

Approach and Avoidance Motivation

Andrew J. Elliot^{1,3} and Martin V. Covington²

In this article, we introduce this special issue by establishing a conceptual foundation for the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. We do so primarily by explicating several reasons why the approach–avoidance distinction should be viewed as fundamental and basic to the study of human behavior. In addition, we compare and contrast the “approach–avoidance” designation with other designations that have been used in the motivational literature to cover the same or similar conceptual ground. Finally, we conclude by briefly overviewing the other contributions to this special issue, specifically highlighting how they make use of the approach–avoidance distinction.

KEY WORDS: approach–avoidance; appetitive; aversive; motivation; valence.

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is a pervasive and important determinant of behavior for students, teachers, and administrators at all educational levels (Pintrich and Schunk, 1996). In order to understand the educational experience, one must comprehend what motivates behavior in the school setting; furthermore, intervention programs and procedures that fail to take motivational considerations into account are destined for failure. This special issue of *Educational Psychology Review* focuses on one particular aspect of motivation: the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. Motivation may be defined as the energization (i.e., instigation) and direction of behavior. Approach and avoidance motivation differ as a function of *valence*: In approach motivation, behavior is instigated or directed by a positive/desirable event

¹University of Rochester, Rochester, New York 14627.

²University of California—Berkeley, Berkeley, California 94720.

³Correspondence should be addressed to Andrew J. Elliot, University of Rochester, Department of Psychology, Meliora Hall, Rochester, New York 14627.

or possibility; in avoidance motivation, behavior is instigated or directed by a negative/undesirable event or possibility (Elliot, 1999). We contend that approach–avoidance is not just an important motivational distinction, but that it is fundamental and basic, and should be construed as the foundation on which other motivational distinctions rest.

We begin by explicating several reasons why the approach–avoidance distinction deserves a central place in conceptualizations of motivation. Then, we address terminological considerations regarding the “approach–avoidance motivation” designation and discuss some related conceptual issues. Finally, we introduce the other contributions to this special issue, emphasizing how they illustrate the importance and utility of the approach–avoidance distinction. The contributors to this special issue were participants in an American Educational Research Association symposium in 1998 entitled “Approach and Avoidance Motivation in Achievement Settings.” Although the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is clearly relevant across life domains, the primary focus of these contributions is on the achievement domain. Nevertheless, we feel that in making the case for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction, it is best to remain at the general level of analysis.

APPROACH AND AVOIDANCE AS A BASIC CONCEPTUAL DISTINCTION

One argument for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction is that it has a long and rich history in intellectual thought. The origin of the approach–avoidance distinction may be traced back to the ancient Greek philosophers Democritus (460–370 B.C.) and Aristippus (435–356 B.C.), who espoused an ethical hedonism that proscribed the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain as the central guide for human behavior. The first thinker to straightforwardly articulate a psychological hedonism, in which the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain not only represented an ethical proscription but also a description of how humans actually tend to behave, was the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832). Bentham (1779/1879) offered the following strong dictum in his *Introduction to the Principles and Morals of Legislation*: “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 should do . . . they govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think” (p. 1).

Within the fold of psychology proper, many of the major theorists of motivation and personality have incorporated the approach–avoidance distinction into their conceptualizations. This use of the approach–avoidance

distinction can be witnessed across time and theoretical perspectives. In his classic *Principles of Psychology* (vol. 2), James (1890) discussed pleasure and pain as the “springs of action,” noting that pleasure is a “tremendous reinforcer” and pain a “tremendous inhibitor” of behavior (pp. 549–559). Freud (1915) presumed that humans, like lower animals, continuously seek pleasure and avoid pain, and viewed this hedonistic tendency as the motivational foundation of psychodynamics. Jung (1921) noted that the fundamental difference between extroverts and introverts is that in the former there is a movement of interest toward social objects, whereas in the latter there is a movement of interest away from social objects. Pavlov (1927) identified two types of reflexive responses in his work on classical conditioning, an orienting response toward the stimulus and a defensive response away from the stimulus. Thorndike (1911) laid the groundwork for reinforcement theory by proposing the “law of effect” which states that a response leading to “satisfaction” is strengthened, whereas a response leading to “discomfort” is weakened. Skinner (1938) sought to extricate “mentalism” from the law of effect, opting to declare that observable reinforcers increase the likelihood of subsequent behavior and observable punishers decrease the likelihood of subsequent behavior. In his purposive behaviorism, Tolman (1925) posited that a complete description of behavior must include reference to the end (i.e., goal) toward which or away from which the organism is moving.

In his field theory, Lewin (1935) stated that goal-objects in the life space possess positive valences that attract and negative valences that repel. Miller (1944) drew on Freudian and Lewinian concepts in detailing the various dynamic conflicts that can result from incompatible valences (e.g., being attracted to and repelled by the same goal-object). Hull (1943) posited two distinct types of conditioned drives, conditioned appetitive drives that develop through association with states such as hunger for food or thirst for water, and conditioned aversive drives that develop through association with unpleasant events such as shock or loud noise. Murray (1938) differentiated positive or “adient” needs that “force the organism in a positive way toward other objects” from negative or “abient” needs that “force the organism to separate itself from objects” (pp. 79–80). In his social learning theory, Rotter (1954) proposed that the nature of an individual’s expectancies and values is largely a function of his or her prior rewards and punishments.

Maslow (1955) identified two distinct types of needs in his humanistic conceptualization of the person: deficit needs which seek to reduce a negative state of tension, and growth needs which seek to increase positive stimulation. In his biologically based analysis of basic traits, Eysenck (1967) posited that introverts are “stimulus shy” because of high baseline levels of cortical arousal, whereas extroverts are “stimulus hungry” because of low baseline levels of cortical arousal. Bowlby (1969) proposed two primary

styles of attachment: a secure type that promotes exploration and challenge seeking, and an insecure type that impels caution and a concern with safety and protection. Cognitive theorists have utilized approach–avoidance concepts, albeit often at the periphery of their conceptualizations. Heider (1958), for example, summarized the difference between his concepts of “can” and “may” by stating that the former implies that if a person tries, he or she will succeed, whereas the latter implies that if a person tries, he or she will not be punished. From this overview of thinkers and theorists, it is clear that the approach–avoidance distinction has deep intellectual roots, has been utilized from the advent of psychology as a scientific discipline, and is present in each of the major theoretical traditions in psychology (psychoanalytic, behaviorist, humanistic, cognitive, biological, etc.).

A second argument for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction is its applicability across forms of animate life. That is, approach and avoidance motivation is not only manifest in humans, but also in lower organisms as simple as the single cell amoeba. In the amoeba, approach and avoidance motivation is extremely rudimentary, representing approach and withdrawal tendencies “energized directly by protoplasmic processes set off by the stimulus” (Schneirla, 1959, p. 2). For example, a weak light will stimulate a local flow of protoplasm toward the light, often followed by a general movement in that direction, whereas an intense light will stimulate a local contraction of protoplasm, often followed by a general movement away from the light source. Schneirla (1959) argued that organisms at all levels of complexity possess what he termed A-type (approach-type) mechanisms, which evoke approach reactions and facilitate food-getting, shelter-getting, and mating and W-type (withdrawal-type) mechanisms, which evoke withdrawal reactions and facilitate defense, huddling, flight, and protection in general. He proposed that the sophistication of these mechanisms varies considerably across species, with those of protozoa and other invertebrates being rudimentary and rigid, and those of higher organisms being more advanced and flexible (see also Dethier and Stellar, 1970).

Interestingly, Schneirla (1959; 1965) also implied that the balance between A-type and W-type processes could be used to categorize many different organisms intraspecifically. A good deal of research has since supported this proposition, as intraspecies differences in the tendency to approach or avoid novel stimuli have been demonstrated in monkeys (Suomi, 1983), cats (Adamec, 1991), dogs (Goddard and Beilharz, 1985), wolves (MacDonald, 1983), cows (Fordyce *et al.*, 1982), goats (Lyons *et al.*, 1988), rats (Garcia-Sevilla, 1984), mice (see Kagan, 1998), birds (Verbeek *et al.*, 1994), snakes (Herzog and Burghardt, 1988), fish (Wilson *et al.*, 1993), and even some crustaceans (see Wilson *et al.*, 1994). Perhaps most provocatively, some

researchers have conducted factor-analytic studies seeking to document the presence of basic dimensions of “personality” or “temperament” in nonhumans. For instance, in his article “‘Personality’ in the guppy (*Poecilia reticulata*),” Budaev (1997) used factor analysis to examine the patterns underlying exploratory, predatory inspection, and schooling behavior in male guppies. Results revealed two primary orthogonal factors that Budaev (1997) labeled approach and fear avoidance, and that he interpreted in terms of basic motivational systems, with the approach system “governing exploration and social attraction” and the fear avoidance system “governing responses to aversive stimulation” (p. 399). Budaev’s data also indicated that these two basic dimensions are stable over time. Comparable results suggesting independent, approach- and avoidance-based dimensions of “personality” have been obtained in factor-analytic studies of behavior with octopuses (Mather and Anderson, 1993), yellow-bellied marmots (Armitage, 1986), small-eared bushbabys (Watson and Ward, 1996), rhesus monkeys (Stevenson-Hinde *et al.*, 1980), and hooded rats (Maier *et al.*, 1988).

Clearly, approach-based and withdrawal-based behavioral adjustments to the environment have adaptive significance. In fact, Tooby and Cosmides (1990) have argued that the decision to approach or withdraw has been the fundamental adaptive decision that organisms have had to make throughout their evolutionary past (see also Davidson, 1992). It is likely that the reason all organisms, “from protozoans to primates,” possess at least some basic form of approach–avoidance mechanism is that approach and withdrawal responses have survival value, in that they move the organism toward potentially beneficial stimuli and away from potentially harmful stimuli, respectively (Schneirla, 1965, p. 7). To paraphrase Schneirla (1959), the high road of evolution has been littered with the remains of species that have failed to acquire one or more mechanisms for accurately determining the beneficial or harmful potential of environmental stimuli.

A third, related, argument for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction is based in the immediacy (if not primacy) and automaticity of many approach- and avoidance-based motivational processes. This is nicely illustrated in the amoeba’s instantaneous, constitutionally ingrained approach or withdrawal response to light intensity, which is essentially a reflexive reaction to the light stimulus. It is not just the organism’s ability to determine the adaptive significance of stimuli that is central to survival, but also the speed at which such determinations are made (see Berntson *et al.*, 1993; Orians and Heerwagen, 1992). As such, all (surviving) organisms are hardwired or “preprogrammed” to make immediate approach–avoidance responses to particular classes of stimuli (Zajonc, 1984, p. 122). In fact, Zajonc (1998) asserts that “approach/avoidance discriminations” (p. 592) are the primary and most elemental reaction of

organisms to environmental stimuli, the initial response on which all subsequent responses are based.

Humans, like protozoa, exhibit immediate, constitutionally ingrained approach and avoidance responses to certain classes of stimuli. For example, humans possess many different unconditioned exteroceptive reflexes that are commonly classified as orienting (e.g., the salivary reflex) or defensive (e.g., pain withdrawal and startle, Graham, 1973; Pavlov, 1927; Sokolov, 1963) and that may be considered manifestations of approach and avoidance-based motivation, respectively (Dickinson and Dearing, 1979; Konorski, 1967). One such reflex that has attracted a significant amount of research attention is the blink component of the startle reflex. The blink reflex is an involuntary response to an intense stimulus such as a loud noise, a bright light, or an electric shock, and occurs within 30–50 ms of stimulus onset (Bradley and Vrana, 1993). It serves the defensive function of protecting the eye from injury, and acts as a behavioral interrupt that clears processors to deal with potential threats in the environment (Lang, 1995; Ohman, 1997). Highlighting its connection with avoidance-based motivation, the magnitude and latency of this primitive reflex has been shown to vary as a function of the motivationally relevant state of the individual prior to stimulus onset. The blink reflex is stronger and its latency is shorter when the startle stimulus is presented to individuals in a negative state (e.g., viewing negative, unpleasant materials) relative to a positive or neutral state (e.g., viewing positive/pleasant or neutral materials; Lang *et al.*, 1990).

An accumulating body of research indicates that persons evaluate most if not all encountered stimuli on a good/bad dimension (Osgood *et al.*, 1957), and that they do so immediately, and without intention or even awareness (Bargh, 1997; Zajonc, 1998). For example, in a set of studies on the “automatic evaluation effect” in the attitude literature, Bargh *et al.* (1996) used a subliminal presentation technique to prime participants with positively or negatively valenced words prior to a task in which they pronounced other positively or negatively valenced words as rapidly as possible. The subliminal presentation of any positively valenced word facilitated the speed of pronunciation of any other positively valenced word presented (and likewise for pairs of negatively valenced words), thereby demonstrating that participants processed the valence of the subliminally presented words, even though there was no instrumental reason for doing so (see also Fazio *et al.*, 1986; see Bargh, 1997, for a review of the literature). Although it is possible that immediate good/bad evaluations represent a form of automatic cognitive processing (see Fiske, 1982), several theorists have suggested that such evaluations take place independent of the transformation processes typically implicated in cognition (Kuhl, 1986; LeDoux, 1987; Zajonc, 1984). Recent research has yielded supportive evidence, suggesting that the neural

circuitry involved in the evaluative (good/bad) processing of stimuli is at least partially divergent from that involved in the perceptual (identification and discrimination) processing of stimuli (Cacioppo *et al.*, 1996; Crites and Cacioppo, 1996; LeDoux *et al.*, 1984; Shizgal, 1999; see also Murphy and Zajonc, 1993). Thus, automatic good/bad evaluations may be a direct response to stimuli, unmediated by any higher-order cognitive processes. Much remains to be learned about the nature of automatic evaluation, including the basic question of the precise quality of the evaluation itself (i.e., Is the dimension of evaluation best construed as good/bad, desirable/undesirable, unpleasant/pleasant, or harmful/beneficial?; see Berridge, 1999, for a related set of issues).

Automatic evaluation is important because evaluation is presumed to instantaneously evoke approach and withdrawal behavioral predispositions. Over the years, a number of theorists from the emotion (Arnold, 1960; Frijda, 1986; Lang, 1984; Lazarus, 1991), motivation (Corwin, 1921; Lewin, 1935; Mowrer, 1960; Young, 1959), and attitude (Bogardus, 1931; Doob, 1947; Osgood *et al.*, 1957) literatures have posited that the positive or negative evaluation of a stimulus is inherently linked to a tendency to move toward or away from the stimulus, respectively. Empirical data have recently been acquired in support of this proposition. In a set of reaction-time experiments, Chen and Bargh (1999) had participants either pull a lever toward them (an approach-based flexor reaction) or push a lever away from them (an avoidance-based extensor reaction) as quickly as possible when a positively or negatively valenced stimulus word appeared. Results indicated that participants reacted more quickly for positive than negative words when they were instructed to pull the lever toward them (the approach response), and more quickly for negative than positive words when they were instructed to push the lever away from them (the avoidance response; see also Cacioppo *et al.*, 1993; Forster *et al.*, 1998; Solorz, 1960). These results were obtained even when no mention was made of the evaluative content of the stimuli and when participants were not instructed to evaluate the stimuli in any way, prompting Bargh and Chartrand (1999) to conclude that automatic evaluation results in a behavioral predisposition toward or away from the stimulus “in a matter of milliseconds” (p. 475).

It is important to highlight that the action disposition associated with automatic evaluation is a *predisposition*, not an overt behavioral response *per se*. Positively and negatively evaluated stimuli produce a physiological and somatic preparedness for approaching and withdrawing (Arnold, 1960), but observable behavior may or may not correspond to this initial behavioral readiness (Lang *et al.*, 1997). Actually, in lower organisms, and in constitutionally ingrained responses in humans, evaluation *does* lead directly and invariably to observable approach or withdrawal behaviors. In

much human behavior, however, behavioral predispositions represent an initial input that may be overridden by other inputs generated by other approach- and avoidance-based mechanisms prior to an actual behavioral response being enacted. For example, one may automatically evaluate a “death by chocolate” dessert stimulus as good/desirable, which may immediately evoke an approach tendency at the physiological and somatic levels. This initial predisposition toward the dessert may be followed by the more deliberate activation of one’s personal goal of “lose 15 pounds this semester,” ultimately resulting in overt behavioral withdrawal. Likewise, the sight of one’s despised boss may evoke an immediate withdrawal tendency, but one’s observable behavior may or may not be consistent with this initial reaction, depending on whether one strategically decides to hide to avoid yet another humiliating interaction or to courageously confront him or her regarding the repetitive maltreatment. Thus, in predicting observable behavior, particularly for complex organisms such as humans with their flexible and creative self-regulatory repertoire (e.g., delay of gratification, impulse control, goal setting), one must consider the operation of multiple levels of approach and avoidance motivation (Cacioppo *et al.*, 1999), both at the same level of representation (e.g., Miller, 1944) and in hierarchical fashion (e.g., Elliot and Church, 1997).

A fourth argument for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction is based in neurophysiological data that support the existence of at least partially independent approach and avoidance systems in the brain. During the past 30 years, several theorists have proposed neuroanatomically based conceptualizations of approach and avoidance motivation (see Cloninger, 1987 [behavioral activation and behavioral inhibition systems]; Davidson, 1993 [approach and withdrawal systems]; Gray, 1982 [behavioral approach and behavioral inhibition systems]; Lang *et al.*, 1990 [appetitive and aversive systems]; see also Depue and Collins, 1999; LeDoux, 1995). Although differing in a variety of ways, these theoretical models have in common the proposition that there are identifiable neuroanatomical substrates located in the brain that underly approach and avoidance motivational processes.

The empirical research in this area is still at a relatively incipient stage of development, but findings from several laboratories have emerged over the years in support of this proposition. Groundbreaking research was conducted by Delgado *et al.* (1954) and Olds and Milner (1954), demonstrating that electrical stimulation of the brain could have reinforcing or punishing properties. The septal area of the limbic system was identified as the “pleasure center” of the brain, whereas the hypothalamic area of the limbic system was implicated in pain and unpleasantness. These provocative findings were the catalyst for much subsequent empirical activity. Using a

diversity of methodologies—including electrical stimulation, lesioning, drug administration, and brain imaging—researchers have sought to link specific neural and neurotransmitter activity in the brain to approach-based and avoidance-based processes (for reviews see Cacioppo *et al.*, 1999; Depue and Collins, 1999; Hoebel *et al.*, 1999; LeDoux, 1995; Watson *et al.*, 1999; Zuckerman, 1994). Recent data suggest a link between approach motivation and dopamine release in the nucleus accumbens; avoidance motivation appears to be linked to activity in the amygdala and, perhaps, acetylcholine release in the nucleus accumbens.

In addition to the aforementioned work on subcortical brain functioning, some researchers have sought to investigate the neuroanatomical substrates of approach and avoidance motivation at the neocortical level. Most notable is the work of Davidson and colleagues, who have investigated the hypothesis that approach and avoidance motivation are localized in different cerebral hemispheres. In several experiments, Davidson and colleagues (see Davidson, 1995, for a review) have demonstrated that resting hemispheric asymmetry in the prefrontal cortex is associated with motivation-based affective experience, such that relatively greater resting activity in the left prefrontal lobe is linked to approach-based positive affect, whereas relatively greater resting activity in the right prefrontal lobe is linked to withdrawal-based negative affect. This cerebral asymmetry has been shown to be stable over time, and to be present in children as young as 10 months of age (Davidson and Fox, 1989). Davidson and colleagues (Davidson *et al.*, 1990) have also documented this same pattern of asymmetric cortical activation during actual experiences of affect. Impressive as these data are, it is nonetheless important to note a procedural issue in this work that produces interpretational difficulties. In most of the research, hemispheric activation has been measured using electroencephalograph (EEG) recordings, and asymmetry has been quantified as the difference between the EEG recordings for the left and right cortices. This computation of asymmetry implies a single bipolar (reciprocal) continuum of cortical activation, which contrasts sharply with the prevailing view of approach and avoidance as largely independent motivational orientations (Ito and Cacioppo, 1999). In addition, with this index of asymmetry, the same difference score may represent several different patterns of activation (e.g., a moderate difference score could be indicative of high left and high right cortical activation or low left and low right cortical activation). Interestingly, for many years an analogous problem plagued research on the achievement motive and on fear of failure in the achievement motivation literature (see Covington, 1992; Elliot, 1997); the problem proved much easier to correct in that literature (Covington and Roberts, 1994; Elliot and Church, 1997) than it appears to be in the asymmetry literature (see Ito and Cacioppo, 1999).

A fifth and final argument for the fundamental importance of the approach–avoidance distinction is that the notion of approach and avoidance motivation is highly intuitive. That is, for most individuals, the idea that their behavior is motivated by positive/desirable events or possibilities and by negative/undesirable events or possibilities rings true to the point that it essentially resembles “common sense.” Intuition is often overlooked and sometimes even disparaged as a source of knowledge, and, obviously, intuition is neither the only nor the best criterion by which to judge the merit of a conceptual distinction or framework. Indeed a common objective of the scientific enterprise is to generate additional knowledge and information that affords a more accurate, systematic analysis of problems or issues than that readily available via intuition or conventional wisdom (Atkinson, 1964). Nonetheless, epistemically, intuition is an important, independent source of information (Lieberman, 2000; Thiroux, 1985). Intuition is commonly the starting place for one’s knowledge and understanding; this is as true for the trained scientist as it is for the average “person on the street.” Intuition should be, and often is, overruled in the scientific process, but this only occurs (or should only occur) if an alternative explanation or account emerges that is grounded in compelling theory and supported by empirical data. Such an alternative does not appear to be in sight with regard to the approach–avoidance distinction (on the contrary, the literature reviewed earlier is clearly in accord with intuition in this case). Thus, intuition may be viewed as an important, independent source of evidence providing additional support for the proposition that approach–avoidance is a fundamentally important motivational distinction.

From this overview, it is clear that the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation has deep and widespread intellectual roots, represents a part of the evolutionary heritage that humans share with organisms across the phylogenetic spectrum, is instigated immediately and automatically in response to most if not all stimuli humans encounter, is grounded in the basic neuroanatomical structures of the brain, and concords with the intuitively based knowledge of how humans are motivated in their daily lives. As such, it is surprising that in much contemporary empirical and theoretical work on motivational issues, the approach–avoidance distinction is either overshadowed or overlooked altogether. Some introductory motivation textbooks imply or explicitly state that the approach–avoidance distinction (typically conceptualized entirely in terms of hedonism) represents a basic assumption of most models of motivation (Cofer and Appley, 1964; Franken, 1994; Reeve, 1992), and we would concur that it does seem to represent a rather widely shared assumption at the very broad, abstract level of analysis. However, it is also evident that when researchers and theorists create motivational constructs and devise motivational conceptualizations of various phenomena, such broad, abstract assumptions commonly get left behind.

We think this lack of attention to the approach–avoidance distinction is detrimental to theory, research, and practice in educational psychology and in the discipline of psychology as a whole. We contend that the approach–avoidance distinction is integral to an understanding of motivation, and that researchers and theorists working in the area of motivation should more carefully attend to this central and rich conceptual dichotomy. The distinction between approach and avoidance motivation is not sufficient to account for motivational phenomena; clearly many other conceptual distinctions are important and need to be addressed. However, the approach–avoidance distinction is fundamental and basic, and should be used as a conceptual foundation on which other distinctions rest.

TERMINOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND RELATED CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

Over the years, a variety of different terms or labels have been used to refer to the basic conceptual idea that we have been focusing on in this article, namely that behavior is motivated by positive/desirable or negative/undesirable events or possibilities. In addition to “approach–avoidance motivation,” the following designations have been the most popular: “hedonism,” “approach–withdrawal motivation,” and “appetitive–aversive motivation.” Each of these designations tend to be associated with a somewhat distinct set of conceptual emphases. Therefore, before proceeding to our introduction of the other contributions to this special issue, we think it is important to briefly discuss the relationship between “approach–avoidance motivation” and each of these other designations.

In philosophy, the term “hedonism” has been defined variously; some (e.g., Epicurus, 341–270 B.C.) have preferred a rather broad denotation that includes seeking the pleasures and avoiding the pains of the mind and the body, whereas others (e.g., the British Empiricists) have preferred a rather narrow denotation that focuses specifically on bodily sensation (see Gosling, 1969). In the psychological literature, hedonism has typically been defined rather narrowly in terms of bodily sensation and affect (Cofer and Appley, 1964; DeCharms, 1969; Franken, 1994), perhaps due to influential motivational theorists like P. T. Young (author of one of the first books in English to carry the word “motivation”—*Motivation and Behavior*, 1936) who proffered an explicitly hedonic theory that essentially equated pleasure/pain and affect (see also Young, 1941, 1949). Recently, some psychologists have attempted to broaden the term “hedonism” to not only include sensory/affective pleasures and pains but also aesthetic (e.g., listening to harmonious/discordant music) and accomplishment-based (e.g., succeeding/failing) pleasures and pains (Kahneman *et al.*, 1999; Rozin, 1999). In this context, Rozin (1999) has suggested that pleasure be defined as “a

positive experienced state that we seek and that we try to maintain or enhance” and pain as “a negative experienced state that we avoid and that we try to reduce or eliminate” (p. 112). It remains to be seen whether this broader definition of hedonism will eventually take root and replace the narrower definition that is now the default in the psychological literature. The narrower definition may be construed as a subset of the more inclusive concept of approach–avoidance motivation; the broader definition is very much akin to the concept of approach–avoidance motivation that we are espousing.

Systematic use of the designation “approach–withdrawal” motivation originated with T. C. Schneirla, a comparative psychologist who argued for a conceptualization of motivation grounded in objective behavioral movement. Schneirla (1959) insisted on establishing observable movement as the central feature of motivation, because he stated that doing so was necessary to account for motivation in lower as well as higher organisms. Thus, all organisms are presumed to be exhibiting approach motivation when they respond to a stimulus by coming nearer to it, and they are presumed to be exhibiting withdrawal motivation when they respond to a stimulus by increasing distance from it. That is, approach–withdrawal motivation and observable physical movement are construed as isomorphic. There are several limitations to this reliance on observable behavior as a direct indicator of motivation. First, an organism can be motivated without exhibiting observable behavioral movement. A stimulus may activate a behavioral predisposition to approach or withdraw without the predisposition necessarily being translated into an actual behavioral manifestation. Furthermore, an organism may be motivated to *stay* near a positive/desirable stimulus or to *stay* away from a negative/undesirable stimulus, neither of which necessitates any physical movement. Second, an organism may exhibit observable behavioral movement without necessarily being motivated in any specific way. Some movement is simply aimless or random action; the mere fact that such behavior might objectively move the organism toward or away from a certain stimulus does not mean that the movement is motivated by that stimulus. Third, an organism’s observable behavioral movement may or may not be congruent with the underlying motivation impelling that movement. Motivational mechanisms in lower organisms and those involved in primitive human functioning may very well operate in terms of a direct, inflexible relationship between stimulus type and observable direction of movement. However, as discussed earlier, more advanced forms of human functioning often entail the operation of multiple mechanisms at multiple levels of representation, resulting in more complex forms of regulation such as observable approach behavior (e.g., moving toward a spider) that is actually in

the service of underlying avoidance motivation (e.g., in order to overcome one's fear of spiders). Using behavior alone to directly represent motivation is clearly inadequate in such instances. Thus, the "approach-withdrawal" distinction seems limited to accounting for basic, *reactive* forms of motivation, and seems unable to adequately account for more advanced, *proactive* forms of human motivation.

The designations "appetitive-aversive" and "approach-avoidance" motivation both have rich traditions in the psychological literature, and both are highly similar in that they are rooted in the concept of *motivational valence*. That is, for both designations, the emphasis is on whether behavior is instigated and directed by positive/desirable stimuli or by negative/undesirable stimuli. W. Craig introduced the "appetitive-aversive" distinction in his influential 1918 *Biological Bulletin* article entitled "Appetites and aversions as constituents of instincts." In this paper, Craig conceptualized appetites and aversions in terms of internal, positive or negative states of agitation (i.e., energization/instigation) that are accompanied by a readiness to act to satisfy the appetite or aversion. Appetites and aversions were presumed to have physiological substrates, the nature of which were simply said to be "exceedingly complex and numerous" (p. 95). Tolman (1932) incorporated the "appetitive-aversive" distinction into his analysis of purposive behavior, embracing Craig's conceptualization "almost in toto" (p. 272). The minor "emendations" that Tolman offered merely sought to add a more purposive and cognitive flavor to Craig's exposition (see Tolman (1932), pp. 272-274). The contemporary use of the appetitive-aversive distinction is also highly congruent with Craig's/Tolman's conceptualization (see Lang *et al.*, 1997), although, of course, methodological and empirical advances have allowed more detailed statements to be made with regard to the physiological substrates of appetite and aversion.

The "approach-avoidance" distinction emerged from Kurt Lewin's work on Field Theory, specifically his conceptualization of positive and negative valences. Lewin (1935) posited that stimuli have positive/attracting properties or negative/repelling properties (i.e., valences) that are linked directly to tendencies to approach or avoid the stimuli. These positive and negative valences usually emerge from the organism's needs, meaning that approach and avoidance tendencies are typically activated in the service of need satisfaction. Working within a Lewinian framework, Miller (1944) helped popularize the approach-avoidance distinction with his systematic experimental research on approach-avoidance conflicts. Although in most of Miller's experiments, approach and avoidance were operationalized in terms of movement toward or away from an object in physical space, Miller (1944), in accord with Lewin, explicitly stated that approach and avoidance are to be

understood dynamically and functionally, not spatially (see also Dollard and Miller, 1950). That is, the experimental work on “spatial approach or avoidance” behavior (Miller, 1944, p. 432) was designed to be a simple, concrete analog of more complex, abstract motivational processes. McClelland and colleagues (McClelland, 1951; McClelland *et al.*, 1953) were also instrumental in establishing and popularizing the approach–avoidance distinction. These theorists focused primarily on approach and avoidance motives, representing dispositional preferences for acquiring positive, hoped-for experiences or states (e.g., the motive for success) or for avoiding negative, feared experiences or states (e.g., the motive to avoid failure), although they also noted that the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation was applicable at the level of unlearned, reflexive mechanisms as well (McClelland *et al.*, 1953). Like Lewin (and Miller), McClelland and colleagues clearly conceptualized the approach–avoidance distinction in terms of underlying valence-based processes, rather than in terms of observable behavior.

In sum, the best way to cover the conceptual space under consideration is in broad fashion, and in terms of underlying motivational processes rather than observable behavior per se. The term “hedonism” has tended to represent a rather narrow set of psychological processes (i.e., sensory/affective), and the designation “approach–withdrawal motivation” has typically been linked to an emphasis on physical movement as a direct indicator of motivation. Both of these terminological options seem unnecessarily restrictive. The designations “appetitive–aversive motivation” and “approach–avoidance motivation” have been used in highly similar fashion in the literature, and may essentially be viewed as synonymous. Both of these designations are broadly applicable to all levels and degrees of complexity of valence-based motivational processes: from the simple, constitutionally engrained instigation of fixed behavior in the single-celled amoeba to the highly complex, multiply determined, flexible self-regulation of the human being. As such, we recommend *either* the “approach–avoidance motivation” or the “appetitive–aversive motivation” designations; we have employed the “approach–avoidance” label exclusively in the present work simply for the sake of presentation clarity.

BRIEF INTRODUCTION OF CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

The contributions to this special issue of *Educational Psychology Review* illustrate the complementary ways in which the approach-avoidance distinction can extend psychologists’ and educators’ understanding of achievement behavior. Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley overview research on an important

self-regulatory strategy observed in classroom contexts—the avoidance of help seeking. These researchers discuss how students' personal motivational characteristics (e.g., their achievement goals) and aspects of the classroom environment (e.g., the social climate of the classroom) influence students' tendency to avoid seeking help with their academic work. A recurring theme throughout their article is that avoidance motivation, particularly the desire not to look incompetent in front of one's peers, plays a central role in the avoidance of help seeking.

Urduan and Midgley—like Ryan, Pintrich, and Midgley—focus on a defensive, self-protective regulatory strategy observed in classroom contexts: academic self-handicapping (i.e., purposeful, a priori efforts to manipulate others' perceptions away from attributions to low ability). They begin their article by discussing definitional issues and by delineating various negative consequences that accrue from self-handicapping. They proceed to overview their own research on the link between achievement goals and self-handicapping among elementary and middle school students. This research has uncovered several important predictors of self-handicapping, including students' adoption of performance-avoidance goals in the classroom.

Elliot and Thrash offer a conceptual critique of the achievement goal approach to achievement motivation, emphasizing the need for a precise definition of the achievement goal construct, and a careful analysis of the way in which these goals and their antecedents combine to produce competence-based self-regulation. They begin by discussing these issues in general terms, and then proceed to illustrate the issues in the context of the hierarchical model of achievement motivation. The approach-avoidance distinction is shown to be an integral aspect of the hierarchical model, applying to both achievement goals and their antecedents.

Covington and Miller make the case for reinterpreting the traditional distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in terms of the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. Specifically, they critically examine the assertion that offering tangible rewards such as grades will inhibit the will to learn for its own sake, positing instead that the true enemy of intrinsic engagement is the pursuit of avoidance goals driven by fear of failure. This proposal, and related ideas, are discussed in the context of the self-worth theory of achievement motivation.

Serving the role of discussant, Maehr offers commentary on the various contributions to the special issue. He overviews various themes that emerge in the articles, and concludes that the pieces are quite complementary in their analysis of motivation and achievement. Importantly, he also includes a reminder that although the approach-avoidance distinction may have a great deal of conceptual and empirical utility, it is by no means sufficient to fully account for the complexities of thought and action in achievement settings.

It is our hope that this special issue will communicate the fundamental importance of the approach-avoidance distinction in accounting for motivated achievement behavior. We additionally hope that these articles will encourage others to make use of this basic distinction in their own theoretical and empirical work on achievement motivation and beyond.

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