

“Grow Old With Me”: Differences in Approach and Avoidance Goals in
Dating, Engaged, and Married Couples

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Abstract

This research aims to examine the different approach and avoidance goals between dating, engaged, newlywed and married couples. The purpose of this research is to understand if there is a difference in approach and avoidance goals based on what stage the relationship is. For example, do dating couples display more approach goals when it comes to their relationship than married couples? Are married couples more prone to avoidance behaviors than newlyweds? More specifically, does the relationship stage (in this case, dating, engaged, newlywed, or married) have any correlation between the individuals' approach and avoidance goals? Previous research has indicated the significant correlations between approach and avoidance motivation in intimate and committed relationships, but few have examined the possible differences among a spectrum of relationship stages. This research is a quantitative analysis of about 300 couples in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. A survey will be used as the measurement instrument, and will aid in deeper understanding of the approach and avoidance scale.

Introduction

Although people hope that their current romantic relationship will withstand the test of time, many couples experience steep declines, and high levels of commitment and satisfaction over the course of their relationship. The “success” or “failure” of a relationship can be largely dependent on relationship goals, which include the motivation and action to maintain, advance, or end a relationship (Impett, 2010). The study of approach and avoidance goals, is grounded in the premise that individuals are either approaching towards a goal or avoiding negative stimuli (Gable, 2006). The directional behavior towards positive stimuli, such as events or goals, is part of the approach motivation, whereas avoidance motivation goals entail the direction and actions when met with negative stimuli (Elliot, Gable & Mapes, 2006).

Although plenty of research has been done on basic human motivation to belong, there is less work investigated on “the motivational processes involved in establishing and keeping social bonds. These processes are to a great extent determined by the focus of social motives and goals,” (Gable, 2006, p. 176). Gable goes on to discuss how social goals can be either rewarding, desired end-states, which she calls “approach”, or punishing, undesired end-states “avoidance.”

The growing interest in how individual differences bear on approach and avoidance relates to diverse aspects of human functioning, specifically in relationships. The tendencies for humans to approach relationship-related awards (intimacy) and avoid relationship-related punishments (conflict) involves a recurrent approach of desired relationship outcomes (Roberts, 2000).

Couples in committed relationships may share the same relationship goals, whether they are improving, satisfied with, unsatisfied with, or would like to end their relationships. Of course

as time progresses, so do relationships, and the idea that approach and avoidance goals steadily change as well is worth investigating.

First, this study will seek to understand current research about approach and avoidance goals, committed relationships, and examine the possible need for a similar study. Second, an explanation of how the research was conducted will be addressed. Third, the research will be analyzed and possible correlations and relationships will be acknowledged, and lastly, a thorough analysis and conclusion about the research results will be conducted.

Literature Review

Reasoning involving approach and avoidance goals have already been applied to the field of close relationships, to an extent. The basic idea is that relationship incentives produce an approach orientation to relationships, which is characterized by positive feelings of engagement and happiness when relationship rewards are experienced (Gable 2006). Gable also acknowledges that a heightened sensitivity to relationship threats often yield an avoidance orientation, characterized by worry and vigilance, and is not conducive to relationship harmony.

The hierarchical model of approach-avoidance social motivation is one way to distinguish these two elements. Though relatively new, the hierarchical model of approach-avoidance has primarily been tested within achievement motivation field (Strachman & Gable, 2006 and Mattingly, McIntyre & Lewandowski, 2011). Achievement motives describe an approach motive as “success”, and an avoidance motive as “fear of failure”. In the model, approach and avoidance motives “represent upper-level, affectively based, dispositional constructs that energize appetitive and aversive relationship behavior effectively,” (Elliot, et al. 2006, p. 379).

In a fairly recent study, Gable (2006) examines the motivational processes involved in establishing and keeping social bonds. The author defined these processes by focusing on social motives and goals, specifically approach and avoidance goals. The study also attempted to explain how the link between approach motives and outcomes is mediated by a different process than the link between avoidance motives and outcomes. Study findings indicated that approach motives and goals were reliably associated with less loneliness and more satisfaction with social bonds. Avoidance motives and goals were reliably associated with more loneliness, negative social attitudes and relationship insecurity (Gable, 2006). The author found that distal motives

predicted more proximal goals, such that those with strong approach motives were more likely to adopt short-term approach goals, and those with strong avoidance motives were more likely to adopt short-term avoidance goals.

Other studies have shown that individuals who experience both strong approach and strong avoidance goals increase the likelihood of experiencing strong approach-avoidance conflicts, making anxious individuals vulnerable to motivational conflicts, which the author contributes to both intrapersonal tension and confusion (Locke, 2008).

Approach and avoidance relationship goals are often correlated to commitment to one's relationship (Strachman & Gable, 2006). For example, if one were not committed to a relationship, their goals would be significantly different. As such, motivation to stay in a relationship is largely dependent on the individual's commitment to their significant other. In a study about the different types of commitment in intimate relationships, Frank and Brandstatter (2002) examined whether approach versus avoidance commitment to one's relationship was differentially predictive of relationship quality parameters. More importantly, the authors predicted that investments, in terms of the duration of a relationship, would correspond positively with avoidance commitment, but not approach commitment. After conducting their study, the authors found that the longer an involvement persists, the more has been invested, meaning that the cost of leaving the relationship increases with the duration of the relationship.

The correlational patterns for approach versus avoidance values, the similarity between partners regarding their ideas about a good relationship, and the duration of the relationship provide convergent and discriminant validity for our distinction between approach and avoidance commitment... From this point of view, one might feel committed to one's romantic partner because one strives for the positive incentives

associated with continuing the relationship (approach commitment). In the same vein, one might feel committed to one's romantic partner because one tries to avoid the negative incentives associated with breaking up the relationship (avoidance commitment). (Frank and Brandstater, 2002, p. 209).

In a related study, Strachman and Gable (2006) proposed that relationship commitment is a goal that was regulated by the approach and avoidance dimensions. The authors suggested that two types of commitment exist: approach commitment (the desire to maintain and continue the relationship) and avoidance commitment (the desire to avoid relationship dissolution). The main aim of the article was to show that commitment is a goal, or an internal representation of desired states where states are broadly construed as outcomes, events, or processes. The authors draw distinctions between three different types of commitment. Attraction is when a person would like to continue the relationship based on satisfaction. Continuance commitment involves partners feeling they have to continue the relationship, or it would be too costly not to. Moral commitment is feeling morally obligated to one's partner or the relationship (Strachman & Gable, 2006).

Other research suggests that approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships effect emotional experiences. One study has explored how approach and avoidance motivations appear to influence the process of responding to situations involving positive and negative emotion, while the influence of approach motivations and avoidance motivations often do not appear to moderate the degree to which negative emotions are related to satisfaction (Updegraff, Gable & Taylor, 2004). Interestingly, individuals with strong avoidance motivations reported greater negative emotions over the course of everyday life. Thus, avoidance motivations appear to shape well-being through direction emotional experience.

The perceived position and velocity regarding approach and avoidance in romantic relationships relate to affective experiences. The distinction between intimacy as an incentive, and conflict as a threat echoes a broader distinction often made in the research of personality and motivation (Laurenceau, Troy and Carver, 2005). Interestingly enough, one system is concerned with the approach of incentives, the other with the avoidance of threats.

The theory of emotion, as explained by scholar Ellen Berscheid, whose work largely concentrates on close interpersonal relationships, suggests that “emotion in relationships result from disruption of interpersonal scripts, or instances where interactions are different from expected patterns. If the disruption facilitates progress toward a desired goal, positive emotion is experienced. If the disruption obstructs progress, negative emotion is experienced,” (in Laurenceau et al., 2005). A relationship approach process that involved intimacy (connectedness with another person) and not conflict is significantly related to positive emotion, whereas conflict and not intimacy, is significantly related to anxiety-related emotion, reflecting a relationship avoidance process. In the study conducted by Laurenceau et al., the closer a person was to higher levels of intimacy and the greater the perception of movement toward intimacy, the higher the positive effect. The closer the person was to conflict, and the greater the perception of movement toward conflict, the greater the anxiety. If this is the case, approach and avoidance goals seemed to be related to positive and negative emotion, and, in this case, levels of intimacy. This also seems related to relationship length. The findings of this study join the emerging literature bearing on how change across time influences affect (Strachman & Gable, 2006).

One such recent study examines and predicts how dating couples can maintain feelings of relationship satisfaction in their daily lives and over the course of time. Impett et al. (2010) used Gable’s perspectives on approach relationship goals (i.e. fun, growth and development) and

avoidance goals (i.e. disagreements and conflicts) to understand how couples can maintain feelings of satisfaction and closeness. They found that approach goals were associated with increased daily relationship quality, and avoidance goals were not significantly associated with daily relationship quality. Both of the studies conducted provided support that positive emotions are the link between approach goals and increased daily satisfaction and closeness.

“Because we measured the relationship goals of both partners, we found support for the predicted interaction that it takes two people to be high in approach goals in order for couples to thrive,” (Impett, et al, 2006, p. 957).

In contrast, it only takes one partner high in avoidance goals to see harmful effects on couples over the long term. More specifically, the partners of people high in avoidance goals felt less satisfied, committed, and close and had more thoughts about breaking up, highlighting the difficulties of being with someone who is high in avoidance goals. (Impett et al., 2010, p. 957).

Other scholars have studied the correlation of approach and avoidance goals with duration of relationship. For instance, Roberts (2000) studies the often polarizing behaviors and communication habits of married couples. The analysis of measuring partner conflict avoidance, intimacy avoidance and angry withdrawal together indicted whether partner withdrawal behaviors contributed to the prediction of marital outcomes. The researchers did this by examining withdrawal behavior through a questionnaire completed by 97 couples.

Study Rationale

While there are multiple studies on the correlations between approach and avoidance goals in committed relationships (Elliot, et al. 2006) very few compare them through the

different relationship stages. This study researches whether or not a relationship stage (in this case, dating, engaged, newlywed, or married) has any correlation with an individuals' approach and avoidance goals. It's an interesting topic to pursue as it can help understand how individuals view their goals and objectives when in a committed relationship during the dating, engaged and married stages. The correlation between common approach and avoidance goals during a relationship is also useful when studying relationship patterns. Obvious highs and lows are to be expected, but in what stage does it typically happen, and can it be predicted or added to motivational theories? For example, are there more married couples who exhibit low avoidance goals than those that have high approach goals? And, how does this compare to engaged couples? This can also help future research to understand whether a relationship stage can determine certain approach and avoidant behaviors. For example, do all engaged couples score high on the approach scale? The data collected from this study can also be used for future researchers who are interested in studying approach and avoidant motivation in relationships, specifically relationship stages.

Research Question

Does the relationship stage (dating, engaged, newlywed, or married) impact someone's approach or avoidance goals? This research question is testable as it will measure how the dependent variable (approach and avoidance goals) is statistically significant to the independent variable (relationship status).

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study are committed couples in Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas. Both individuals in the relationship completed the survey independently, with a total of 122 couples (244 individuals) completing both the approach and avoidance questions. The average age of this sample were 34 years of age, with all participants being at least 18-years-old. The average relationship length was about eleven years (135.3 months), and nearly half (48%) of the same have at least one child. Additionally, respondents largely identified as Caucasian or White (73.4%), and 31% have a Bachelor's degree.

Instruments

The measurement instrument was a section of an eight-page survey on the relationship and commitment. The approach and avoidance scale used consisted of ten questions, as used in Elliott, Gable and Maples (2006).

A demographic question also helps us to determine what relationship stage the participant is in based on self-report. Participants have four options to choose from including married, engaged, dating one person exclusively, and not dating one person exclusively. These categories were used based on the participant's self-report. See Appendix A for the questions used in these scales.

Procedures

The survey was given to willing participants in paper or electronic form. Survey packets included a consent form, and a list of instructions that advised participants to complete their

surveys independently from their partner. Each survey was put into a small envelope, and then put into a larger envelope so the couples' surveys stayed together, but still protected the participants' anonymity. The envelopes were coded with a generic identification number to identify the researcher, but will otherwise be anonymous. Procedures included ensuring participants were aware that participating in this research was voluntary, and that their partner must also complete the survey, that only the course instructors were able to open the envelopes, and retrieved signed consent forms, which were stored separately from the surveys.

Results

The approach and avoidance scales were used to determine whether dating, engaged and married couples participated in approach or avoidance behaviors. The scale has five questions each that measure the participants' approach and avoidance goals. These two independent scales have a Likert scale response frame where participants choose from 1 (not at all true for me) to 7 (very true for me) with an option for 0 (not relevant in my relationship). The approach questions measured whether the participants engaged in positive ways to strengthen their relationship, while avoidance questions measured conflict avoidance. Looking at the frequencies of the data, the fourth relationship status (not dating one person exclusively) was eliminated from the sample because there was only one response, which does not constitute enough stability for statistical tests. The correlating partner was also exempt.

The alpha reliability found for the scale in the current study was good at 0.81 ($M=52$, $SD=11.4$), but the component analysis showed two strong primary factors – approach and avoidance. The loading of the factors confirmed the theoretical factor structure consistent with previous research, namely Elliot, Gable & Maples (2006). The approach factor had a moderately strong Cronbach's Alpha ($\alpha = 0.79$), while the avoidance factor was a bit higher ($\alpha= 0.80$).

	Approach	Avoidance
1. I am trying to deepen my relationship with my partner.	0.640	
2. I am trying to avoid disagreements with my partner.		0.508
3. I am trying to help our relationship grow.	0.713	
4. I am trying to stay away from situations that could harm our relationship.		0.647
5. I am trying to strengthen the intimacy in our relationship.	0.640	
6. I am trying to avoid being embarrassed, betrayed, or hurt by my partner.		0.534
7. I am trying to have fun experiences with my partner.	0.672	
8. I am trying to make sure that nothing bad happens to our relationship.	0.678	
9. I am trying to avoid conflicts with my partner.		0.653
10. I am trying to share meaningful experiences with my partner.		0.592

Figure A-2: Factor Analysis

Once these theoretical factors were identified, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to examine whether married, engaged and dating couples differ in their approach and avoidance goals. The MANOVA was used, as opposed to two ANOVA tests, because it increases the chances of ending up with Type I error due to parsimony, or the presumption that the smallest number of tests run is better than multiple tests.

The goal of the research question was to determine if there was a difference between married, engaged and dating couples on approach and avoidance goals. To analyze this question a one-way MANOVA was calculated using relationship status (married, engaged or dating) as the independent variable and the scores for approach and avoidance goals as the dependent variables. The Box's M for the scale was significant so equality of variance can be assumed: $F(6, 18406.3) = 1.86, p < 0.084$.

Box's Test of Equality	
Box's M	11.457
F	1.86
df1	6
df2	18406.261
Sig.	0.084

Figure A-3: Box's M Test

Given that equality of variance is assumed, the Wilks' lamda (Λ) will be used as the test statistic to test the significance of the overall model. If the overall model is significant, then we can state that simultaneous differences exist on the dependent variable by the independent variable. The Wilks' lambda criteria indicates very low significant group differences for the overall model: Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.95, F(4, 478) = 3.09, p = 0.016$. Given that the Wilk's lambda is quite large, the group dispersion in approach and avoidance scores is smaller; therefore, there is less chance that the relationship groups differ significantly.

Multivariate Tests						
Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Pillai's Trace	0.50	3.076	4.000	480.000	0.016	0.025
Wilks' Lambda	0.95	3.091	4.000	478.000	0.016	0.025
Hotelling's Trace	0.05	3.105	4.000	476.000	0.015	0.025
Roy's Largest Root	0.05	5.735	2.000	240.000	0.004	0.046

Figure A-4: Multivariate Tests

The multivariate tests revealed that there was a significant difference between married ($M=27.9$, $SD=5.8$) and engaged couples ($M=31.1$, $SD=3.5$) in reported approach behaviors. Results also reveal that there is significance between married ($M=22.4$, $SD=8.1$) and dating ($M=25.2$, $SD=6.8$) couples in reported avoidance behaviors.

Results of Two Groups

Since the dispersion between all the group relationship statuses were varied, a second test was run to compare married couples with non-married couples. In other words, the 19 engaged and 80 dating individuals were combined into one group. The 99 non-married individuals were then compared to the 144 married individuals in a post-hoc test. Results found that married couples ($M=27.9$, $SD=5.8$) reported more approach behaviors than non-married couples ($M=29.5$, $SD=4.8$). Also, married couples ($M=22.4$, $SD=8.0$) did not participate in avoidance behaviors as often as non-married couples do ($M=25.4$, $SD=6.9$).

Discussion

The goal of this study was to use one independent variable (relationship status) to examine two dependent variables (approach and avoidance goals) using one test. The results of the multivariate analysis of variance, or MANOVA, indicated that equality of variance could be assumed given that both Box's M tests were significant.

Since equality of variance could be assumed between the independent variables, the Wilks' lambda was analyzed. The Wilk's lambda is often used to know the overall significance of the model, and if it is, we can assume that simultaneous differences exist on the dependent variable by the independent variable. In this study however, the Wilk's lambda was quite large, so simultaneous differences do not exist. In other words, there is not a causal relationship between the independent and dependent variables. This answers questions brought up by the research question in that couples who are dating, engaged or married are not innately going to behave a certain way as some people might expect. In other words, one's relationship status, whether married, engaged or dating, does not always determine one's approach and avoidance goals.

Even though the groups are less likely to be significantly different in the overall scale, multivariate tests were analyzed to examine differences among the relationship groups. Results indicated there was a significant difference between married and engaged couples in approach behaviors. Gable's (2006) study findings indicated that approach motives and goals were associated with a need for social bonds, which maybe a possible explanation for why married couples are less likely to participate in approach behaviors. The possible longevity of being married makes the social bond tighter, and perhaps provides an incentive for their relationships, which is characterized by positive feelings and healthy behaviors.

Though engaged couples scored high on approach behaviors that may not prove that all married couples do not exhibit entirely healthy relationships. In fact, Roberts (2000) found that the behaviors and communication habits of married couples often involve conflict avoidance, intimacy avoidance and angry withdrawal, so longevity in relationships is most likely not a factor in relationship goals.

The research also found that there was significance between married and dating couples in avoidance behaviors, with married couples scoring lower. That is, dating couples are more likely to participate in relationship avoidance behaviors. Impett et al. (2010) found that avoidance goals were not significantly associated with daily relationship quality, so the fact that dating couples may not spend time with each other as often as married couples do may not be a factor in the couples' avoidance goals.

Interestingly enough, the same research found that approach goals were associated with increased daily relationship quality, which correlates with this study's research findings that married couples were more likely to participate in approach behaviors (and less in avoidance behaviors) than non-married couples.

Limitations

There are a few limitations in this research. The survey instrument provided plenty of information on individual couples, but only a few questions were dedicated specifically to approach and avoidance goals. Also, the questions used in the instrument did not examine all possible facets of relationship goals including friendship goals, relationship satisfaction, loneliness and social desirability as Elliott, Gable & Mapes (2006) used. A more thorough and exhaustive survey about relationship goals would surely yield richer results for future research.

Another limitation in this study was with the sample. While more than 300 individuals completed surveys, some of them did not complete both sections of the approach and avoidance goals. While 240 participants is a good-sized sample, perhaps a larger one could yield richer and wider responses. The dispersion of the same size in terms of relationship status was also a limitation because there were less dating and engaged couples compared to married individuals. The fact that there was a need to eliminate one dating group (not dating one person exclusively) was also a limitation in the data sample.

Future Research

There are some possible future research developments from this study. First, the development of a reliable and exhaustive approach and avoidance scale would help measure a person's relationship goals very well. Future studies should include survey and other research instruments that effectively measure an individual's approach and avoidance goals, specifically in terms of relationship satisfaction as Elliot, Gabe & Mapes (2006) has done.

Future research in the field of motivation and how it relates to approach and avoidance goals would also be beneficial. This can help answer whether or not couples are more likely to have approach goals when engaged, or avoidance goals when married.

It would also be beneficial for future researchers to study the range of approach and avoidance goals throughout a couple's relationship. This longitudinal study would provide richer information regarding the possible changes to approach and avoidance goals especially if the couple was dating, engaged, and married during the course of the study.

Conclusion

This study found that there was a significant relationship between couples' relationship status and their approach and avoidance goals. More specifically, there was a significant difference between married and engaged couples approach behaviors, with engaged individuals more likely to exhibit approach goals. The findings also found a significant difference between married and dating couples in reported avoidance behaviors. Though these findings were not directly measured in previous studies, it is consistent with findings on approach and avoidance goals over a certain time period (Strachman & Gable, 2006). The results of this study were significant, but future research in approach and avoidance goals over the course of a relationship can prove to be useful in the understanding of relationship approach and avoidance goals.

Appendix

How would you classify this relationship?

- _____ 1. Married – How many years have you been married to your partner? _____
- _____ 2. Engaged
- _____ 3. Dating one person exclusively
- _____ 4. Not dating one person exclusively

When you think about your commitment to your current relationship and partner, to what degree are the following statements true for you? For each statement write a number from 1 (Not at all true for me) to 7 (Very true for me) in front of the statement to show how true the statement is of your current opinions. If you do not feel a particular statement is relevant to your current relationship, put a 0 in front of the item.

Not at all true for me							Very true for me	Not relevant in my relationship
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		0

- 1. _____ I am trying to deepen my relationship with my partner.
- 2. _____ I am trying to avoid disagreements with my partner.
- 3. _____ I am trying to help our relationship grow.
- 4. _____ I am trying to stay away from situations that could harm our relationship
- 5. _____ I am trying to strengthen the intimacy in our relationship.
- 6. _____ I am trying to avoid being embarrassed, betrayed, or hurt by my partner.
- 7. _____ I am trying to have fun experiences with my partner
- 8. _____ I am trying to make sure that nothing bad happens to our relationship.
- 9. _____ I am trying to avoid conflicts with my partner.
- 10. _____ I am trying to share many meaningful experiences with my partner.

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