



The supporting and impeding effects of group-related approach and avoidance strategies on newcomers' psychological adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Migrating to another country makes a person a newcomer in the receiving society. The current research investigates the impact of group-related approach and avoidance strategies on the psychological functioning of newcomers in the receiving society. Research in the interpersonal domain has demonstrated that approach strategies have positive effects and avoidance strategies negative effects on people's well-being. We propose that in an intercultural context group-related approach strategies also lead to a higher extent of well-being. Moreover, we expect that people's attitude to contact and (dis)identification account for this effect. As in the interpersonal domain, group-related avoidance strategies are expected to lead to lower well-being. More specifically, we predict that avoidance strategies facilitate disidentification, which, in turn, affects well-being negatively. Moreover, disidentification, being an unsuccessful integration into the group, is predicted to induce stronger achievement effort as a compensation for unsuccessful integration. A longitudinal study with 51 German first-year students in the Netherlands mainly confirmed these predictions. However, the predicted mediation was not found for avoidance strategies. Results are discussed with reference to approach/avoidance literature and acculturation research. The findings underline the importance of early strategy adoption to ensure long-term psychological functioning of migrants in the receiving society.

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1. General introduction

Imagine an international student at a foreign university. In order to integrate into the local student community, he might focus on dressing like his fellow students, using similar language, or behaving like typical local students. Imagine, on the other hand, an expatriate who is sent to work in a foreign country. In order to become part of the local society, she might take care to avoid expressing unpopular opinions, taking wrong decisions at work, or dressing improperly according to local standards. The first example illustrates the adoption of group-related approach strategies by migrants: the application of behavior that encourages integration into the receiving society. The second example illustrates group-related avoidance strategies: migrants will tend to avoid behavior that puts their integration into the receiving society at risk. Approach and avoidance strategies occur naturally in the social domain and are often related to each other (Elliot, 2006; Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable & Strachman, 2008). New group members, such as migrants to another country, also apply approach and avoidance strategies when integrating into the group (Matschke & Sassenberg, in press; Matschke & Sassenberg, 2010). But little is known about the functionality of approach and avoidance strategies in the context of new group memberships. The purpose of the current research is to identify the effects of group-related strategies on the psychological functioning of newcomers in groups.

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1.1. The effect of approach and avoidance strategies on well-being

When newcomers focus on positive experiences in a new group, they adopt group-related approach strategies: their behavior aims at increasing the likelihood of integration. When newcomers focus on negative experiences in the new group, they adopt group-related avoidance strategies: newcomers will avoid such behavior that puts integration into the new group at risk. Both strategies, group-related approach and avoidance, are aimed at integration into the new group, but on different routes. It has been demonstrated that the adoption of approach and avoidance strategies¹ in the pursuit of interpersonal relations affects, in the long term, the well-being of individuals: interpersonal approach strategies are positively related to well-being, whereas interpersonal avoidance strategies are negatively related to well-being (Elliot et al., 2006). Applying this finding to intercultural relations, we predict that group-related approach strategies lead to higher levels of well-being, and group-related avoidance strategies lead to lower levels of well-being. These effects might occur due to a relation between group-related strategies and acculturation attitudes.

1.2. Acculturation attitudes

We will first discuss the effects of acculturation attitudes on well-being, and then propose a relation between group-related strategies and acculturation attitudes.

In the intercultural domain, it has been proposed that well-being is affected by certain attitudes of migrants (i.e., newcomers in the receiving society): Their attitude towards (a) maintenance of their own primary cultural identity, and (b) contact with and participation in the receiving society (Berry, 1997). Various findings support the assumption that the adoption of both attitudes leads to higher degrees of well-being (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Nguyen, Messé, & Stollak, 1999; Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001). The attitude towards maintaining of one's own primary cultural identity refers to an established group membership, whereas the attitude towards contact refers to a new group. As the current research focuses on group-related strategies which are aimed at integration into a new group, only the effects of the attitude towards contact will be considered.

Group-related strategies refer to the *type of contact* that newcomers seek with their new group, while acculturation attitudes refer to the *extent of contact*. Nevertheless, there is evidence in interpersonal research that the strategy adopted by individuals will affect the extent to which they seek contact. Gable (2006) proposes that individuals who adopt approach strategies for building good relationships actively seek positive contact experiences, and this search will lead to stronger exposure to positive contact experiences. The adoption of avoidance strategies, on the other hand, neither affects their search for nor their exposure to contact, but the *impact* of contact experiences. Based on these findings, we propose that group-related strategies affect seeking contact with the new group. We predict that stronger group-related approach strategies (but not avoidance strategies) are positively related to the attitude towards contact (*Hypothesis 1*).

Furthermore, we propose that the attitude towards contact affects (dis)identification with the new group.

1.3. (Dis)identification

Firstly, the impact of (dis)identification on well-being will be discussed. Secondly, we propose that acculturation attitudes and group-related strategies affect (dis)identification.

According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), new group memberships induce self-concept changes: The relationship with the group is included into a person's self-concept (Smith & Henry, 1996). A positive relationship – in this case: successful integration into the group – will result in the development of social identification. Members feel, self-categorize, and act on behalf of their group membership (Sassenberg & Matschke, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). A negative relationship to a self-relevant group – failed integration – is mirrored in disidentification. Members feel, self-categorize, and act *contrary* to the group (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007).

There is a large body of literature proposing the beneficial effects of social identification on well-being (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Brewer, 1991; Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). We therefore predict that stronger social identification with a new group is related to higher degrees of well-being (*Hypothesis 2*). The relation between disidentification and well-being has not yet been investigated. There are several reasons why we expect that disidentification affects well-being. Firstly, negative interpersonal relations have a negative impact on well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and negative relationships to groups are likely to have similar effects. Secondly, being a disidentified member implies two conflicting cognitions: “I am a member of the group” and “I have a negative relationship with that group”. These contradict each other and are likely to lead to cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), a disagreeable state of tension. Thus, we predict that stronger disidentification with a new group is related to lower degrees of well-being (*Hypothesis 3*).

On the other hand, success in the academic world may compensate for problems in the social sphere. Schwartz, Hopmeyer Gorman, Duong, and Nakamoto (2008) have demonstrated that academic achievement buffers the negative effect of having

¹ Though Gable and co-workers name the construct social approach and avoidance *goals*, their instruments rather measure on the level of goal *strategies* applied to reach a goal (i.e., establish relationships). We therefore refer to interpersonal approach and avoidance strategies.

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