The Hierarchical Model of Approach-Avoidance Motivation

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Abstract Approach motivation is the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior toward, positive stimuli (objects, events, possibilities), whereas avoidance motivation is the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior away from, negative stimuli (objects, events, possibilities). In this article, I provide a brief overview of this distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. In addition, I provide a brief overview of a model of motivation in which this approach-avoidance distinction plays an integral role—the hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation.

Keywords Hierarchical model · Approach-avoidance motivation

The approach-avoidance distinction is not new in analyses of motivation and behavior. On the contrary, this distinction may be considered one of the oldest ideas in the history of psychological thinking about organisms. What is new is the depth and sophistication with which the approach-avoidance distinction is being used to explain and predict motivated behavior. In the following, I provide a brief overview of this approach-avoidance distinction, as well as a brief overview of a contemporary model of motivation in which this distinction plays an integral role—the hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation.

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The approach-avoidance distinction

History

Scholars have made use of the approach-avoidance distinction for over two thousand years. It first appeared in the writing of the ancient Greek philosopher Democritus (460–370 B.C.E.) who articulated an ethical hedonism in which the immediate pursuit of pleasure and avoidance of pain were prescribed as the guide for human action (see also the writing of Socrates's pupil Aristippus [435–356 B.C.E] and Epicurus [342–270 B.C.E]). The eighteenth century British philosopher Jeremy Bentham was the first to postulate a psychological hedonism that moved beyond a prescription of how we ought to behave to a description of how we actually do behave. This principle is directly stated in what is one of Bentham's most oft quoted propositions: "Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (Bentham, 1779/1879, p. 1).

Within the field of scientific psychology, the approach-avoidance distinction was utilized from the very beginning. William James (1890), in his classic *Principles of Psychology* (vol. 2), for example, considered pleasure and pain to be "springs of action," noting that pleasure is a "tremendous reinforcer" of behavior and pain a "tremendous inhibitor" of behavior (pp. 549–559). Likewise, Freud (1915) construed the procurement of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (i.e., unpleasure) as the basic motivational impetus underlying psychodynamic activity. Indeed, many other prominent contributors to psychological theory from the time of James and Freud through the 1960s also made central use of the approach-avoidance distinction (see Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Covington, 2001; for reviews).

In the 1970s through the 1980s, cognitive and social-cognitive theorists drew a sharp distinction between cognition and motivation, and sought alternative, non-affective explanations for motivational accounts of behavior. In this context, the approach-avoidance distinction was still utilized in theorizing to some degree, but in a much more limited way than in years past. It was with the acknowledgement in the 1990s that cognition and motivation are deeply intertwined, and need not be viewed as conceptual competitors, that motivational considerations in general, and the approach-avoidance distinction specifically, returned to prominence.

This return to prominence is noteworthy, because use of the approach-avoidance distinction in the contemporary scene would appear to differ from prior use in two important ways. First, until recently, the approach-avoidance distinction had been widely utilized and applied without taking a step back to explicitly define and articulate the nature of approach and avoidance motivation per se. Thus, philosophers, theorists, and researchers over the years have proffered approach- and avoidance-relevant ideas and constructs, and have even debated the sufficiency of hedonism as an explanatory principle, but rarely have they taken a step back to clearly explicate the conceptual space represented by approach and avoidance motivation. Recent work has directly attended to this definitional issue (see Elliot & Covington, 2001; Elliot & Mapes, 2005). Second, until recently, the approach-avoidance distinction has been applied to isolated situations and constructs without broader consideration of how this distinction might be applied as a general organizer of motivation and action. In essence, the approach-avoidance distinction has moved from the ground to the figure, such that this distinction is now being considered as fundamental and basic in many motivational analyses (see Cacioppo & Bernston, 1994; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Elliot & Church, 1997; Higgins, 1997).

Definition

Approach motivation may be defined as the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior toward, positive stimuli (objects, events, possibilities), whereas avoidance motivation may be defined as the energization of behavior by, or the direction of behavior away from, negative stimuli (objects, events, possibilities). Five aspects of this definition are considered further in the following.

First, being a motivational distinction, approach-avoidance encompasses both the *energization* and *direction* of behavior. Energization refers to the initial instigation or "spring to action" (James, 1890/1950, vol. 2, p. 555) that orients the organism in a general way (Elliot, 1997). This use of energization does not presume that the organism is passive until instigated to action; on the contrary, the organism is viewed as perpetually active, with instigation functionally representing a shift from one form of orienting to another (Atkinson & Birch, 1970). Direction herein refers to the guiding or channeling of behavior in a precise way.

Second, inherent in the approach-avoidance distinction is the concept of physical or psychological movement. Positively evaluated stimuli are inherently associated with an approach orientation to bring or keep the stimuli close to the organism (literally or figuratively), whereas negatively evaluated stimuli are inherently associated with an avoidance orientation to push or keep the stimuli away from the organism (literally or figuratively). Although positively and negatively evaluated stimuli produce (at minimum) a physiological and somatic preparedness for physical movement toward and away from the stimuli, respectively (Arnold, 1960; Corwin, 1921), this preparedness may or may not be translated directly into overt behavior.

Third, implicit in the aforementioned point is the notion that movement toward a positive stimulus and movement away from a negative stimulus each have two distinguishable forms. "Movement toward" can represent getting something positive that is currently absent or it can represent keeping something positive that is currently present (functionally, continuing toward). Likewise, "movement away" can represent keeping away from something negative that is currently absent (functionally, continuing away from) or it can represent getting away from something negative that is currently present. In other words, the initial presence/absence of a stimulus may be crossed with its valence to discern two different types of approach and avoidance motivation (for a conceptual parallel, see Herzberg, 1966). Thus, approach motivation not only encompasses promoting new positive situations, but also maintaining and sustaining existing positive situations, and avoidance motivation not only encompasses preventing new negative situations, but also escaping from and rectifying existing negative situations.

Fourth, positive/negative valence is conceptualized as the core evaluative dimension of approach-avoidance motivation. "Positive" and "negative" are presumed to take on somewhat different meanings in different contexts, including beneficial/harmful, liked/disliked, and desirable/undesirable. Research indicates that these dimensions are conceptually and empirically comparable to a high degree, although some empirical work suggests that they may be separable in certain instances (Berridge, 1999). At present, given their substantial comparability, it seems best to construe beneficial/harmful, liked/disliked, and desirable/undesirable as functionally equivalent dimensions that may be subsumed under the positive/negative rubric (i.e., in essence, the three dimensions are conceptualized as indicators of a positive/negative latent variable). Nevertheless, it is possible that subsequent research will establish a need to distinguish among these dimensions in defining the approach-avoidance distinction.

Fifth, "stimuli" as used herein may represent concrete, observable objects/events/possibilities, or they may represent abstract, internally-generated representations of objects/events/possibilities. Furthermore, "stimuli" is meant to connote an essentially limitless, idiographic array of focal endpoints (somewhat obliquely characterized as "objects/events/possibilities").

The hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation

In the following, I provide an overview of the hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation. This overview will be brief; those interested in further details may refer to the following articles: Elliot (1997), Elliot and Church (1997), Elliot, Gable, and Mapes, 2006; Elliot and Thrash (2001), and Elliot and Thrash (2002).

A core premise of the hierarchical model is that the approach-avoidance distinction is fundamental and basic to motivation, so much so that it may be used as a conceptual lens through which to view the structure and function of self-regulation. There is much evidence to support the fundamental nature of approach-avoidance motivation. Approach-avoidance processes are present across phyla. They may be seen in single-cell organisms, crustaceans, fish, snakes, birds, dogs, monkeys, and, of course, human beings (see Elliot & Covington for a review). Approach and avoidance processes are absolutely essential for successful adaption to the environment. Tooby and Cosmides (1990) characterize approach-avoidance behavioral decisions as the most critical adaptive judgments that organisms have had to make in the evolutionary past, and it is likely that this adaptive function is the reason that approach-avoidance process are witnessed across animate forms of life (Schneirla, 1959). Another indicator of the fundamental nature of approach-avoidance motivation is the immediacy and ubiquity of approach-avoidance evaluative judgments in human functioning. Research indicates that humans automatically evaluate most, if not all, encountered stimuli on a positive/negative dimension (Bargh, 1997; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957), and that these evaluations instantaneously evoke approach and avoidance behavioral predispositions (Corwin, 1921; Lewin, 1935).

Approach-avoidance motivation is represented in many different and partially independent ways throughout the human body (Cacioppo & Berntsen, 1994; Stellar & Stellar, 1985). Humanity's lengthy evolutionary history appears to have resulted in multiple levels of valence-based evaluative mechanisms, ranging from rudimentary spinal cord reflexes (Sherington, 1906) to subcortical affective computions (LeDoux, 1995; Shizgal, 1999) to our vaunted cortical processes (Davidson, 1993; Lang, 1995). These multiple approach-avoidance processes operate in tandem and in sequence, and produce the urges, affects, motor responses, cognitive representations, and commitments that comprise the contents of our daily experience and regulation.

Given the complex, multiply determined nature of approach-avoidance motivation, any theoretical framework that seeks to account for it must by necessity be selective. In the hierarchical model, the goal construct has been selected as the conceptual centerpiece. A goal is a cognitive representation of a future object that one is committed to approach or avoid (Elliot & Fryer, in press). This construct holds a central place in the hierarchical model because goal-directedness appears to be a cardinal characteristic of human behavior (McDougal, 1908), and it is difficult to envision a satisfactory account of motivated action that excludes this feature. Furthermore, goals occupy a unique place in self-regulation in that they commonly represent the final component of the motivational process; stated otherwise, goals are often the proximal predictors of behavior. As such, goals have tremendous utility in not only explaining, but also predicting behavior.

Goals are posited to serve a directional function in motivation. That is, goals focus on a specific, cognitively represented end point, and serve to guide the individual's behavior toward or away from that end point. Goals are conscious, intentional commitments, although once in place in the cognitive system, they may be activated and may operate in automatic, non-conscious fashion (Bargh & Ferguson, 2000). Importantly, the definition of goal and the functional role imparted to goals in the hierarchical model is much narrower than in many other conceptualizations. Many theorists define the goal construct broadly in terms of any purpose or reason for action, and construe goals as serving both energizational and directional functions. Unfortunately, placing such a heavy burden on the goal construct seems to result in a lack of conceptual precision and explanatory clarity (see Elliot & Fryer, in press, for a review). From the standpoint of the hierarchical model, a more restricted definition of and role for the goal construct is critical, in that it not only affords clarity with regard to the nature of goals, but also affords clarity with regard to how goals fit in the overall motivational process.

In the hierarchical model, goals are not sufficient to account for motivated behavior, it is also necessary to consider the motivation underlying goals. This motivation comes from many different sources and many be represented in many different ways, but for the present purposes I will focus primarily on two important sources: motives and temperaments. A motive is an affectively-based tendency that orients individuals toward domain-specific positive or negative stimuli (McClelland, 1985). Most of daily life transpires in achievement contexts and/or social contexts, and socialization histories within these contexts produce recurrent approach and avoidance tendencies with regard to achievement (i.e, the

need for achievement and fear of failure) and affiliation (i.e., the need for affiliation and fear of rejection). A temperament is a general neurobiological sensitivity to positive (approach temperament) or negative (avoidance temperament) stimuli that is rooted in biological processes across the neuraxis (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). Temperaments produce immediate affective, cognitive, and behavioral inclinations in response to encountered or imagined stimuli, and operate in a rather rigid, reactive manner across domains and situations.

Although quite different constructs, motives and temperaments are similar in that they both produce broad motivational tendencies that function as energizers of approach and avoidance behavior. Motives and temperaments orient individuals (motives to domain-specific positive or negative stimuli; temperaments to domain-general positive or negative stimuli), but they do not provide precise guidance for how general desires or concerns may be approached or avoided. Instead, goals serve this function. That is, goals are commonly recruited to serve underlying motive- or temperament-based motivation by strategically guiding it toward concrete aims that address the underlying desire or concern. Motives and temperaments can and sometimes do lead directly to behavior, but such regulation can often appear rigid and/or unfocused (Elliot, McGregor, & Thrash, 2002). Goals provide precise direction that can lead to more effective and efficient regulation.

Motives and temperaments are discussed herein for illustrative purposes, but there are many other sources of motivation that underly goals as well. Such sources include self-conceptions, implicit theories, attachment schemas, environmental affordances and impedances, cultural values and norms, etc.; the ultimate underlying source of much human motivation is likely the establishment and maintenance of meaning. The study of motivation entails identifying and specifying the most important antecedents of goal adoption, and examining the specific links between these underlying sources of motivation and the goals they presumably serve. In short, a full account of motivation will attend to both direction (goal) and energization (the motivation underlying the goal).

When goals are viewed as conceptually separate from, but hierarchically linked to, general sources of motivation such as temperaments and motives, the flexibility of self-regulation comes into bold relief. That is, it becomes easy to see that the same goal can be used in the service of many different underlying motivations, and the same motivation can be channeled through many different types of goals. Indeed, intriguing possibilities abound with regard to combinations of goals and underlying motivations. For example, approach goals may be adopted in the service of underlying avoidance motivation, as when performance-approach goals are adopted in the service of fear failure (Elliot & Church, 1997). This hierarchical combination of approach

and avoidance (i.e., approaching in order to avoid) allows individuals with aversive dispositional tendencies to cope with them in an adaptive manner by channeling them toward appetitive possibilities. Another example is that goals in one domain can emerge from motivational desires or concerns in another domain, as when individuals who are concerned about rejection by close others adopt performance-avoidance goals in achievement contexts (Elliot & Reis, 2003; Elliot & Thrash, 2004). This dynamic commingling of the affiliation and achievement domains is undoubtedly commonplace, and can only be detected when multiple levels of motivation are considered. These examples highlight both the flexibility afforded by goal adoption, and the added insight provided by a hierarchical analysis of approach and avoidance processes.

A primary assumption of the hierarchical model is that conceptually, goals and the underlying motivations they serve must be construed as separate entities. Nevertheless, it is also posited that in the actual process of regulation, goals and underlying motivations remain closely intertwined (see also Lewin, 1935), and that these underlying motivations exert an influence throughout the process of goal pursuit. A third construct is posited to account for this intertwining of goals and their underlying motivations, specifically "goal complex" (Elliot & Thrash, 2001; Thrash & Elliot, 2001; for conceptual parallels, see Allport, 1937; Murray, 1938). A goal complex is construed as a context-specific regulatory construct that is formed upon adoption of a goal, and is represented in memory until the goal and/or underlying motivational desire/concern is achieved, altered, or abandoned. This goal complex is presumed to include information regarding both the goal and the underlying reason that it is being pursued. Often the motivation underlying a goal is not consciously accessible and, therefore, cannot be explicated; when the motivation underlying the goal is accessible, the goal complex may be characterized in the propositional form: "[goal] IN ORDER TO [underlying reason]." Different goal complexes are posited to lead to different processes and outcomes, even when the goal is the same. Stated differently, goal pursuit feels different and has different effects when it is impelled by different underlying motivations.

Both approach and avoidance motivation are part of our evolutionary heritage, and we certainly cannot survive, either physically or psychologically, without both types of motivation. Certain tasks in negotiating the environment and our social world require avoidance motivation, and avoidance motivation is undoubtedly adaptive in some instances. For example, it is imperative that our perceptual system be perpetually vigilant for physical danger or it is likely that our lifespan would be greatly truncated; likewise, tasks and challenges such as air traffic controlling and ceasing to smoke would seem to require avoidance regulation. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that by its very nature, avoidance motivation is aversive, and is greatly overused in

contemporary life (that is, used in instances where it is not necessary). As such, in the hierarchical model, it is the negative implications of avoidance motivation that are typically highlighted.

Avoidance motivation entails using a negative object as the hub of regulatory activity. As such, avoidance motivation is experienced as stressful, and even when effective, can take a toll on enjoyment and, eventually, well-being (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997; 1998). For example, even if avoidance regulation allows air traffic controllers to effectively keep airplanes from crashing into each other, the constant monitoring of negative possibilities is draining; accordingly, it is not surprising that this occupation has one of the highest turnover rates on record (Hopkin, 1995). Furthermore, avoidance motivation is limited in a structural sense, in that by its very nature it can only lead to the absence of a negative outcome (when effective) or the presence of a negative outcome (when ineffective). This may be contrasted with approach motivation, which uses a positive object as the hub of regulatory activity and, therefore, can lead to the presence of a positive outcome (when effective) or the absence of a positive outcome (when ineffective; see Mowrer, 1960, for a conceptual parallel). Thus, avoidance motivation is designed to facilitate surviving, whereas approach motivation is designed to facilitate thriving. Individuals often utilize survival mode even when danger is not imminent, thereby missing positive opportunities for development and growth. Importantly, the over-utilization of avoidance motivation not only leads to missed opportunities, but it also, in self-fulfilling fashion, often produces the very negative outcomes that it is designed to avoid. For example, in achievement situations, performance-avoidance and mastery-avoidance goals produce worry and distraction that undermine performance and intrinsic motivation (Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller, 2006; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996).

Avoidance motivation is posited to be problematic at all levels of the hierarchy. In some respects, avoidance motivation would seem most pernicious at the higher, more general levels (e.g., temperament), because such levels exert a pervasive influence on behavior. However, as discussed earlier, individuals can cope with higher-order avoidance motivation through the use of lower-order regulatory tools, such as approach goals that channel aversive energization in a positive direction. Avoidance motivation at the level of goals also seems quite inimical, given the role of goals as direct, proximal regulators of behavior. What seems quite clear is that goal complexes comprised entirely of approach motivation would be optimal for functioning in most instances.

Closing statement

As illustrated in the hierarchical model of approach-avoidance motivation, the approach-avoidance distinction is clearly of considerable conceptual and empirical utility in motivational analyses of behavior. This approach-avoidance distinction may be applied to nearly any psychological construct, and doing so commonly yields a precision of knowledge that would not otherwise be attainable. That organisms are motivated in multifarious ways to approach the positive and avoid the negative may be construed as something of a psychological law, and in my experience, the deep, penetrating application of this law invariably yields much theoretical fruit. It is important to bear in mind, however, that as valuable as the approach-avoidance distinction is, other psychological distinctions are needed to fully understand motivated behavior. In this sense, the approach-avoidance distinction may be considered a necessary, but not sufficient, component of a complete account of motivation.

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