Robinson et al., 2008). Research (e.g., Smits & Boeck, 2006) also showed relationships between approach and avoidance tendencies with the other Big Five personality traits (i.e., agreeableness and conscientiousness), however, results are less clear and need more empirical support.

Conclusion: To conclude, approach-avoidance conflicts occur frequently in people's everyday lives. Conflict resolution depends on the magnitude of valence, state of tension and psychological distance an individual experiences in relation to the conflict in question. Approach-avoidance conflicts are also linked to individual differences, in particular to neuroticism and extraversion.

Cross-References: Related chapters to be added later selected from the table of contents

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