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Avoiding Regulatory Rigidity and Approaching Regulatory Flexibility

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In their target article, Scholer, Cornwell, and Higgins (in press) suggest that current conceptualizations of approach and avoidance motivation should be reconsidered. Amid and beyond psychology, in fields as diverse as education, organizational science, and clinical therapy (Covington, 1992; Elliot, 1999; Fowles, 1994; Kanfer, Frese, & Johnson, 2017; McFarland, Shankman, Tenke, Bruder, & Klein, 2006), approach motivation is lauded as an adaptive self-regulation orientation and avoidance branded a maladaptive reaction. Scholer and colleagues (in press) argue that a rigid categorization of approach as good and avoidance as bad has prevented the behavioral sciences from identifying situations in which approach can be problematic and avoidance beneficial, an analysis with which we agree.

The target article outlines potential trade-offs between the costs and benefits of approach and avoidance. For example, avoidance can have hedonic costs as well as performance benefits, whereas approach generally feels good but does not necessarily produce effective results. In highlighting these trade-offs, Scholer et al. (in press) moved beyond what Bonanno and Burton (2013) referred to as the fallacy of uniform efficacy—the assumption that one particular strategy or state will be universally beneficial or costly in every situation. Seeing researchers advocate for this contextually sensitive approach to be broadly adopted is an exciting development in the self-regulation literature.

Whereas Scholer et al. (in press) highlighted the benefits of moving beyond classifying approach and avoidance as good and bad, respectively, there is another refinement that deserves just as much attention. Rather than positioning approach and avoidance (whether for approaching or avoiding gains or losses) as static entities that operate separately in a given context, we argue for greater recognition of the dynamic interplay between approach and avoidance. Conceptualizing approach and avoidance as separate states that are *either* effective or ineffective depending on context does not capture the full picture of how and why these states can be psychologically beneficial or costly. Here, it can be useful to incorporate lessons from literatures that have investigated the interplay between regulatory states, such as the emotion regulation and threat defense literatures.

The interplay between regulatory states can be seen in the emotion regulation literature's emphasis on regulatory flexibility, a hallmark of an optimally functioning system.

Regulatory flexibility is the ability to switch between different states and strategies to obtain optimal outcomes (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). This concept holds that people must choose the right regulation strategy for the right situation, or indeed must choose the right *combination* of strategies for the right situation (Blanke, Brose, Kalokerinos, Erbas, Riediger, & Kuppens, 2019). Applying this perspective to the self-regulation literature suggests that a fruitful avenue of inquiry may lie in understanding how people switch flexibly between approach and avoidance states in pursuit of optimal functioning.

The many and various literatures on threat defense have embraced this notion by incorporating motivational shifts into theories of self-regulation. A wealth of evidence shows that anticipating or experiencing threat activates avoidance processes (e.g., Corr, DeYoung, & McNaughton, 2013; Gray, 1982; Klackl, Jonas, & Fritsche, 2018). Moving beyond this observation, literatures from terror management theory to the meaning maintenance model and reactive approach motivation (Fritsche et al., 2013; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Kay, Gaucher, Napier, Callan, & Laurin, 2008; McGregor, Nash, Mann, & Phills, 2010; Proulx, Heine, & Vohs, 2010) have demonstrated and cataloged the shift from avoidance to approach that occurs following threat detection.

Our own work suggests that approach and avoidance work in close coordination. We hypothesized that people would exhibit greater approach as a way of counteracting the natural motivational shift toward anxiety and avoidance following a threat. We found that people deprived of control (who then experienced a brief delay between tasks to allow for a switch in motivation systems), exhibited greater approach orientation than people not deprived of control. Yet when control deprivation was paired with a misattribution procedure (ingesting a pill) that provided an explanation for the arousal they were feeling, people did not show an uptick in approach orientation (Greenaway, Storrs, Philipp, Louis, Hornsey, & Vohs, 2015; for a review, see Greenaway, Philipp, & Storrs, 2017).

Other work suggests that vigilance in the service of avoiding mistakes is cut short when people are given the opportunity to restore control through other means (Bukowski, Asanowicz, Marzecová, & Lupiáñez, 2015; Pittman & D'Agostino, 1989). Together, these findings

indicate that people move from avoidance to approach in ways that are motivationally beneficial, responsive to context, and that harness arousal (energy)—a well-known marker of motivational states (e.g., Brehm & Self, 1989; Brooks, 2014)—in service of resolving psychological conflict.

To be sure, we would not expect approach motivation to continue unabated indefinitely. Either approach motivation will be successful in balancing the psychological scales and then eventually subside, or the message will be received by the system that such action is futile and a waste of energy. This latter reaction is famously captured in Seligman and Maier's (1967) study of learned helplessness in which dogs subjected to electric shock first showed furious exploration of their inescapable environment (i.e., approach) before subsiding into the passivity and listlessness that is best remembered today (i.e., avoidance).

Avoidance may be a response to a particular event or stimulus that requires approach to offset its processes and bring people back to baseline. When approach is generated by an event or stimulus, it may require avoidance to mute its more extreme manifestations. To our knowledge, this latter proposal has not been tested directly, but it follows from the present theorizing about the benefits of dynamic motivational shifts. In addition, it is exhausting for a system to effortfully regulate in one direction for an extended period (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007), and switching to an alternative motivational state may be one way to alleviate this burden. Mapping these temporal dynamics is an ongoing challenge for the self-regulation literature to consider.

The perspective in the threat defense literature is that approach is a natural outgrowth of avoidance following threat—the sign of an adaptive and well-regulated system that shifts from evasive vigilance toward doing something, anything, to deal with psychological discombobulation (Jonas et al., 2014). The ultimate aims of an avoidance-to-approach motivational shift include simply seeking to quell the negativity that accompanies avoidance activation, redressing the source of the threat itself, and attempting to reaffirm the self in a domain outside of that which is threatened (e.g., Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Jonas et al., 2014). Most germane to the target article (Scholer et al., in press) is the value of considering not simply how approach or avoidance can be effective states in particular contexts but also how approach and avoidance operate in tandem and over time to deliver adaptive outcomes.

Conclusions

We concur that it is high time to move beyond the dichotomous thinking that approach is good and avoidance is bad, and we applaud Scholer and colleagues (in press) for addressing the issue. Yet, along with considering when approach and avoidance can be either good or bad, there is additional benefit in conceptualizing self-regulation as a dynamic process of moving from one state to another in the service of optimal functioning. Put simply, we argue for a better understanding of the *regulation* of self-regulation.

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