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Andrew J. Elliot, Andreas B. Eder and Eddie Harmon-Jones

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Approach–Avoidance Motivation and Emotion: Convergence and Divergence

Andrew J. Elliot

Clinical and Social Sciences in Psychology, University of Rochester, USA

Andreas B. Eder

Department of Psychology, University of Würzburg, Germany

Eddie Harmon-Jones

School of Psychology, University of New South Wales, Australia

Abstract

In this concluding piece, we identify and discuss various aspects of convergence and, to a lesser degree, divergence in the ideas expressed in the contributions to this special section. These contributions emphatically illustrate that approach–avoidance motivation is integral to the scientific study of emotion. It is our hope that the articles herein will facilitate cross-talk among researchers and research traditions, and will lead to a more thorough understanding of the role of approach–avoidance motivation in emotion.

Keywords

affect, approach, avoidance, emotion, motivation

This special section of *Emotion Review* covers considerable ground. The contributions focus on diverse topics relevant to approach–avoidance motivation and emotion, and emerge from different conceptual perspectives, different types and levels of analysis, and different subdisciplines of psychological science. Nevertheless, there is a considerable degree of convergence expressed in these contributions and it is this convergence that will be highlighted in the following. Lingering points of divergence among viewpoints will also be noted, as applicable.

Approach–Avoidance Is Basic

First, there is broad and unanimous agreement among the contributors that the approach–avoidance distinction is integral to an understanding of emotion. The presence of a special section on approach–avoidance motivation and emotion does not de facto attest to this point, as the special section could represent or reveal a debate on whether the approach–avoidance distinction is needed or is beneficial to conceptualizing and studying emotion phenomena. No such debate is manifest in the contributions herein, as

across the board authors either explicitly or implicitly acknowledge the central importance of approach–avoidance motivation in emotion. Emotion is not just construed as a phenomenological experience, but is seen as a process that has implications for the way in which organisms are both energized and directed, the two fundamental definitional components of motivation.

Defining Approach–Avoidance

Second, there is general agreement among contributors on how approach and avoidance motivation is defined, although there is also considerable variation in the precise and specific ways that this is articulated. Most connect approach motivation to concepts of appetition, reward, and incentive, and connect avoidance motivation to concepts of aversion, punishment, and threat. In addition, there is considerable agreement that normal, adaptive functioning entails an appetitive physical and/or psychological orienting toward reward and incentive, and an aversive physical and/or psychological orienting away from punishment and threat (which may entail strategic movement

toward or away, as we discuss in point 5 that follows). However, it is important to note that there is not uniform agreement on the definition of approach–avoidance motivation; indeed, even among the authors of this article there is a divergence of opinion, with Elliot and Eder embracing the aforementioned definition and Harmon-Jones (Harmon-Jones, Harmon-Jones, & Price, 2013; see also Terburg & van Honk, 2013) suggesting that a new definition may be needed that decouples evaluation and action tendencies. Further discussion and, perhaps, debate on this issue is beyond the scope of the present article, but should bear fruit in prompting careful, rigorous consideration of the precise nature of the approach–avoidance motivational distinction.

Finally, it should also be noted that without objective, independent indicators of reward and punishment, definitions and operationalizations of approach–avoidance motivation can become circular. This has been and remains a pervasive, yet not well-recognized issue in the literature across disciplines.

Approach–Avoidance and Types of Emotion Concepts

Third, approach–avoidance motivation is implicated in two different types of emotion concepts, those based in core evaluative processes and those based in discrete categories of emotional experience. Regarding core evaluative processes, it is widely acknowledged among our contributors and in the literature in general that organisms continually engage in basic appraisals of stimuli as beneficial or detrimental. These appraisals are presumed to be evolutionarily engrained evaluations that allow the organism to adapt and thrive; they are often characterized in the literature as fundamental affective experiences present in organisms across phylogeny (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Bernston, 1999; Lang & Bradley, 2013; Rolls, 2013; Schneirla, 1959; Zajonc, 1998; see point 5 for more on the nature and range of complexity of these evaluations in different organisms). “Stimuli” may be concrete physical objects, but in more advanced organisms they may also be mental representations or memories of such objects, abstract concepts, or possibilities that are anticipated for the future (Eder & Hommel, 2013; Scholer & Higgins, 2013). Thus, “stimuli” in this conceptual context is used in a broad way to encompass a wide range of foci varying from concrete to abstract and from past to present to possible, and approach and avoidance motivation may emerge from both external input and internal input that may be temporarily (state) or chronically (trait) accessible.

Regarding discrete categories of experience, it is widely acknowledged, again among our contributors and in the literature in general, that some specific emotions may be construed as emerging from, sustaining, and/or impelling approach motivation, whereas others may be construed as emerging from, sustaining, and/or impelling avoidance motivation. Thus, approach–avoidance motivation is seen as a critical and defining feature of discrete emotions; specific emotions are commonly portrayed as approach-based or avoidance-based (Frijda,

2007; Lazarus, 1991; Panksepp, 2013; Rolls, 2013). Although there is broad agreement regarding the integral nature of approach–avoidance in understanding discrete emotions, there is some disagreement with regard to the nature of certain emotions, anger in particular. The traditional view has been that approach–avoidance (often labeled “motivational direction” in this context) and emotional valence (positive vs. negative phenomenological experience) are inextricably intertwined, with approach motivation and positive feelings being linked, and avoidance motivation and negative feelings being linked (Cacioppo et al., 1999; Lang, 1995; Russell & Carroll, 1999; Watson, Wiese, Vaidya, & Tellegen, 1999). Anger appears to challenge this isomorphism, as anger is often linked to approach motivation but is accompanied by negative feelings (Carver, 2004; Harmon-Jones, 2003; Harmon-Jones et al., 2013). This has led to a call to consider motivational direction and emotional valence as separate dimensions in conceptualizing discrete emotions (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Harmon-Jones & Sigelman, 2001).

Approach–Avoidance and Evaluation

Fourth, many of the contributors explicitly embrace the idea that organisms possess basic approach and avoidance systems that underlie core evaluative processes and discrete emotional experience, and that are involved in the production of approach and avoidance tendencies. We suspect that those who do not directly refer to such systems nevertheless acknowledge the utility of positing such systems and simply take their presence for granted (i.e., treat it as an assumption that need not be explicitly stated). These systems and their conceptual manifestations have been given many different labels over the years, including appetitive–defensive systems, approach–withdrawal systems, approach–avoidance temperaments, behavioral activation, and behavioral inhibition systems (Corr, 2013; Lang & Bradley, 2013; Robinson, Boyd, & Liu, 2013; Roskes, Elliot, Nijstad, & De Dreu, 2013). Although there is divergence in the specific definitions and emphases among these constructs, they share a fundamental commonality in that they are all portrayed as functional systems responsible for approach–avoidance motivational processes. Beyond this broad convergence, however, a number of differences reside. Many theorists posit two systems, one undergirding approach motivation and the other undergirding avoidance motivation, but others posit multiple systems within these overarching conceptual entities. For example, in reinforcement sensitivity theory, two avoidance-based systems are proposed: (a) A fight–flight–freeze system (FFFS) sensitive to aversive stimuli (unconditioned and conditioned) is responsible for avoidance and escape behavior, and mediates the emotion of fear; (b) a behavioral inhibition system (BIS) is involved in resolving goal conflicts—it generates the emotion of anxiety, which inhibits behaviors, conducts risk assessments, and scans memory and the environment for goal conflicts. Several subsystems within the omnibus behavioral activation system (BAS) are also discussed in this perspective (e.g., reward interest, drive-persistence, reward reactivity; Corr, 2013; Robinson et al., 2013). Another

multicomponent view is taken by Panksepp (2008, 2013), who proposes several distinct, domain-specific approach (e.g., LUST, CARE) and avoidance (e.g., FEAR, PANIC) motivational systems, each presumed to produce unique “primal affects.”

Approach–Avoidance Is Multifaceted

Fifth, many of the contributors note, and several elaborate on, the multifarious nature of approach–avoidance motivation. At the simplest level (i.e., the single-celled organism), approach–avoidance is straightforward and rigid: A weak light stimulus directly and automatically evokes approach, whereas an intense light stimulus directly and automatically evokes avoidance. With more complex evaluative capacities and response repertoires come more intricate and flexible approach–avoidance motivational processes. This is true across taxa, but reaches a pinnacle with humans; we will focus on human approach–avoidance processes in elaborating on this point.

Stimulus evaluation includes intrinsic evaluation that is (relatively) isolated from the current situation, as well as contextual evaluation that takes into consideration environmental affordances and constraints, and the current needs and capacities of the organism (Lewin, 1935; Moors & De Houwer, 2001). So, for example, a chocolate dessert may have a positive intrinsic valence, but in the context of being satiated or being on a diet, this same chocolate dessert can take on a negative motivational valence. Evaluations take place at multiple levels across the neuraxis, from rudimentary exteroceptive reflexes (Grau et al., 2006; Lang & Bradley, 2013) to subcortical computations (Moscarello & LeDoux, 2013; Panksepp, 2013) to higher-order cortical processing (Rolls, 2013). These multiple types and levels of approach–avoidance evaluations occur in tandem and in sequence, and function to energize the organism for action.

Evaluations evoke response tendencies and may lead to physically enacted behavior. In any given situation, evaluations across the neuraxis may be of the same valence and produce entirely congruent response tendencies, or may be of mixed valence and produce at least partially conflicting response tendencies. These multifarious and sometimes incongruent evaluations are integrated together to produce a net evaluation and accompanying response tendency (Cacioppo et al., 1999; Rolls, 2013). As noted by several contributors, this response tendency is not rigidly translated into physical action. Approach motivational tendencies emerging from appetitive evaluation are not necessarily manifest as approach physical movement and, likewise, avoidance motivational tendencies emerging from aversive evaluation are not necessarily manifest as avoidance physical movement (Eder & Hommel, 2013; Förster & Friedman, 2013; Krieglmeier, De Houwer, & Deutsch, 2013; Robinson et al., 2013). For example, avoidance motivation may prompt inaction (e.g., freezing; Corr, 2013; Fanselow, 1994; Moscarello & LeDoux, 2013) and approach motivation may prompt withdrawal behavior (e.g., stepping back to see the big picture; Förster & Friedman, 2013).

Furthermore, evoked approach and avoidance response tendencies are often strategically regulated. Approach and avoidance tendencies may be served by either like-valenced or opposite-valenced tactics and goals. For example, a person may adopt the approach goal of “become a better conversationalist” in order to “make deeper connections with my friends” or in order to “avoid being rejected by my friends” (Gable & Gosnell, 2013; Scholer & Higgins, 2013). These hierarchical, instrumental combinations of approach-to-approach and approach-to-avoid (respectively), as well as other regulatory combinations of avoid-to-avoid and avoid-to-approach, highlight the great flexibility in human behavior. Initial behavioral inclination is not necessarily destiny, but may be channeled or overridden in myriad idiographic ways in everyday self-regulation (Elliot, 2006).

Conclusion

Approach–avoidance motivation has a long and rich history in scientific psychology (for a review, see Elliot, 1999). It has encountered a resurgence in the last two decades (see Eder, Elliot, & Harmon-Jones, 2013), and this resurgence has helped advance our understanding of many psychological phenomena, including emotion. Much is known about both approach–avoidance motivation and its integral and pervasive role in emotion, but much also remains to be discovered. Stated differently, there is much convergence in the current literature, but also enough divergence to serve as a reminder that considerable work remains. We are confident that the approach–avoidance distinction will continue to bear conceptual and empirical fruit in the years to come, helping lead to a deeper, more precise, and more integrated knowledge of basic emotion processes and discrete emotional experience.

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