

Measurement of ambivalent and purposeful engagement after aversive social experiences

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Abstract

We describe two ways that participants may react to their internal experiences subsequent to stressful interpersonal interactions: Ambivalent engagement, consisting of attempts to avoid or dismiss the experiences arising from memories of the situation, and purposeful engagement, consisting of effortful attempts to approach the memories and internal experiences associated with the event. In a series of studies employing undergraduate samples, we evaluate a self-report method of measuring these trait-like constructs. The measure shows promising psychometric properties, including adequate to good factorial validity, good internal consistency, good test–retest reliability, and strong convergent and discriminant validity across a variety of theoretically related measures. This method of measuring ambivalent and purposeful engagement should be useful in investigating whether these constructs are related to the development of such disorders as social anxiety disorder and generalized anxiety disorder, as well as whether purposeful engagement is related to therapeutic change.

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Recent theory and evidence have suggested that avoidance of one's own experience may be a factor in the development of psychological distress (e.g., Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999) and, more particularly, anxiety-related problems (e.g., Orsillo, Roemer, Block Lerner, & Tull, 2004). Experiential avoidance may include a variety of behavioral strategies, which may be more overt (e.g., avoiding a situation because of the emotions and thoughts it stimulates) or less overt (e.g., attempting to distract oneself from a thought that seems

distressing). Because of the potential for wide-ranging forms of experiential avoidance, multiple forms of assessment are needed. Further, because much of experiential avoidance may be difficult or impossible to detect unless one is the person who is avoiding, self-report questionnaires may be especially valuable.

Available measures in this area tend to focus on experiential avoidance in general (e.g., the Acceptance and Action Questionnaire; Hayes et al., 2004) or mindfulness (e.g., the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale; Brown & Ryan, 2003), which has been postulated as a potential antidote to experiential avoidance (e.g., Hayes et al., 1999). Although the strategy of measuring general tendencies toward experiential avoidance versus mindfulness has an intuitive appeal and may be useful in some circumstances, different

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psychological disorders entail avoidance in different contexts. Thus, whereas one would expect people with panic disorder and social anxiety disorder to both display experiential avoidance, it seems reasonable to expect that the situations, cognitions, and sensations that trigger this avoidance will differ. For example, in the case of social anxiety disorder, we would expect that experiential avoidance would be largely concentrated on social situations, as well as the cognitions and sensations associated with such situations. In addition, other disorders that involve significant interpersonal elements may involve experiential avoidance related to social situations. Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) appears to relate to particular types of perceived interpersonal problems (e.g., Eng & Heimberg, 2006), which might make it useful to researchers to have a measure of experiential avoidance and approach related to social situations for people with this disorder, as well.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no available measures of experiential avoidance that focus on experiential avoidance after stressful social situations. Virtually all people experience distressing social situations at some time, but people may handle their personal memories, emotions, and reactions to these events in different ways. Such a specific measure would allow researchers and clinicians to increase their ability to measure experiential avoidance, as well as test specific hypotheses. For example, given the postulated role of experiential avoidance in maintaining distress, we would expect that experiential avoidance related to social situations should be associated with increased social anxiety over time.

We hypothesize that although distressing social situations will elicit an automatic tendency to continue to think about the event for some amount of time, people's differences in their purposeful (or strategic) reaction to these reactions will fall along two main lines: (a) *ambivalent engagement*, characterized by attempts to engage with experience in order to avoid, dismiss, or immediately repair experience without further overt behavior that usefully addresses the problematic issue and, (b) *purposeful engagement*, characterized by effortful attention, willingness to explore reactions, and the conviction that such exploration will ultimately be valuable in guiding further overt behavior. Ambivalent engagement was conceptualized as relating to experiential avoidance, because although the person is directing attention toward experience, the primary purpose is to be rid of the experience. In contrast, purposeful engagement was conceptualized as an opposing approach in which one

strategically brings one's attention to bear on distressing experience in order to assimilate it.¹

We suggest that ambivalent and purposeful engagement would be better assessed together. We expect that any items attempting to measure these different forms of engagement would be correlated due to their relationship to distress. That is, most people will experience both of these types of cognition, to varying degrees, in reaction to the distress they feel in the social event in question, because distressing experiences tend to draw attention and engagement. However, the effects of each construct may be quite different. For example, although people in general may experience both ambivalent and purposeful engagement in response to distressing social events, relatively higher levels of ambivalent engagement should promote further social anxiety, due in part to experiential avoidance that may lead to behavioral (e.g., interpersonal) avoidance and decreased understanding of social difficulties, whereas relatively higher levels of purposeful engagement should relate to less social anxiety in the future, due to the promotion of understanding of social difficulties and an attitude toward them that promotes behavioral as well as experiential approach. In addition, we expected a variety of unique relationships with overlapping constructs. To understand the reasons we expected to find these relationships, it will be helpful to consider what is known about the broader factors that influence social anxiety.

Available evidence points to symptoms of social anxiety, particularly social interaction anxiety, relating to both high negative affect and low positive affect (e.g., Hughes et al., 2006; Kashdan & Steger, 2006) as well as higher neuroticism and lower extraversion (in participants with social anxiety disorder: Bienvenu et al., 2004; in participants with avoidant personality disorder:

¹ In response to a previous version of this manuscript, an anonymous reviewer noted similarities between these constructs and constructs invoked in the literature regarding coping and stress, particularly the work of Lazarus and colleagues (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). There do appear to be interesting parallels to this literature, as well as the related literature regarding the COPE scale developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). Ambivalent engagement and purposeful engagement are conceptually distinct from the constructs described in this literature, however. In our definition, ambivalent and purposeful engagement (a) refer to social interactions or performances only and (b) refer to methods of dealing with internal events regarding situations, not methods of handling the situations themselves. Nevertheless, future research regarding this scale should determine what relationships it has with measures from the coping literature, as well as whether the constructs are statistically as well as conceptually distinct.

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