



# Measuring approach-avoidance motivation: Expanding dimensionality through implied outcomes



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## ABSTRACT

The current study tested the validity of a novel four-dimensional model of approach-avoidance, whereby both approach motivation and avoidance motivation are measured in relation to both implied success and implied failure. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses supported the validity of the proposed framework and the use of items with clearly implied outcomes. Furthermore, newly developed scales reflecting constructs representing increasing non-gains via approach and increasing non-losses via avoidance meaningfully expanded the approach-avoidance construct space. The current study also suggested contamination by implied outcomes does not invalidate approach-avoidance scales where reward/punishment context is specified. Finally, results indicated assessing an “effective avoidance” motivational orientation significantly and uniquely predict overall job performance.

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## 1. Introduction

The notion that human behavior is driven by dual desires to approach rewards and avoid punishments is a central theme throughout the motivation literature (Elliot & Covington, 2001). As the approach-avoidance distinction often serves as the foundation for other motivational frameworks, researchers have called for further examination of how to operationalize this fundamental construct (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Thrash, 2002). As such, approach motivation and avoidance motivation serve as over-arching dimensions underpinning various approach-oriented and avoidance-oriented constructs (e.g., reinforcement sensitivity, regulatory focus, goal orientation). Current self-report assessments fail to adequately account for *approach*-oriented goal pursuits resulting in missed opportunities (“non-gains”) and *avoidance*-oriented goal pursuits resulting in a broader success at avoiding punishments (“non-losses”; cf. Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Freitas, Liberman, & Higgins, 2002; Kuhnén & Knutson, 2005). To properly assess whether approaching vs. avoiding gains or losses is advantageous to the respondent, these scales must incorporate items which clearly specify positive or negative outcomes. Furthermore, this is essential to evaluate the extent to which the desirability of implied outcomes is driving responses, as opposed to approach-avoidance orientation. The purpose of this article is to test the validity of a four-dimensional model of approach-avoidance, whereby both approach motivation and avoidance motivation are measured in relation to both implied success and implied failure.

### 1.1. Moving to a four-dimensional model of approach-avoidance

Currently, approach-avoidance motivation is broadly depicted under the assumption that approach and avoidance represent two uncorrelated dimensions (see Fig. 1). Approach motivation is initiated by the possibility of rewarding outcomes, while avoidance motivation is instigated by the possibility of punitive outcomes (Elliot, 1999). In response to theories suggesting individuals differ in their sensitivity to rewards and punishments (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), various psychometric instruments have been created to assess temperamental approach-avoidance (e.g., Carver & White, 1994). Such instruments associate increasing approach motivation with increasing gains, and increasing avoidance motivation with increasing losses. Accordingly, this two-dimensional model and associated assessments do not recognize non-gains and non-losses (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Freitas et al., 2002; Kuhnén & Knutson, 2005).

We propose an alternative model of approach-avoidance measurement, whereby both approach motivation and avoidance motivation are assessed in relation to both implied success and implied failure (see Fig. 2). We borrow the terminology of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) to further explain the four-dimensional model. Our choice of Higgins' terminology is not an endorsement of regulatory focus theory over other conceptualizations of approach-avoidance. Rather, Higgins' framework was chosen because it facilitates clarity in explicating a broader representation of approach-avoidance motivational orientation.

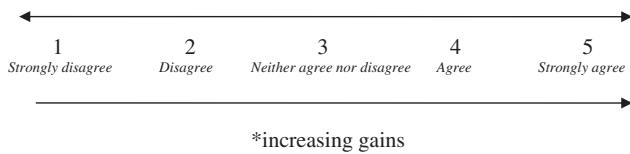
Much of the regulatory focus literature distinguishes between the presence of positive outcomes (“gains”) and negative outcomes

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## Increasing Gains Via Approach Example:

*I intensely feel the excitement of earning a reward.*



## Increasing Losses Via Avoidance Example:

*I am overly sensitive to punishments.*

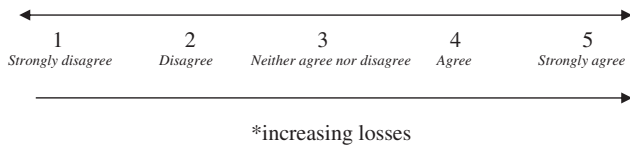
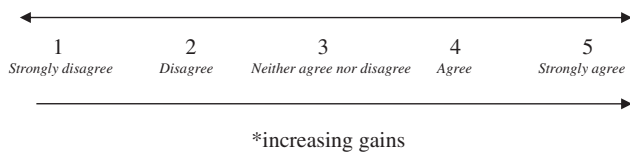


Fig. 1. Two-dimensional model.

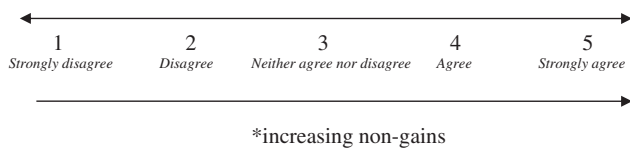
## Increasing Gains Via Approach Example:

*I have a clear vision of my life goals.*



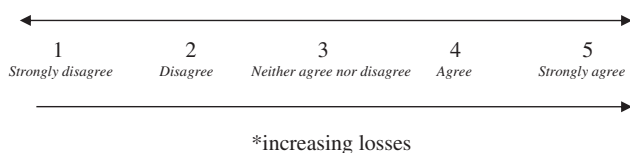
## Increasing Non-Gains Via Approach Example:

*I waste time daydreaming.*



## Increasing Losses Via Avoidance Example:

*I blindly follow social norms.*



## Increasing Non-Losses Via Avoidance Example:

*I can be counted on.*

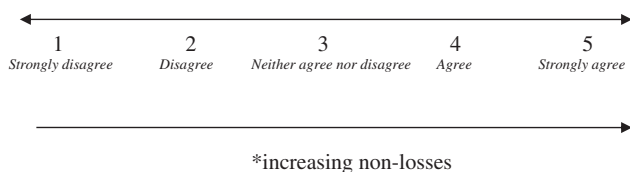


Fig. 2. Four-dimensional model.

(“losses”), and the absence of positive outcomes (“non-gains”) and negative outcomes (“non-losses”). In order to illustrate the difference between these various orientations, consider the following hypothetical examples: (1) Purchasing a book that costs \$65, and the bookstore offers a \$5 discount for paying in cash (as opposed to credit card) – getting the discount is interpreted as a *gain*, whereas not getting the discount is interpreted as a *non-gain*; (2) Purchasing a book that costs \$60, and the bookstore charges a \$5 penalty for paying with a credit card (as opposed to cash) – not paying the penalty is interpreted as a *non-loss*, whereas paying the penalty is interpreted as a *loss* (examples adapted from Idson, Liberman, & Higgins (2000)).

Higgins and colleagues (e.g., Higgins, 1998; Idson et al., 2000) premise this distinction based on evidence that individuals can experience either success or failure in acquiring the fundamental needs of nurturance (aspirations) and security (obligations), and that individuals can differ in their chronic focus on said needs. Additionally, Florack, Scarabis, and Gosejohann (2005) demonstrated the impact of a gains/non-gains or losses/non-losses orientation on both information processing and task performance. Accordingly, the four-dimensional model – comprised of gains via approach, non-gains via approach, losses via avoidance, and non-losses via avoidance – represents a more complete conceptualization of approach-avoidance motivation.

### 1.2. Expanding dimensionality through implied outcomes

Prior factor analytic research on current approach-avoidance scales supports the use of items clearly implying the acquisition of rewards or the failure to avoid punishments (Scott & Hauenstein, 2011). For example, the retained item “I am the life of the party” implies the social rewards associated with popularity vis-à-vis extraversion. In contrast, the impulsivity-related item “I often act on the spur of the moment” taken from the “Fun Seeking” subscale of the Behavioral Activation and Inhibition System (BAS/BIS) scales (Carver & White, 1994) is ambiguous as to reward context. That is, acting “on the spur of the moment” could lead to either approaching rewards or avoiding punishments.

From a measurement perspective, we recognize the challenge raised by the argument to make outcomes explicit in motivational orientation items. More specifically, inclusion of explicit outcomes creates what is traditionally known as double-barreled personality items (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991), thereby clouding interpretation – in our case, whether item responses reflect standing on motivational orientation (approach-avoidance) or simply the preference for positive outcomes (gains and non-losses) over negative outcomes (non-gains and losses). Many existing motivational items, however, are already, in a sense, double-barreled by their clear association with outcomes. Specifically, while goal pursuits predicated on either approach or avoidance motivation are directed by the anticipation of a particular outcome, the actual result of the goal pursuit (be it desirable or undesirable) is independent of the particular motivational orientation employed. We are creating greater measurement clarity and consistency by making outcomes explicit for all items, including items that are ambiguous as to implied outcomes. Furthermore, it is impossible to construct an item pool measuring non-gains or non-losses without making the absence of positive or negative outcomes explicit in the item.

As such, we are explicitly recognizing the outcome-valence contaminant that is already affecting measures of motivational orientation while also addressing potential construct deficiencies by adding non-gain and non-loss items to the measurement of motivational orientation. A critical advantage of our four-dimensional measure over existing two dimensional measures is that it affords an empirical test of the argument that preference for positive outcomes is the alternative latent cause of responses. In two-dimensional measures, it is impossible to assess contamination by implied outcomes because approach items are confounded with positive outcomes and avoidance items are confounded with negative outcomes. In our four-dimensional model, however, motivational

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