Why don’t you like me? : the role of social approach and avoidance motives and attributions in the experience of social acceptance and rejection

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Published Version

Originally published at:
Schoch, Simone. Why don’t you like me? : the role of social approach and avoidance motives and attributions in the experience of social acceptance and rejection. 2013, Zürich, Faculty of Arts.
Why don’t you like me?
The Role of Social Approach and Avoidance Motives and Attributions in the Experience of Social Acceptance and Rejection

Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Zurich for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by
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Accepted in the Autumn Term 2013
on the Recommendation of the Doctoral Committee:

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Zurich, 2013
Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank my advisor Alexandra M. Freund, for all her support and time spent advising me and giving me feedback. A special thanks also goes to my co-advisor Jana Nikitin for supporting, teaching, and inspiring me. This thesis could not have been realized without their support. Working with them gave me much insight and contributed to my professional and personal development. I am thankful that I had the opportunity to profit from their experience. Furthermore, I would like to thank Veronika Brandstätter-Morawietz for her willingness to referee this work, and for her inspiring questions, discussions and helpful comments on my work.

Second, I would like to thank all my former and current colleagues of the Life-Management lab for the fruitful discussions and the good time: Thomas Blumer, Burcu Demiray, Miriam Depping, Marie Hennecke, Regula Gasser, Tamara Herz, Michaela Knecht, Kathrin Krause, Maida Mustafić, Johannes Ritter, Martin Pletscher, Frank Schleich, Josua Schmeitzky, Martin Tomasik and David Weiss. I would especially like to thank my wonderful officemates Miriam Depping, Maida Mustafić and Josua Schmeitzky. Thanks also goes to the student assistants who helped me: Mirjam Dönni, Christian Gross and Mahmoud Hemmo.

Finally, I thank the members of the peer-mentoring group “Methods and Statistics” and the peer-mentoring group “Psychophysiology” for the many inspiring workshops, discussions and their helpful feedback.

Last but not least, thank you to my close friends and family for their lasting support, their unconditional love, and just for being who they are: Georg, Michèle, Pia, Reta, Sonja, Susan, Valeria, my sister Claudine, Mami, and Papa.
Funding

I conducted my dissertation within the project “Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation – The Role of Age” funded by Grant 10014_126868 from the Swiss National Science Foundation (PIs: Jana Nikitin & Alexandra M. Freund). I would like to thank the foundation for their support.
Abstract

Previous research has shown that social acceptance generally has positive effects and social rejection negative effects on people’s social experience (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004). However, people differ with respect to how they react to situations of social acceptance and rejection: Some people react in a self-enhancing way, others in a self-derogating way (Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). Taking a motivational approach, this thesis provides the first evidence that social approach and avoidance motives and their social-cognitive concomitants account for these differences.

The thesis consists of three chapters:

Chapter I focuses on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes that underlie the association between social motives and different aspects of social success (e.g., acceptance) and failure (e.g., loneliness) across adulthood. In a review of the previous research, Chapter I demonstrates that social avoidance motives are related to maladaptive, while social approach motives are related to adaptive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral concomitants across different social situations and different ages. Thus, social approach motives appear to be associated with social success and social avoidance motives to social failure across the lifespan.

Chapters II and III focus on underlying social-cognitive processes that may explain the association between social motives and interindividual differences in the experience of and reaction to acceptance and rejection. We hypothesized that social approach motives are related to self-enhancing attributions and social avoidance motives to self-derogating attributions in situations of acceptance and rejection. To what people attribute acceptance and rejection, in turn, should influence whether they initialize new social contacts. Moreover, people’s attributions should account for differences in their emotional reactions to acceptance and rejection. Most of the hypotheses were confirmed. For example, one self-report study
(Study 1, Chapter II, $N = 205$) demonstrated that social approach motives were positively and social avoidance motives negatively associated with the decision to enter a new social situation. Focusing on the processes underlying these associations, a speed-dating scenario study (Study 2, Chapter II, $N = 153$) demonstrated that social-cognitive concomitants of the social motives (viz., attributions and specific expectations) explain why people differ in their decision to establish new social relationships (viz., to participate in a speed-dating event).

Extending these findings, Chapter III focused on the role of social motives and attributions for the emotional consequences of acceptance and rejection across adulthood. One scenario study using hypothetical interactions entailing social acceptance and rejection (Study 1, Chapter III, $N = 281$) and one study using actual social interactions entailing social acceptance and rejection (Study 2, Chapter III, $N = 128$) demonstrated that social approach motives were associated with attributions of social acceptance and social avoidance motives with attributions of social rejection. These patterns were found in younger as well as older adults, indicating a stable association between social motives and attributions across adulthood. In addition, a third scenario study (Study 3, Chapter III, $N = 232$) provided empirical evidence that attributions are an important mediator of the association between social avoidance motives and the negative emotional reactions to social rejection.

The present research thus demonstrates that social approach and avoidance motives play an important role in people’s attributions of social acceptance and rejection across different methods and age groups. These attributions, in turn, account for differences in people’s decisions about whether to establish new social relationships as well as in people’s emotional reactions to rejection.
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Introduction

„You do not see the world how it is, you see the world how you are.“ (Eberle, 2000, p. 14)

As Eberle implies, people seem to differ in how they perceive the world. Accordingly, people are likely to differ in how they perceive interpersonal situations (e.g., Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010). Imagine Susan, a young woman, and John, a young man, who meet each other for first time at a party. After a short conversation they separate. John goes to his group of friends, whereas Susan rejoins her friends. Later on, Susan notices that John occasionally looks in her direction and smiles at her while talking with his friends. How should Susan interpret this smile? Whereas some people might interpret this smile as a sign of interest and acceptance (e.g., “John is interested in me”), others might perceive the very same smile as a sign of rejection (e.g., “John is laughing at me”). How people interpret such a smile can determine to whom they approach and who they avoid (e.g., Adams, Ambady, Macrae, & Kleck, 2006; Marsh, Ambady, & Kleck, 2005; Marsh, Kozak, & Ambady, 2007). If Susan interprets the smile as a sign of John’s interest in her, she would probably approach him. In contrast, if she interprets the smile as a sign of rejection, she would probably avoid social contact with John. Moreover, the way people interpret social outcomes, such as a smile, might influence whether people feel accepted or rejected. Depending on the interpretation, some people might easily feel integrated and accepted, whereas others might easily feel rejected. What factors influence how people perceive, experience and react to social acceptance and rejection? What are the consequences of the differences in how people interpret interpersonal outcomes? Given the importance of satisfying social relationships in people’s life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), this dissertation aims to answer these questions. The following section introduces the aims of this thesis and gives an overview of its structure.
Introduction

Research Questions

Why do People Differ in Their Experience of and Reaction to Social Acceptance and Rejection?

Relatedness is a central human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, the experience of interpersonal acceptance and rejection are psychologically potent events. Believing that one is appreciated, liked, valued, or included fosters self-esteem, confidence, and well-being; whereas experiencing that one is unappreciated, disliked, devalued, or excluded reduces self-esteem, and fosters negative feelings and hostile behavior (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004). Throughout life, most people experience—to varying degrees—both social acceptance and rejection. The positive and negative effects of social acceptance and rejection have been investigated in numerous studies (Buckley, et al., 2004; Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Leary, 2010; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001; Williams, Cheung, & Choi, 2000). However, people differ in how they react to social acceptance and rejection. Whereas some people react in a self-enhancing way and enter new social situations easily, others react in a self-derogating manner and try to avoid similar social situations. A self-enhancing way of reacting to social acceptance is to attribute it to internal, stable, and global causes (e.g., “I am a likeable person,” “I always have nice encounters,” and “I get along with others in almost all situations”). A self-enhancing way of dealing with social rejection is to attribute it to external, variable, and specific causes (e.g., “It was the other person,” “The other person had a bad day,” and “It only happened in this specific situation and will hardly happen again”; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). Interestingly, little is known about why people differ in their reactions to acceptance and rejection. This dissertation aims to close this gap in the literature. Taking a motivational approach, the thesis suggests that dispositional social approach and avoidance motives play an important role in the formation of attributions related to social acceptance and rejection. Moreover, given the tremendous importance of experiencing satisfying social
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relationships in people’s lives, the thesis focuses on whether attributions mediate the association between dispositional social motives and people’s decision to initiate new social relationships and their emotional reactions to interpersonal acceptance and rejection. In other words, the thesis hypothesizes that people differ in their decision to enter a new social situation and their emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection because they attribute acceptance and rejection differently. The attributions, in turn, are influenced by people’s social approach and avoidance motives.

What are the Associations between Social Motive and Attributions?

People’s general expectations about positive and negative outcomes of a social situation are particularly relevant for forming attributions of experienced outcomes (Alden, 1986; Morris, 2007). Previous research has shown that expected acceptance and unexpected rejection are attributed in a self-enhancing manner, whereas expected rejection and unexpected acceptance are attributed in a self-derogating manner (e.g., Feather & Simon, 1971; Morris, 2007). People’s generalized expectations for future social situations are key to understanding social approach and avoidance motives (Mehrabian, 1994). Social approach motives are characterized by generalized positive expectations of future social encounters (i.e., “I can behave in a way that others will accept me,” “I am always successful in social interactions”). Experiencing a positive social interaction thus confirms their expectations and should lead to internal, stable, and global attributions. In contrast, the experience of social rejection represents an exception to the generalized positive expectations. Consequently, social rejection should be attributed to external, variable, and specific causes. The opposite pattern should be true for the association with social avoidance motives. As social avoidance motives are characterized by generalized negative future social expectations (i.e., “I cannot behave in a way that others will accept me,” “I never succeed in social interactions), experiencing a negative social interaction confirms the negative expectations and should consequently lead to internal, stable, and global attributions. The experience of a positive
social interaction, in contrast, constitutes an exception of their negative expectations and should be attributed to external, variable, and specific causes.

The thesis will test these associations using scenarios as well as actual interactions of social acceptance and rejection. Furthermore, the thesis aims at testing these hypotheses in both younger and older adults.

**What is the Role of Age?**

Thus far, research on the effects of social approach and avoidance motives has focused primarily on younger adults (for exceptions, see Nikitin, Burgermeister, & Freund, 2012; Nikitin & Freund, 2011). Little is known about how dispositional social motives affect social cognitions such as attributions across adulthood. There are theoretical reasons and empirical support for expecting stability, increase, or decrease (see Nikitin & Freund, 2011). For example, Gross and colleagues (Gross et al., 1997; John & Gross, 2004) suggest that older adults are more motivated and skilled in regulating their emotions than younger adults. This higher emotion-regulatory skill might override the negative effects of social avoidance motives and lead to a weaker association between social motives and attributions of social acceptance and rejection in older adults compared to younger adults.

An alternative suggestion is that cumulative processes associated with social approach and avoidance motives lead to an increase in the effects of these dispositions with age. Social approach motives, which are related to holding positive expectations, are typically associated with positive social outcomes (Gable, 2006; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a). Positive social outcomes, in turn, might lead to an increase in positive social expectations, resulting in a dynamic process of reciprocal reinforcement that might lead to a stronger association between approach motives and attributions over time. Similarly, negative expectations associated with negative expectations should be primarily related to negative outcomes that, in turn, reinforce negative expectations and attributions. In this way, cumulative processes could lead to a
strengthening of the association between avoidance motives and attributions (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998).

A third suggestion is that the influence of social approach and avoidance motives on attributions remains stable. This hypothesis is based on Neugarten's (1964) concept of the “institutionalization” of personality, assuming that dispositions and their interaction with the social context stabilize with age. Supporting the stability hypothesis, Nikitin and Freund (2011) found no age-related differences in the association between social avoidance motives and the processing of emotional stimuli in a sample of young and older adults. Similarly, Nikitin et al., (2012) reported stability in the effect of social approach and avoidance motives on daily social experiences and behaviors in young and older adults. Despite these findings, the empirical evidence for the relationship between motives and social outcomes across adulthood remains scarce. A systematic analysis of this question could give further insight into how dispositions affect social cognitions across the adulthood.

The next sections summarize the research questions and introduce the structure of the thesis.

**Overview of the Research Questions and the Structure of the Dissertation**

The present dissertation is composed of three chapters that answer the following research questions:

1. Chapter I aims to the answer the question of what the associations between social motives and positive and negative social outcomes across adulthood in general are. Are social approach motives related to social success (e.g., successful initiation and maintenance of social relationships) and social avoidance motives to social failure (e.g., loneliness and solitude)?

2. Chapter II focuses more specifically on the question of why some people are more successful in initiating social relationships than others. Focusing on specific social-cognitive processes related to social motives that might explain why some people enter new social
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situations without self-doubts, whereas others try to avoid new social situations, Chapter II deals with the following question: Do social motives and attributions of previous social outcomes account for people’s decision to initiate new social relationships?

(3) Chapter III stresses the relationship between social motives and attributions of acceptance and rejection, and their associations with people’s emotional experiences of acceptance and rejection. More specifically, Chapter III examines the following questions: (a) What are the associations between social motives and attributions following acceptance and rejection across adulthood? (b) Do social motives and attributions account for emotional consequences of acceptance and rejection?

Overview of the Chapters

To answer the research questions, the thesis includes one theoretical paper and a total of five empirical studies. This section provides an overview of the different chapters of the doctoral thesis.

Chapter I: Social Approach and Avoidance Motives and Social Outcomes

Chapter I centers on the question of why some people are socially successful, whereas others are not. Focusing on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes that underlie the association between social motives and their consequences (e.g., Gable & Berkman, 2008), it is argued that distinguishing between social approach and avoidance motives and their possible cognitive, emotional, and behavioral concomitants and consequences provides further insight into describing and explaining why some people are socially more successful than others. Moreover, given the importance of satisfying relationships for successful aging (e.g., Freund, Nikitin, & Ritter, 2009; Freund & Riediger, 2003), Chapter I uses a developmental perspective to explore how these processes might change across the life span. Using a theoretical approach, Chapter I gives a broad overview of how social approach and avoidance motives are related to different aspects of social success across the life span.
Chapter II: Social Motives, Attributions and Establishing new Social Relationships

In contrast to the broad motivational and developmental perspective of Chapter I, Chapter II focuses on attributions as specific social-cognitive processes that might explain why some people are socially more successful than others. Chapter II introduces attributions and specific future expectations as important factors that might influence people’s success in establishing new social relationships. More specific, Chapter II questions the behavioral consequences of social motives and attributions for the very first step of a social interaction – the decision to enter a new social situation or not. New social situations contain both possibilities and risks (e.g., Fingerman & Lang, 2004; Gable & Berkman, 2008). On the one hand, one can get acquainted with new people. On the other hand, one can also fail to socialize. However, if one decides to avoid the rejection by not entering the social situation, that person will miss the possibility to establish new social relationships. We assume that as social approach and avoidance motives are associated with different emphasis on positive (i.e., possibilities) and negative (i.e., risks) information, respectively, they lead to different decisions when facing a new social situation. Social approach motives refer to a dispositional orientation towards positive, hoped-for social incentives (McClelland, 1985). Thus, approach motives should be related to the hope for new positive social encounters and, therefore, also to the decision to enter a new social situation. In contrast, social avoidance motives refer to an orientation that tends to stay away from negative, feared social incentives (McClelland, 1985). Thus, avoidance motives should be related to the fear of rejection and, therefore, the making decisions against a new social situation. Furthermore, we suggest that attributions are underlying social-cognitive processes that mediate the associations between social motives and people’s decision to enter a new social situation.

Using correlational designs, two studies test these hypotheses. The first study focuses on the associations between social motives and the decision to enter a new social situation. The second study broadens the focus on the underlying processes of these associations. We
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hypothesize that social approach and avoidance motives are related to the decision to enter a
new social situation because they influence how people attribute social acceptance and
rejection of previous social situations. Attributions, in turn, should influence the decision to
establish new social contacts. We test this assumption in a scenario study, presenting
participants with a social situation of either acceptance or rejection. Then, we assess people’s
attributions and finally their actual decision to enter a new similar social situation or not.

Chapter III: Motivational Antecedents and Emotional Consequences of Attributions of
Acceptance and Rejection

Extending the findings of Chapter II, Chapter III centers on the emotional
consequences of social motives and attributions. Using a multi-method approach, including
taking a developmental perspective, Chapter III examines whether attributions account for
individual differences in the intensity of emotional reactions to social acceptance and
rejection. Social acceptance is indicated by the willingness other people show to affiliate with
a person. In contrast, social rejection is expressed in other people’s disinterest (Leary, 2010).
Thereby, social acceptance serves, and social rejection threatens, the need to belong
(Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Thus, it is not surprising that people typically report feelings of
hurt, diminished self-esteem, and increased hostile behavior after social rejection
(Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002; Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Leary, 2010; Leary,
Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). However,
there is a substantial amount of variability about how people emotionally react to social
acceptance and rejection (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). We posit that one important factor
that accounts for this variability is the way people attribute social acceptance and rejection.
How people make attributions, in turn, should be influenced by their social motives.

Using correlational designs with manipulated situations of social acceptance and
rejection, we conducted three studies to test these hypotheses. The first study investigates the
relationship between social approach and avoidance motives and attributions of scenarios of
social acceptance and rejection in young and older adulthood. We suggest that approach motives are related to a tendency to attribute acceptance to internal, stable, and global causes. In contrast, we hypothesize that avoidance motives are related to internal, stable, and global attributions of social rejection. Further, we explore whether these associations are stable or change across adulthood. The second study aims to replicate these findings in actual social interactions of acceptance and rejection with confederates. Finally, the third study investigates whether attributions mediate the association between social motives and the emotional experience of acceptance and rejection. Internal, stable, and global attributions of acceptance should mediate the association between social approach motives and high positive emotional reactions to acceptance. Internal, stable, and global attributions of rejection should mediate the relationship of avoidance motives and high negative emotional reactions to rejection.

Summary

The main question of this thesis addresses the association between social approach and avoidance motives and attributions of social acceptance and rejection. Based on the assumption of different motivational orientations of social approach and avoidance motives, social approach and avoidance motives should be differently associated with attribution patterns. Starting with a broad overview, Chapter I discusses diverse concomitants of social approach and avoidance motives, explaining why some people are socially successful across the life span and others are not. Focusing more specifically on the processes that might explain why social motives are differently related to social success, Chapter II proposes attributions as an important mediator for the association between social motives and the decision to enter a new social situation. Finally, Chapter III centers on the question of why people feel accepted and rejected. Chapter III focuses on whether attributions might be seen as a social-cognitive process that explains the individual differences in the emotional consequences of social acceptance and rejection. Taking a developmental perspective, we
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assume that approach and avoidance motives might be important in understanding how people attribute social acceptance and rejection over their adult lives.
Chapter I

Social Approach and Avoidance Motives and Social Outcomes

Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation

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Abstract

It is essential for people to have satisfying social relationships. However, individuals differ in their ability to initialize and maintain social ties. We take a motivational approach to explain why some people are socially successful and others are not. Thereby, we focus on the dispositional motivation to approach positive social outcomes, such as acceptance and intimacy, and the motivation to avoid negative social outcomes, such as rejection and loneliness. We discuss processes that underlie the positive and negative outcomes of social approach and avoidance motivation, respectively. Taking a developmental perspective, we explore how these processes change across the life span. Finally, we discuss the implications for interventions to prevent social isolation and the possible developmental specifics of such interventions.

Keywords: social motivation, approach, avoidance, life-span development
Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation

Belongingness is a central human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Lack of social bonds or their low quality has a causal impact on well-being, health, and even mortality (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Given this tremendous importance, it is essential for people to have satisfying social relationships. However, individuals differ in their ability to initialize social interaction and maintain social ties. We take a motivational approach to explain why some individuals are socially successful and others are not. More specifically, we focus on the dispositional motivation to approach positive social outcomes, such as acceptance and intimacy, and the dispositional motivation to avoid negative social outcomes, such as rejection and loneliness. The former dispositional motivation is typically called social approach motivation, whereas the latter one is typically called social avoidance motivation (McClelland, 1985).

Social approach and avoidance motivation are two fundamental motivational dimensions that differ in the cognitive representation of the end state that is to be approached or avoided. In social approach motivation, behavior is directed by a positive (i.e., desirable) end state, whereas in social avoidance motivation, behavior is directed by a negative (i.e., undesirable) end state (Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006). Most social situations are ambiguous (Baldwin, 1992) and can be interpreted in a positive or a negative way. For example, a smile from a colleague can be interpreted as an invitation to interact or as sarcasm. Individual differences in social approach and avoidance motivation affect the interpretation of and reaction to social situations like these.

In this chapter, we will demonstrate processes that underlie the positive and negative outcomes of social approach and avoidance motivation. Taking a developmental perspective, we will explore how these processes might change across the life span. Finally, we will discuss the implications of the research on social approach and avoidance motivation for
interventions to prevent social isolation and the possible developmental specifics of such interventions.

**Approach and Avoidance as two Fundamental Systems**

The idea that there is an appetitive system that regulates responses to potentially rewarding stimuli and an aversive system that regulates responses to potentially punishing stimuli has a long history in many psychological domains such as in research on affect (positive and negative affect; Watson & Tellegen, 1985), personality (extraversion and neuroticism; Eysenck, 1963), cognitive evaluation (evaluation of positive and negative attributes; Cacioppo, Gardner, & Bertson, 1997), neurophysiology (cerebral asymmetry; Davidson, 1992), and motivation (behavioral activation and inhibition system; Gray & McNaughton, 2000; discrepancy-reducing and discrepancy-enlarging system; Carver & Scheier, 1981). Some researchers supposed that the distinction between appetitive and aversive systems is fundamental and innate (Carver, Sutton, & Scheier, 2000; Elliot & Covington, 2001), an assumption that has been also supported by empirical evidence (Gable, Reis, & Elliot, 2003). As Gable and colleagues put it: “… this basic distinction may serve as a general organizing construct underlying a variety of more specific dispositional processes in the areas of emotion, motivation, and personality” (p. 369).

One of these specific dispositional processes in the area of motivation refers to social approach and avoidance motivation. It seems that social approach and avoidance motivation share commonalities with other constructs of the appetitive and aversive system but are not identical. For example, Nikitin and Freund (2011) found that social approach motivation is moderately correlated with extraversion and behavioral activation system, whereas social avoidance motivation is moderately correlated with neuroticism and behavioral inhibition system. The main differences between the constructs might lie in their focus. Whereas behavioral activation and inhibition or extraversion and neuroticism have a more general focus on (social) incentives and threats, social approach and avoidance motivation focus on
what drives peoples’ behavior, cognitions, and emotions in interpersonal situations characterized by possible acceptance and rejection (for a more elaborate discussion on similarities and differences between motivation and personality see (Zelenski, Sobocko, & Whelan, in press).

Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation and Related Constructs

Social approach and avoidance motivation are not only part of the fundamental appetitive and aversive systems; they are also associated with other constructs in psychology. For instance, social approach and avoidance motivation have a long history in the shyness literature (Lewinsky, 1941). Shyness has been typically characterized as a motivational approach–avoidance conflict: “A person is motivated to approach another person, but this approach tendency is inhibited” (Asendorpf, 1990, p. 721).

Rejection sensitivity is another construct that overlaps with social avoidance motivation. Similar to social avoidance motivation, rejection sensitivity is part of the general aversive motivational system (Downey, Mougios, Ayduk, London, & Shoda, 2004). Further, there are similarities in experience and behavior. Rejection sensitive are people “who anxiously expect, readily perceive, and overact to rejection” (Downey & Feldman, 1996, p. 1327), which is also true for high social avoidance motivation (see Gable & Berkman, 2008). Moreover, rejection sensitivity has been defined in terms of “generalized negative social expectation: fear and apprehension that interactions with others will result in rejection, discomfort, and suffering” (Mehrabian, 1994, p. 98). Sensitivity to rejection is thus the core of social avoidance motivation as the anxiously expected rejection is the negative end state that is to be avoided. Not surprisingly, rejection sensitivity and social avoidance motivation are often used synonymously (Elliot et al., 2006; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a).

Finally, although social avoidance motivation is associated with similar behavior and experience as social anxiety disorder (such as being shy when meeting new people or being withdrawn in unfamiliar social settings; Stein & Stein, 2008), social avoidance motivation
does not reach the diagnostic criteria for social anxiety disorder. The main difference between social avoidance motivation and social anxiety disorder might be thus the difference in the intensity of the associated experience and behavior.

**Historical Roots of the Research on Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation**

Individual differences in approach and avoidance motivation have been investigated in different domains, mainly in the domains of achievement (Elliot & Church, 1997), power (Veroff, 1992), and affiliation (Gable, 2000). Two of the first researchers to differentiate between approach and avoidance in the affiliative domain were Mehrabian and Ksionzky (1970). Whereas initial research on affiliation was based on the assumption of a single dimension of dispositional affiliation (e.g., Bass, 1967), Mehrabian and Ksionzky argued that it is difficult to integrate the diverse findings reported in the literature on affiliation into a single framework. They therefore proposed two dimensions of affiliative attributes that in their view provided a more satisfactory integration: generalized positive social expectations and behaviors (i.e., social approach motivation) and generalized negative social expectations and behaviors (i.e., social avoidance motivation).

The considerable research based on this distinction has shown that social approach and avoidance motivation are largely independent of each other and that they exhibit theoretically different (and not simply inverse) patterns of relationships with social experience and behavior (see Mehrabian, 1994, for a summary of the research). For instance, social approach motivation was found to be positively associated with judged similarity and compatibility with others, favorable impressions of strangers, self-disclosure, confidence, and positive interactions with others. This positive behavior is probably the reason why people with high social approach motivation are more liked by others than those with low social approach motivation (see Mehrabian, 1994): They are described as friendly, affectionate, sincere, cooperative, and popular (McAdams & Powers, 1981). In contrast, social avoidance motivation was found to be negatively associated with assertiveness, leadership, competition
performance, confidence, ability to deal with threat and hostility, and to be positively associated with submissive social behavior (Mehrabian, 1994). Although people with high avoidance motivation do not have less social interactions than others, they report low popularity (see Mehrabian, 1994), dissatisfaction with close social relationships (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998), and feelings of loneliness (Cutrona, 1982; Gable, 2006).

More recent research on dispositional approach and avoidance motivation has focused on the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional processes that underlie the association between dispositions and their consequences (e.g., Gable & Berkman, 2008). In the next few sections, we will discuss these processes and how they mediate the association between social approach and avoidance motivation and their social and emotional outcomes. We will start by discussing the contexts in which the processes might take place.

**Establishing and Maintaining Social Relationships as a Function of Social Motivations**

Previous studies have found that social approach motivation has positive consequences and social avoidance motivation has negative consequences for social success in samples of strangers (Nikitin & Freund, 2010a), acquaintances like students taking the same class (McAdams & Powers, 1981), friends (Gable, 2006), and in romantic relationships (Downey et al., 1998). This evidence suggests that these dispositional motivations have an impact on establishing as well as maintaining social relationships.

The process of establishing new social contacts is accompanied by uncertainty and risk (Neuberg, 1996). As avoidance motivation is associated with the avoidance of undesired end states, it involves a state of vigilance to insure against losses and, therefore, leads to risk-averse behavior (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). As a consequence, social avoidance motivation leads people to decide against participating in a new social situation and to prefer to miss the chance of establishing a new social relationship than expose themselves to possible failure (Eiser & Fazio, 2008). It seems that it is mainly due to the fear of negative evaluation by others. As Beck and Clark (2009) found, social avoidance motivation was related to a
preference for social situations that provide no evaluation from others over social situations that do provide such evaluative information. In contrast to social avoidance motivation, social approach motivation is positively associated with relationship initialization. As Nurmi and colleagues reported, approach-oriented social strategies lead to success in initiating peer relationships (Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmela-Aro, & Eronen, 1996).

The process of maintaining social relationships is accompanied by behaviors related to persistence and intensifying one’s relationship (e.g., Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Van Lange et al., 1997). People with high attachment anxiety towards their romantic partner (which is positively related to social avoidance motivation; Nikitin & Freund, 2010) tend to avoid the conflicts and rejection they fear in their romantic relationships (Gable & Impett, 2012). In contrast, people with high attachment avoidance orientation (which is negatively related to social approach motivation; Nikitin & Freund, 2010) are inclined to pursue fewer approach goals in their romantic relationships. Approach goals such as increasing intimacy are likely to involve an augmented level of closeness with which people high in attachment avoidance orientation may feel uncomfortable and therefore try to avoid (Gable & Impett, 2012). In line with these findings, engaging in sex due to avoidance motivation (e.g., to avoid disappointing one’s partner) was found to be negatively associated with interpersonal well-being and detrimental to the maintenance of relationships over time. On the other hand, engaging in sex due to approach motivation (e.g., to make one’s partner feel good) was positively associated with personal and interpersonal well-being and had positive effects on the maintenance of relationships (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). In addition, in a short-term longitudinal study of dating couples, Impett et al., (2005) found that individuals who were high in approach motivation were rated as more satisfied and responsive to their partner’s needs than people who were low in approach motivation. Also, people who scored high in avoidance motivation were rated as being less satisfied and responsive than those who scored low in avoidance.
motivation. Moreover, they found that it was particularly dissatisfying to be in a relationship with a partner who was merely focused on avoiding negative outcomes in the relationship.

In summary, social approach and avoidance motivation are influential in establishing as well as maintaining social ties. However, it has yet to be systematically tested whether the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes underlying the effects of social approach and avoidance motivation are context-independent or context-related. As we do not have any assumptions about substantial differences between familiar and unfamiliar social contexts with respect to the processes of social approach and avoidance motivation, we will handle both contexts equally. However, we should keep in mind that we do not know whether all of the processes found in one context are also applicable in the other.

Cognitive, Emotional, and Behavioral Processes of Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation

Cognitive Processes

Perception and interpretation of social stimuli. With respect to attentional and perceptual processes, social avoidance motivation is related to enhanced processing of negative information. A study on the startle reflex showed that social avoidance motivation is positively associated with greater attention (i.e., potentiated eye-blink startle magnitude) to pictures with rejection themes (Downey et al., 2004). The authors interpreted this finding as an automatic activation of the defensive motivational system by rejection cues. Similarly, Gomez and Gomez (2002) found a positive relationship between avoidance motivation and enhanced processing of negative information in a word fragmentation task, a word-recognition task, and in a free word-recall task. Finally, using a gaze-time paradigm, Nikitin and Freund (2011) showed that, for both young and older adults, avoidance motivation was positively associated with gaze preference for angry faces and negatively associated with gaze preferences for happy faces.
As for interpretational processes, Strachman and Gable (2006) demonstrated that avoidance motivation is related to an emphasis of potential threats in the environment. In two studies, avoidance motivation was associated with better memory for negative information and a negatively biased interpretation of ambiguous social cues. Similarly, Nikitin and Freund (2010b) showed that social avoidance motivation predicts how ambiguous facial expressions are interpreted. More specifically, social avoidance motivation was positively associated with the interpretation of ambiguous (masked) faces as angry faces and negatively with the interpretation of ambiguous faces as happy faces. The authors believe that cognitive processes like those examined in the study mediate the effects of social avoidance motivations on socially relevant outcomes as most social situations are ambiguous with regard to social acceptance and rejection (e.g., Fingerman & Lang, 2004) and dispositional factors influence how the situation is interpreted (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993). When social avoidance motivation results in a negatively biased interpretation of ambiguous social cues, people high in avoidance motivation might feel easily rejected (see Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, 2001). These findings are in line with cognitive models of anxiety (Ouimet, Gawronski, & Dozois, 2009). Encountering a threat-relevant stimulus activates threat-related concepts that facilitate interpretation of the stimulus as threat. The activated concepts enhance attentional engagement with the stimulus, which in turn increases the activation of threat-related associations and impedes attentional disengagement from the stimulus. In consequence, the threatening nature of the stimulus intensifies. Cognitive processes associated with anxiety might be the driving force of the negative consequences of social avoidance motivation.

In contrast, social approach motivation only seems to play a marginal role in the interpretation of positive and negative social information (Nikitin & Freund, 2010b; Strachman & Gable, 2006). However, some studies have demonstrated that approach motivation is related to positive reproductions and interpretations of neutral statements (Gomez & Gomez, 2002; Strachman & Gable, 2006). One proposed mechanism by which
people high in approach motivation, engage in more positive events is thus by seeing potential social rewards in neutral stimuli (Strachman & Gable, 2006).

**Attribution of social success and failure.** In addition to attentional and interpretational factors of social information processing, the attribution of social success and failure might serve as another cognitive mediator between social motivations and their consequences, particularly future social behavior. Schoch, Nikitin, and Freund (2011) suggested that social motivation not only influences whether a social situation is experienced as a success or a failure, but also what the social success or failure is attributed to. In a social scenario study, they found that dispositional approach and avoidance motivation have different effects on the attribution of experienced social success and failure: Social approach motivation was related to adaptive attributions after scenarios of social acceptance (e.g., internal-global-stable attribution of social acceptance), whereas avoidance motivation was related to maladaptive attributions after scenarios of social rejection (e.g., internal-global-stable attribution of social rejection). These results were interpreted in terms of expectations. Previous attribution research has shown that expected outcomes are more often attributed to internal and stable factors, whereas unexpected outcomes are likely to be attributed to external and variable factors (e.g., McMahan, 1973). As social approach motivation is related to the expectation of social success (Mehrabian, 1994), social success is attributed to internal factors. On the other hand, social avoidance motivation is related to the expectation of social failure (Mehrabian, 1994), which might explain the attribution of social failure to internal factors.

The attribution of previously experienced social situations should further influence specific expectations for future social situations (Schoch et al., 2011). Whether or not we enter a new social situation might depend on how we attribute previously experienced social success and failure. In support of this suggestion, Cutrona (1982) showed in a transition study with students who were starting college that students who became chronically lonely
believed that their loneliness was their own fault. They blamed their loneliness on undesirable, unchangeable aspects of their personality. This kind of maladaptive attribution is typical for people high in social avoidance motivation and may lead to the fact that other reasons for difficulties in their social life such as external factors (e.g., living on an impersonal campus) are disregarded. In line with these findings, previous research has shown that people who are generally fearful that others will reject them often have strong negative expectations about novel social interactions (e.g., Maddux, Norton, & Leary, 1988). As a result, individuals who anticipate significant distress tend not to pursue novel social encounters (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). In conclusion, people who score high on avoidance motivation seem to generalize from a single experience of rejection to experiences with other potential partners. This, in turn, leads them to see novel partners as sources of social threat rather than as sources of affiliation. Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, and Schaller (2007) found that the tendency for rejected people to perceive a novel interaction partner as nice and friendly was only pronounced among individuals low in fear of negative evaluation. In contrast, rejected individuals who were high in fear of negative evaluation did not view a novel social partner in a socially optimistic light. These individuals did not exhibit similar signs of wanting to restore social bonds after experiences of rejection and, in some cases, even seemed to view new partners with negative attitudes such as skepticism, fear, or disdain (Maner et al., 2007).

Behavioral Processes

We have already discussed that the selection of social situation is influenced by social approach and avoidance motivation. However, social avoidance motivation is not related to the frequency of positive or negative social events (Gable, 2006). Although individuals with high avoidance motivation do not experience negative social events more frequently than others do, they report them to be more important when they occur (Gable, 2006). Therefore, Gable (2006) suggested that approach motivation is linked to social outcomes because it is
associated with increased exposure to positive social events whereas avoidance motivation is related to social outcomes because it is associated with more intense reactions to negative social events when they inevitably occur.

Focusing on behavior in social situations, social avoidance motivation is related to passive and inhibited behavior, avoidance of eye contact, and reduced verbal output in social interactions (Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a). Furthermore, avoidance motivation is related to standing on the periphery of a group (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). According to Rapee and Heimberg (1997), these avoidance-oriented behaviors can facilitate a self-fulfilling prophecy. Avoiding eye contact, verbal output, and standing on the periphery might be viewed by others as disinterest in social interaction. This, in turn, could explain why highly avoidance-motivated individuals are judged less positively by others.

On the other hand, social approach motivation is associated with self-confident and active approach behavior in social situations (McAdams, 1992). More specifically, approach motivation is positively related to the duration of speech in social interactions, the involvement of all group members in spontaneous and friendly exchange, positioning oneself closer to others, smiling more, and showing more eye contact (McAdams, 1992; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a). As a consequence of this approach-related behavior, Mehrabian and colleagues found that people high in approach motivation are more liked by others than people low in approach motivation. The self-confidence and friendliness of approach-motivated individuals seem to “spill over” to their social partners (Mehrabian, 1994).

**Emotional Processes**

As social approach motivation is associated with attention and interpretation processes that benefit positive social information, active approach behavior, and social success, one can assume that it leads to positive emotions in social situations. In contrast, social avoidance motivation is associated with attention and interpretation processes that benefit negative
social information, passive vigilant behavior, and social failure. Thus, it might lead to negative emotions in a social situation. These assumptions are supported by a study on approach and avoidance social motivation and friendship goals. Elliot and colleagues found that social approach motivation predicted approach goals, and approach goals, in turn, predicted high subjective well-being (measured by positive and negative affect, and life-satisfaction in the past few days; Elliot et al., 2006). In contrast, social avoidance motivation predicted avoidance goals, and avoidance goals, in turn, predicted loneliness, the frequency of negative social interactions, and the impact of negative relational events on well-being. Similarly, Nikitin and Freund (2010a) found that social approach motivation was positively associated with positive emotions such as happiness and negatively related to negative emotions such as nervousness in social interactions. In contrast, social avoidance motivation was positively related to nervousness.

**Interplay of Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation**

So far, we have reported empirical findings on the consequences of social approach and avoidance motivation separately. As mentioned above, approach and avoidance motivation are largely independent. However, approach and avoidance motivation can co-occur. How does this co-occurrence affect social cognition, behavior, and emotion? Nikitin and Freund (2008) suggested that when both approach and avoidance motivation are high, they should result in equally high sensitivity to positive and negative incentives. Consequently, activation of the opposing characters of these two motivational tendencies should lead to behavioral as well as emotional ambivalence. In line with this suggestion, Nikitin and Freund (2010a) showed that social approach and avoidance motivation interacted in predicting cognitions, emotions, and behavior. In a social interaction study, the co-occurrence of high approach and high avoidance motivation was associated with both high arousal and high positive emotions. Furthermore, it predicted control over the situation and eye contact while listening. The authors concluded that individuals high in both approach and
avoidance motivation are dependent on the acceptance of their interaction partners and, therefore, are highly engaged and make a great effort to succeed in social contexts. They are happy to be able to socialize, but also aroused because they fear the rejection of others. These findings are in line with previous research. For instance, Mehrabian (1994) found that dependency on others was related to high approach and high avoidance motivation. Dependent people are friendly and outgoing individuals who also feel that events and/or others influence their lives. This suggests that, when approach and avoidance motivation co-occur, both positive and negative consequences result. Further evidence for the ambivalent experience resulting from the co-occurrence of approach and avoidance motivation comes from research on shyness, which can be described as an approach-avoidance conflict (Asendorpf, 1990; Coplan, Prakash, O’Neil, & Armer, 2004) or from the joint subsystems hypothesis of behavioral activation and inhibition system (Corr, 2002). Taken together, the interplay of approach and avoidance motivation has been found to be associated with intense and ambivalent experiences and behavior.

The Origins and Development of Social Approach and Avoidance Motivation Across the Life Span

Biological Substrates

Social approach and avoidance motivation do not tend to be an emphasis of genetic research, although there do seem to be biological substrates of social approach and avoidance motivation with genetic origins. Biological tests of (social) approach and avoidance motivation are based on frontal electroencephalographic (EEG) asymmetry (Davidson, Taylor, & Saron, 1979). Frontal EEG asymmetry has been used inter alia as an index of approach and withdrawal (i.e., avoidance) motivation (Davidson, 1995). According to the approach-withdrawal model, increased activation in the left frontal cortex is associated with increases in appetitive, approach-related behavior. The approach system includes emotions like joy, interest, and anger. Increased right frontal activation is related to increases in
defensive, withdrawal-related behavior. The withdrawal system includes emotions like fear and disgust. In addition to using frontal EEG asymmetry as a state measure, researchers have also investigated its use as a trait measure of people’s tendency to respond in a motivationally biased manner (e.g., Hagemann, Naumann, Thayer, & Bartussek, 2002). The approach-withdrawal theory of frontal EEG asymmetry proposes that people with greater resting right frontal activation have stronger withdrawal/inhibitory tendencies and that those with greater resting left frontal activation are more vulnerable to experiencing stronger approach tendencies (Davidson, 1995). Resting EEG asymmetry is highly stable over time (Hagemann, et al., 2002).

Studies that examined the role of frontal EEG asymmetry in infant temperament found that young children with right frontal EEG asymmetry were more likely to exhibit social withdrawal and behave in a socially maladaptive manner when interacting with unfamiliar peers (e.g., Fox et al., 1995; Fox, Henderson, Rubin, Calkins, & Schmidt, 2001). This pattern of frontal EEG asymmetry can be identified in infants as young as nine months of age and it predicts social withdrawal or reticence in preschool- and school-age children. In addition, children who display stable patterns of behavioral inhibition over time also exhibit stable right frontal asymmetry (Fox & Reeb, 2008).

Regarding specific brain regions, behaviorally inhibited individuals show heightened amygdala activation in response to novel and threatening stimuli (Fox, Henderson, Marshall, Nichols, & Ghera, 2005) and enhanced activity in the striatum in response to rewards and punishments (Helfinstein, Fox, & Pine, 2012). It seems that the amygdala activation is particularly linked to attentional processes (enhanced sensitivity to novel and threatening stimuli), whereas the activation of striatal structures is particularly linked to avoidance behavior associated with behavioral inhibition (Helfinstein et al., 2012).
Environmental Influences

We know little about the developmental origins of social approach and avoidance motivation (Fox & Reeb, 2008). Heritability of frontal EEG asymmetry seems relatively low (less than 30% of the variance; Anokhin, Heath, & Myers, 2006). Thus, environmental factors may play a substantial role in the development of EEG asymmetry. One of the most prominent environmental factors may be the quality of maternal care. For instance, Hane and Fox (2006) found that infants who received high-quality maternal care displayed decreased right frontal activation as compared to those who received low-quality maternal care. The researchers found that infants receiving low-quality maternal care showed more fearfulness, less positive joint attention, and greater right frontal EEG asymmetry than those receiving high-quality maternal care. The pattern of fearfulness, low sociability, and right frontal EEG asymmetry found in the low-quality maternity care group has been identified in infants displaying negative reactivity to novelty and behavioral inhibition during the early years of life (Fox et al., 1995, 2001). However, the direction of the relationship is not clear: Infants’ negativity may also influence the quality of mother-infant interaction as has been reported in the developmental literature (e.g., Crockenberg & Acredolo, 1983).

In fact, a growing body of literature indicates that temperament and maternal behavior act in concert to shape development (e.g., Calkins, 2002; Hane, Cheah, Rubin, & Fox, 2008). For instance, Hane and colleagues (2008) observed the behavior of children during play with unfamiliar peers at the age of four and seven. In addition, mothers and their seven-year-old children were observed during structured and unstructured activities. Maternal positivity and negativity differentially influenced the development of social withdrawal in childhood: Maternal negativity was associated with poor social functioning in children who had an established history of social withdrawal, whereas maternal positivity was associated with better social outcomes for these children. Similarly, Coplan and colleagues found that the relationship between child’s social withdrawal and maladjustment was moderated by mother’s
personality and parenting style (Coplan, Parkash, O’Neil, & Armer, 2008). These findings suggest that generalized levels of maternal positivity and negativity moderate the relationship between temperamental predisposition and overt expressions of social avoidance motivation.

**Developmental (In)Stability in Childhood**

The above findings suggest that environmental factors, such as the quality of maternal care, may buffer or amplify the temperamental predisposition to develop social avoidance motivation. In line with the behavioral findings, EEG asymmetry also seems to change as a result of experiential factors. For instance, Fox et al. (2001) found that children who had originally displayed a right frontal bias and had become less inhibited over time displayed a change from right to left frontal asymmetry. The authors screened four-month-old infants for temperamental patterns (motor reactivity and affect expression patterns) thought to predict behavioral inhibition and selected a subsample that was identified as displaying high motor reactivity and high negative affect in response to novelty. This group was followed over the course of four years and slightly over a quarter of it was found to display a pattern of continuously inhibited behavior. A similar number of infants were no longer inhibited at the age of four. The remaining children showed no discernable pattern over time. In addition, infants who remained inhibited over the four-year period exhibited stable right frontal EEG asymmetry while infants who changed exhibited a shift from left to right frontal EEG asymmetry.

Kagan and Snidman (1991) found that the initial disposition to approach or avoid unfamiliar events at age four months was related to fearful behavior a year later. Their study also provided partial support for the argument that inhibited and uninhibited children belong to qualitatively different groups rather than representing extremes on a single dimension. The combination of high motor activity and frequent crying at four months best predicted high levels of fear later on. Children who showed high levels of motor activity but no distress were much less fearful. Similarly, children who were low in motor activity but very irritable
were more fearful than infants who displayed both low levels of motor activity and minimal
crying. These findings are in line with the idea of independent approach and avoidance
motivational systems.

More recent studies growing out of the two-factor model of inhibition (Asendorpf, 1990) have explored the interplay of social approach and avoidance motivation in childhood (see Coplan & Rubin, 2010; Rubin, Burgess, & Coplan, 2002). Asendorpf (1990) differentiated between children who are socially withdrawn because they experience an approach-avoidance conflict and children who are socially withdrawn because they are socially disinterested (i.e., low in approach motivation). This differentiation was supported by empirical evidence. Interestingly, the consequences of social withdrawal seem to be negative regardless of the underlying motivation. Coplan and colleagues found that all socially withdrawn children report negative peer relationships (Coplan, Rose-Krasnor, Weeks, Kingsbury, & Bullock, in press). The authors conclude that socially withdrawal behaviors—irrespective of its origin—appear to be a marker for social difficulties.

Regarding the role of maternal care for social withdrawal, social withdrawal based on the approach-avoidance conflict seems to be associated with either low authoritative parenting (low warmth, reasoning, and democratic participation) or overprotectiveness (being anxious and intervening; Coplan et al., 2004). In other words, too little and too much parental care might lead children to develop shyness characterized by an approach-avoidance conflict probably because in both cases children do not learn to cope with interpersonal situations (either because of too much or too little parental regulation). Social disinterest (or low approach motivation) is unrelated to parental behavior but associated with maternal social goals. Mothers who place less importance on children’s sociability and peer relations have children who are social disinterested (Coplan et al., 2004). Although the causality is unclear, these findings support the assumption that social approach motivation and approach-avoidance conflict might have origins in different environmental factors.
Developmental (In)Stability Beyond Childhood

**Adolescence and young adulthood.** As discussed in previous sections, dispositional social approach and avoidance motivation in childhood have a genetic basis and are the result of an uninhibited or inhibited temperament, respectively, and environmental factors such as the quality of maternal care. It seems that inhibited infants are at a slightly higher than normal risk for the later development of some form of anxious symptomatology. For instance, behavioral inhibition assessed via maternal report throughout infancy and early childhood was associated with four times increased risk for social anxiety disorder in adolescence (Chronis-Tuscano et al., 2009; Essex, Klein, Slattery, Goldsmith, & Kalin, 2010). Conversely, college students who reported high levels of social anxiety remembered being inhibited when they were young children (Mick & Telch, 1998). Behavioral inhibition in childhood predicted only social anxiety, not generalized anxiety. These data suggest that a childhood history of behavioral inhibition may be more strongly associated with adult social anxiety than other types of anxiety.

Thus, behavioral and physiological features of behavioral approach and avoidance are moderately stable from infancy into early adolescence. However, this might especially be the case for extreme groups (Pfeifer, Goldsmith, Davidson, & Rickman, 2002). Infants who have extreme levels of dispositional approach and avoidance motivation remain more stable than those with moderate levels. In the middle of the distribution, the development of approach and avoidance motivation is characterized more by change than by stability (Pfeifer, et al., 2002).

**Middle adulthood and old age.** To date, very little is known about the development of social approach and avoidance motivation beyond young adulthood. There is some support in the literature for the assumption that interindividual differences in motivation in general may be relatively stable across the life span. In two surveys, Veroff, Reuman, and Feld (1984) investigated the stability of social motives. Although the authors found some social
role-related differences, the strength of the motives was remarkably similar across age groups. Similarly, in a longitudinal study on motive development, Franz (1994) found evidence for both stability of and change in motives across middle adulthood.

However, individual differences can be operationalized either quantitatively or qualitatively (Caspi & Moffitt, 1993). Quantitative differences are related to differences between individuals on a single trait dimension (i.e., mean differences). Differences like these were discussed in the previous paragraph. Individuals can also differ with respect to how frequently they exhibit trait-related behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. In other words, the qualitative differences address the question concerning how well traits predict trait-related outcomes. There are good reasons for expecting either stability, an increase, or a decrease in the impact of social approach and avoidance motivation on social outcomes across adulthood. Older adults show greater motivation to regulate their emotions (e.g., Gross et al., 1997). Their emotion-regulation efforts thus seem to override the effects of disposition, which speaks for a decrease in the impact of social approach and avoidance motivation on social outcomes across adulthood. This hypothesis contradicts the hypothesis that the effects of disposition become stronger over time due to cumulative processes (Impett et al., 2010). Finally, the hypothesis that the effects of disposition remain stable over time is based on Neugarten’s (1964) notion of the institutionalization of personality, which assumes that personality traits and their interaction with the social environment stabilize with age.

There is some initial support favoring the stability hypothesis over the two change hypotheses with respect to the impact of social approach and avoidance motivation on social outcomes across adulthood. In a study with young and older adults, Nikitin and Freund (2011) found that self-reported avoidance motivation predicted how emotional faces were processed irrespective of age. In both young and older adults, avoidance motivation was positively associated with gaze preference for angry faces and negatively associated with gaze preference for happy faces. Age did not moderate the effect of avoidance motivation. Thus,
the influence of avoidance motivation on gaze preference appears to remain relatively stable from young to older adulthood.

It seems that other factors than chronological age influence individual differences in the expression of dispositions across adulthood. Caspi and Moffitt’s (1993) suggested that individual differences tend to be magnified when individuals experience profound discontinuities in their lives. Preexisting cognitive schemas exert a powerful and pervasive influence on our interpretation of new experiences by helping us to categorize and organize the changing events as we attempt to assimilate new and unpredictable events into existing cognitive and action structures. Thus, it appears that person-related variables continue to exert an important influence on social outcomes well into old age and are even accentuated during transitions into new social situations.

**Conclusions and Future Directions**

In the present chapter, we discussed social approach and avoidance motivation, their underlying processes, and developmental specifics. Distinguishing social approach and avoidance motivation and their possible cognitive, emotional, and behavioral concomitants and consequences help us to describe and explain different patterns of behavior and experience in social situations across the life span.

Future research needs to address how maladaptive cognitive, emotional, and behavioral concomitants of social avoidance motivation could be altered in order to reduce social failure and loneliness. Previous intervention studies indicate the effectiveness of targeting cognitions and beliefs that lie at the heart of interpersonal patterns. Walton and Cohen (2007), for example, developed an experimental intervention aimed to increase people’s expectations of acceptance. Changing people’s expectations of acceptance had significant positive effects on self-confidence, resilience, and even academic success. In line with these findings, Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002) demonstrated in an intervention study that college students who learned about the malleability of personal attributes (such as
intelligence) showed a higher valuation of their courses and studies, enhanced enjoyment thereof, and higher grade-point averages. The intervention mentioned above follows in the footsteps of earlier attribution interventions that changed people’s explanations of events and thereby their reactions to them (e.g., Försterling, 1985). According to Dweck (2008), these interventions all speak to the effectiveness of targeting cognitions, which play an important role in challenge seeking, self-regulation, and resilience. Further, changing self-theories, or cognitions about oneself, appears to result in important real-world changes in how people function. For example, individuals who think that their shyness is malleable as compared to individuals who see their shyness as unchangeable view social situations as learning opportunity, they are less likely to avoid social interactions, and report less negative consequences of their shyness (Beer, 2002). Moreover, cognitive interventions have been found to be successful in changing many of the personality traits that are often thought to be relatively stable across adulthood, such as sociability (e.g., reach out to others) or negative affectivity (e.g., positive vs. negative reactions to setbacks; Dweck, 2008). Based on these findings, we would suggest interventions that focus on changing people’s cognitions about social situations in order to reduce social failure and loneliness.

Changing people’s cognitions alone may not be sufficient to bring about a stable change in behavior. Thus, behavior should also be addressed in interventions. One of the most direct modes of intervention would be to use our knowledge about the behavior associated with social approach motivation (such as actively approaching others, talking to others, engaging in self-disclosure) and to apply it to the development of training programs for socially avoidant individuals. Thinking about how interventions should look and which strategies should be learned, we do not claim that approach cognitions, emotions, and behaviors are always adaptive, whereas avoidance cognitions, emotions, and behaviors are always maladaptive. Imagine that you wanted to have a fun evening with your new colleagues. Now imagine a different situation, namely, one in which you had to bring up a
difficult topic with a friend. Would you behave the same way in both situations? Probably not. In other words, there are situations in which avoidance goals and means are more adaptive and others in which approach goals and means are more appropriate. It would therefore make sense to also include discrimination tasks in interventions that teach people to discriminate between social situations in which approach strategies are more appropriate than avoidance strategies and vice versa. In a second step, as mentioned above, the intervention should provide training in appropriate approach and avoidance strategies as well as focus on cognitive aspects.

Moreover, future studies should systematically investigate when across the life span such training programs would be most successful and meaningful. As the influence of social approach and avoidance motivation on social outcomes has been found to be relatively stable across the life span, interventions might be important both in young and older age. However, there are substantial differences between young and older adults in their motivational focus. With increasing age and decreasing resources, people are more motivated to avoid losses instead of striving for gains (Freund & Ebner, 2005). The switch in motivational focus also changes the adaptivity of approach and avoidance strategies, with approach strategies becoming less and avoidance strategies becoming more adaptive for goal pursuit (see Freund & Ebner, 2005, for a summary). This should also be true for the social domain. As older adults are particularly motivated to maintain their established social relationships (Antonucci, Fiori, Birditt, & Jackey, 2010), social avoidance behaviors should become more adaptive with increasing age. In contrast, young adults are particularly motivated to establish new social relationships (see Carstensen, 1992; Nikitin & Freund, 2008). The adaptivity of social approach behaviors might therefore be highest in young adulthood and continuously decrease across adulthood. Thus, although the importance of social approach and avoidance motivation is not diminished in older adulthood, the strategies that are adaptive for young and older adults might differ.
Taken together, social approach and avoidance motivation are influential in different contexts (new as well as established social relationships) and at different ages (young as well as older adulthood). Furthermore, dispositions appear to foster individual stability in times of social instability such as in social transitions. There are substantial cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and neuropsychological differences between social approach and avoidance motivation, suggesting that the motivations are theoretically different and not simply inverse. Moreover, the motivations interact in predicting social outcomes. To date, we know less about the processes and development of social approach motivation than about social avoidance motivation. This discrepancy in the research is probably based on the fact that the consequences of social avoidance motivation, unlike those of social approach motivation, are detrimental for the individual. However, learning more about the processes and development of social approach motivation would help us to understand what leads to well-functioning and satisfying relationships. This knowledge could be applied in future interventions to prevent social isolation.
References


doi:10.1017/CBO9780511527937.020


Chapter II

Social Motives, Attributions and Establishing new Social Relationships

Social Motives and Attributions as Predictors of the Decision to Participate in a Speed-Dating Event

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Paper submitted to: European Journal of Social Psychology
Abstract

Two studies investigated the role of dispositional social approach and avoidance motives for participation in a speed-dating event. In a sample of $N = 205$ college students (Study 1), social approach motives were positively and social avoidance motives negatively associated with the decision to participate in a speed-dating event. Focusing on the processes underlying these associations, Study 2 ($N = 153$) showed that social approach motives predict self-enhancing attributions of previous dating experiences, which, in turn, are associated with expecting to be accepted in an actual upcoming speed-dating situation. These expectations were positively associated with the decision to participate in a speed-dating event. Social avoidance motives were negatively associated with expectations of future acceptance and with the decision to participate in a speed-dating event. These studies illustrate the important role of dispositional social motives and its social-cognitive concomitants (i.e., attributions and expectations) for the decision to initiate social contacts.

*Keywords:* social motives, approach, avoidance, speed dating, attribution
Social Motives and Attributions as Predictors of the Decision to Participate in a Speed-Dating Event

Imagine Ellie, a young women in her twenties who just moved to a new city and is looking for new social contacts. One of her colleagues invites her to a party. If she attends the party, she would not know anyone except the host, and this prospect does not seem appealing to her. At the same time, however, the party might be a good possibility to get to know people. In other words, situations such as this party bear possibilities for affiliation and risks of feeling out of place or even rejected (e.g., Gable & Berkman, 2008). How will Ellie decide?

People are generally highly motivated to form positive and stable interpersonal relationships (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Gable & Impett, 2012). The lack of social contacts has negative effects on well-being, health, and even affects mortality (Birditt & Antonucci, 2007; Cohen, Gottlieb, & Underwood, 2000; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). However, surprisingly little attention has been devoted to the motivational processes that influence the initiation of relationships, such as social motives (Gable, 2006). Social motives can be oriented towards approaching positive social outcomes, such as acceptance and intimacy, or towards avoiding negative social outcomes, such as rejection and loneliness (McClelland, 1985). This article centers on the role of social approach and avoidance motives for the first step in building social relations, namely the decision of whether or not to enter a new social situation. We argue that social approach and avoidance motives play an important role in this decision because they influence how people attribute social acceptance and rejection. Attributions of previous social outcomes, in turn, have consequences for the initiation of social contacts.

What Affects the Decision to Enter a New Social Situation?

Previous social experiences are important predictors of decisions to enter similar social situations (e.g., Anderson, 1983; Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981; Higgins, 1987). However,
people differ in the way they interpret previous social outcomes. There is substantial empirical evidence demonstrating that attributions of previous social outcomes affect future expectations for similar situations (e.g., Anderson & Jennings, 1980; Brodt & Zimbardo, 1981; McMahan, 1973; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012; Valle & Frieze, 1976; Weiner, 1980). Self-enhancing attributions (attributing social acceptance to internal, stable, and global causes, and attributing social rejection to external, variable, and specific causes) lead to positive expectations towards similar future situations (Mezulis et al., 2004; Sedikides & Alicke, 2012). People who have positive expectations, in turn, tend to enter similar situations in the future (Anthony, Holmes, & Wood, 2007).

To date, little is known about antecedents of attributions. General expectations to handle social situations seem to be an important factor in this regard. Expected positive outcomes are positively associated with self-enhancing attributions, whereas expected negative outcomes are negatively associated with self-enhancing attributions (Alden, 1986). Note, that generalized future expectations are at the core of dispositional social approach and avoidance motives (Mehrabian, 1994). Social approach motives are characterized by generalized positive social expectations (i.e., being accepted), whereas social avoidance motives are characterized by generalized negative social expectations (e.g., being rejected; Mehrabian, 1994).

When the approach-associated expectations of being accepted are fulfilled, this confirms the general view that social situations are mostly positive (stable and global attribution) and that one is a likeable person (internal attribution). When the approach-associated expectations of being accepted are not met, this does not confirm the general positive view but is seen as an exception. The experience of social rejection appears as an isolated, single event related to external factors (e.g., the other person was in a bad mood and hence was not interested in getting to know me, or it was bad luck). In other words, social approach motives are positively related to self-enhancing attributions. In turn, self-enhancing
attributions result in specific expectations of acceptance in similar situations. These specific expectations increase the likelihood of entering new social situations (for an illustration of the expected associations, see Figure 1).

In contrast, when the generalized expectations of being rejected associated with social avoidance motives are fulfilled, this confirms the conviction that most social situations are negative (stable and global attribution) and that one is a rather disagreeable person (internal attribution). The experience of acceptance, in contrast, does not confirm the generalized avoidance-associated expectations of being rejected. Therefore, the experience of acceptance is seen as pure luck or benevolence of the other person (external, variable, and specific attribution). In other words, social avoidance motives are negatively related self-enhancing attributions. Such attributions lead to specific expectations of rejection in similar situations, which, in turn, lower the likelihood of entering a new social situation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Hypothesized associations between social motives, attributions, specific expectations, and the decision to enter a new social situation.

**The Current Studies**

The current studies used the decision to participate in a speed-dating event as a sample case of establishing new social relations. Study 1 tested the association between social
motives and the decision for or against participation in an actual speed-dating event. Although it has often been assumed that social approach and avoidance motives are particularly influential for the decision to initiate social relationships (Eiser & Fazio, 2008; Nurmi, Toivonen, Salmela-Aro, & Eronen, 1996), this assumption has not yet undergone empirical testing. Most of the research on social motives has focused on people’s behaviors, emotions and cognitions in social situations (Derryberry & Reed, 1994; Koestner & McClelland, 1992; Nikitin & Freund, 2010b; Strachman & Gable, 2006) but has neglected the impact on the first step of establishing new social relationships, namely the decision to enter a new social situation.

Study 2 investigated the hypothesized path from social motives to the decision to participate in a speed-dating event via attributions and specific future expectations. We investigated the dimensions of internality (i.e., internal vs. external attribution) and generality of attributions (i.e., variable and specific vs. stable and global attribution) separately because these two dimensions have different meanings. **Generality** refers to the probability of occurrence of an event across different situations and times (Carver & Scheier, 1991; Carver, 1989; Metalsky, Halberstadt, & Abramson, 1987; Stiensmeier-Pelster, 1989). **Internality**, in contrast, refers to the locus of causality of an event (Miller & Ross, 1975). For example, Ellie might blame her tiredness (internal attribution) at the last party for the negative social encounter but given that Ellie is typically fit when she attends a party, she does not expect this to happen again (specific, variable attribution). Conversely, Ellie might believe that other people are likely to ignore her when they are at a party together with their friends (external attribution) and expects this outcome for all similar situations (stable, global attribution). Given these different meanings of internality and generality, we explore if self-enhancing attributions as measured by internality and generality differ in their associations with motives, expectations, and decision to participate in a speed-dating event.
Study 1

Method

Procedure. Young adults who were currently single completed an online questionnaire assessing their social approach and avoidance motives (run by www.limesurvey.org). After completing the questionnaire, participants decided if they—as a way of compensating participation in the study—wanted to take part in a speed-dating event. To prevent a possible selection bias, no mention was made of speed dating before completion of the questionnaire. Before participation, all participants gave written informed consent. After participation, they were debriefed.

Participants. Participants were recruited through an e-mail service for students. The sample consisted of college students between 18 and 30 years. N = 258 participants completed the online questionnaire. Data of 53 participants were excluded because they did not fulfill the criterion of being single. The final sample consisted of N = 205 singles (49% women, age M = 23.18 years, SD = 3.23). Almost none of the participants reported prior experience with speed dating (98.5%).

Social approach and avoidance motives. The Affiliation Tendency and Rejection Sensitivity Scales (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986) assessed social approach motives (e.g., “I like to make as many friends as I can”) and avoidance motives (“I am very sensitive to any signs that a person might not want to talk to me”). For reasons of economy, we used a short version of the scales each with 8 items of the highest loadings as found in previous studies (Nikitin & Freund, 2010b). Response scales ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The internal consistency was Cronbach’s α = .72 for approach motives (M = 3.70, SD = 0.93) and α = .61 (M = 3.19, SD = 0.86) for avoidance motives. Approach and avoidance motives were not significantly correlated (r = -.10, p = .18).
Decision for/against participation in speed dating. The participants got the possibility to participate in a speed-dating event after completing the questionnaire. The instruction was as follows: “The questionnaire is now completed. Thank you very much for your participation! As a thank-you, you have the possibility to take part in a responsibly organized, free-of-charge speed-dating event worth 70 Swiss francs (approximately 56.40 Euro at the time of the study) with other college students between 18 and 30 years of age.” For those who were not familiar with speed dating, a short description of the procedure was added. The participants were requested to click “Yes” or “No” dependent on whether they wanted to participate or not. About one third ($n = 67$) of the participants decided to participate in the event.

Results

We ran a logistic regression analysis predicting the decision for or against participating in the speed-dating event by approach and avoidance motives. As hypothesized, approach motives positively predicted the decision for participating in the speed-dating event ($B = 0.34, SE = 0.18, Wald = 3.66, p = .06, OR = 1.41, 95\% CI = [0.99, 1.99]$), whereas avoidance motives negatively predicted the decision ($B = -0.55, SE = 0.19, Wald = 8.37, p = .004, OR = 0.58, 95\% CI = [0.40, 0.84]$). We discuss these results in the general discussion.

Study 2

Study 2 tested the path between social motives, attributions, specific future expectations, and the decision for or against participating in a speed-dating event. Similar to Study 1, the participants completed an online questionnaire and decided at the end if they—as a gratification for participating in the study—wanted to take part in an actual speed-dating event. In addition, Study 2 manipulated social acceptance and rejection in a hypothetical speed-dating situation and assessed the participants’ attributions, their specific expectations regarding an upcoming speed-dating event, and their decision for or against participating in an
actual speed-dating event. We decided to use a hypothetical scenario in order to comply with the APA guidelines to use deception only as a last resort if no other procedures are available.

**Method**

**Procedure.** The participants completed the questionnaire online (run on www.soscisurvey.de). First, they gave written informed consent for participation and filled out the questionnaire on social motives. Then, the participants read a speed-dating scenario that included a manipulation of a social acceptance or rejection, respectively. After the manipulation, the participants rated the causes of the social acceptance or rejection on the dimensions of generality and internality, as well as their specific expectations concerning an actual upcoming speed-dating event. After completing the questionnaire, the participants decided if they wanted to take part in an actual speed-dating event. The possibility to participate in a speed-dating event was not mentioned before. After participation, the participants were debriefed. As a thank-you, they could take part in a lottery drawing of ten book vouchers for 10 Swiss francs each (approximately 8.05 Euro at the time of the study).

**Participants.** Participants were recruited through the participant server at our university. We approached students between 18 and 30 years who were currently single. $N = 182$ participants completed the online questionnaire. Data of 26 participants were excluded because they did not fulfill the above criteria. Another 3 participants were excluded because they failed to respond correctly the control question (detailed information is provided below). The definitive sample consisted of $N = 153$ singles (73% women, age $M = 22.42$ years, $SD = 2.70$). Very few of the participants had experience with speed dating (3.9%).

**Social approach and avoidance motives.** As in Study 1, the Affiliation Tendency and Rejection Sensitivity Scales assessed social approach and avoidance motives. As the reliability of the avoidance motive subscale was relatively low in Study 1, we used all items of the scales in Study 2. The internal consistency was Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$ for approach
motives ($M = 3.54, SD = 0.69$) and $\alpha = .81$ ($M = 3.08, SD = 0.68$) for avoidance motives. Approach and avoidance motives were negatively correlated ($r = -.20, p < .05$).

**Manipulation of social acceptance and rejection.** First, the participants read an explanation of the procedure of speed dating. Then, we asked them to imagine taking part in a speed-dating event and to take some notes about it (“What would you tell about yourself?” “What would you like to know from your dating partner?” “What would you talk about?”). We asked these questions to make sure that the participants engaged in imagining the scenario. After answering the questions, the participants read the following instruction: “Please imagine having participated in a speed-dating event. Over the course of this event, you got to know 10 persons of the opposite sex. Each date lasted seven minutes. You liked four of these persons. You would like to meet them again and selected them for further contact. You know that you only get their contact information if there is a match between your and your partner’s choice. Now you are waiting eagerly for the result. ‘How many persons might have chosen me?’ ‘How many matches do I have?’” Again, the participants took some notes. Then, they received a fictitious e-mail with the speed-dating result. The participants were randomly assigned to either an acceptance feedback (“You wanted to get to know four persons—all of them also wanted to get to know you.”) or a rejection feedback (“You wanted to get to know four persons—none of them wanted to get to know you.”). The acceptance-feedback group consisted of $n = 78$ persons. The rejection-feedback group consisted of $n = 75$ persons. Again, the participants took some notes (“What are your thoughts after receiving this feedback?” “How do you feel after reading this mail?”).

**Manipulation check.** To test if the manipulation of social acceptance and rejection was successful, we asked the participants “How successful was the speed dating for you?” The participants responded on a scale ranging from 0 (not successful at all) to 6 (very successful).
**Attributions.** An adapted version of the Attributional Style Questionnaire for Adults (Poppe, Stiensmeier-Pelster, & Pelster, 2005) assessed attributions of acceptance and rejection, respectively. After the hypothetical feedback, the participants wrote down the main reason for their success or failure in the speed-dating scenario. Then, they rated the cause of the experienced outcome on the dimensions of internality (e.g., “The cause has something to do with circumstances or other persons” vs. “The cause has something to do with me”), stability (e.g., “The cause will change over time” vs. “The cause will be stable over time”), and globality (e.g., “The cause applies only to this situation” vs. “The cause applies to many other situations”). Each dimension was assessed with two single items. The response scales ranged from -3 (external, variable, specific) to +3 (internal, stable, global). The dimension of generality was indexed by the mean of the dimensions of stability and globality. The internal consistency for attributions of acceptance was Cronbach’s α = .82 (M = 0.42, SD = 1.39) for internality, α = .84 (M = 0.50, SD = 1.23) for generality, α = .74 (M = 0.28, SD = 1.38) for internality after rejection, and α = .80 (M = -0.32, SD = 1.45) for generality after rejection.

To assess how self-enhancing attributions were, we used the mean score of the two attribution dimensions after the acceptance manipulation and the revised scores of the attribution dimensions after the rejection manipulation (internality M = 0.11, SD = 1.39; generality M = 0.46, SD = 1.26). Higher values represent higher levels of self-enhancing attributions, whereas lower values represent lower levels of self-enhancing attributions of internality and generality, respectively. Self-enhancing attributions of internality and generality were positively correlated (r = .68, p < .001).

**Specific expectations.** Specific expectations of acceptance and rejection of an upcoming speed-dating event were assessed with eight self-created items. Four items assessed expectations of acceptance (“I expect …” “… that others will accept me”, “… that others will like me”, “… to establish contact with many people”, “… to go on well with others”), four items assessed expectations of rejection (“I expect …” “… that others are not
interested in me”, “… that others will reject me”, “… that hardly anybody will choose me”, “… to be rejected”). The internal consistency was Cronbach’s $\alpha = .78$ ($M = 3.73, SD = 1.04$) for expectations of acceptance, and $\alpha = .88$ ($M = 2.08, SD = 1.32$) for expectations of rejection. Expectations of acceptance and rejection were negatively correlated ($r = -.75, p < .001$).

**Decision for/against participation in speed dating.** The instruction was the same as in Study 1. About 40% of the participants ($n = 56$) decided to participate.

**Control items.** One control item (“How many persons did you select for further contact?”) identified participants who did not read the scenario carefully. The participants who did not respond correctly ($n = 3$) were excluded from the analyses. To identify how realistic the speed-dating scenario was we used two items (“How realistic was the speed-dating scenario for you?”, “How well could you imagine the speed-dating scenario?”).

Results

**Preliminary analyses.** The participants experienced the speed-dating scenario as realistic ($M = 3.56, SD = 1.43$) and could imagine it well ($M = 4.38, SD = 1.30$). Means were significantly above the scale center of 3 (realistic: $t[152] = 4.86, p < .001, d = 0.79$; imagine: $t[152] = 13.09, p < .001, d = 2.12$).

There were no significant differences between the two manipulation conditions in social motives and self-enhancing attributions of generality (all $ps > .74$). Significant differences were found for self-enhancing attributions of internality (acceptance: $M = 0.42$, $SD = 1.39$; rejection: $M = -0.19, SD = 1.34$; $t[144] = -2.73, p < .001, d = -0.46$), specific expectations of rejection (acceptance: $M = 1.82, SD = 1.18$; rejection: $M = 2.35, SD = 1.41$; $t[151] = 2.50, p < .05, d = 0.41$), and a marginal difference for specific expectations of acceptance (acceptance: $M = 3.88, SD = 0.94$; rejection: $M = 3.58, SD = 1.11$; $t[151] = -1.81, p = .07, d = -0.29$). A Chi-square test for independence indicated no significant association
between the manipulation and the decision to participate in the actual speed-dating event, $\chi^2(1, n = 153) = .47, p = .49, \phi = -.07$.

**Manipulation of social acceptance and rejection.** The participants felt significantly more accepted in the acceptance condition ($M = 5.60, SD = 0.67$) than in the rejection condition ($M = 0.94, SD = 1.21$), $t(151) = -29.63, p < .001, d = -4.82$.

**Prediction of the decision for/against participation in speed dating.** We tested a path model with social approach and avoidance motives as predictors of self-enhancing attributions, and specific expectations of future social acceptance as a mediator for the decision for or against participation in a speed-dating event ($0 =$ no participation, $1 =$ participation). Bivariate correlations revealed a significant correlation between specific expectations of future social acceptance and the decision to participate ($r = .17, p < .05$), whereas the correlation between specific expectations of rejection and the decision to participate was close to zero ($r = -.03, p = .72$). Note, that simultaneously entering both expectations of future acceptance and rejection would lead to a multicollinearity problem (bivariate correlations >.7 bear a high risk of multicollinearity), which increases type II error (Hutcheson & Sofroniou, 1999). Thus, we excluded expectations of future social rejection from the path model. We used Markov chain Monte Carlo Estimation (MCMC Estimation) provided by AMOS 18 (Arbuckle, 2009) to examine the paths and the fit of the full logistic model of the observed data. The paths of the model revealed excellent fit to the data $p = .48$ (sample size = 500+25'294, convergence = 1.0003). The standardized parameter estimates obtained in the path model are shown in Figure 2. Approach motives positively predicted self-enhancing attributions of generality and internality. Self-enhancing attributions of internality (but not of generality), in turn, positively predicted specific expectations of acceptance of a new speed-dating situation. Finally, expecting acceptance positively predicted the decision to participate in an actual speed-dating event. Unexpectedly, social avoidance motives were not significantly associated with self-enhancing attributions. Instead,
social avoidance motives were directly related to low specific expectations of acceptance and, consequently, negatively to the decision to participate in a speed-dating event.

Figure 2. Standardized direct effects from Markov chain Monte Carlo Estimation for the logistic path model of social motives, self-enhancing attributions, specific expectation of acceptance, and decision to participate in an actual speed-dating event. Solid lines represent significant paths at the $p < .05$ level (coefficients in which 95% confidence intervals do not include 0). Confidence intervals (95% CI) are presented in brackets.

**General Discussion**

Recall Ellie who is undecided whether she should attend a party where she only knows the host. The findings of the current studies suggest that Ellie’s decision is related to her dispositional social approach and avoidance motives. Social motives affect Ellie’s attributions of the outcome of previous parties and, as a result, her specific expectations about the outcome of the upcoming party. Social approach motives are associated with self-enhancing attributions of previous situations and, in turn, with high positive expectations of
future social situations. Thus, social approach motives increase the likelihood that Ellie will
attend the party. In contrast, social avoidance motives are associated with low positive
expectations about future social situations and, therefore, decrease the likelihood that Ellie
will attend the party.

**Social Motives and Initiating Social Contacts**

In support of our hypotheses, the current studies illustrate the importance of
dispositional social motives and their social-cognitive concomitants for people’s decision of
whether or not to enter new social situations. To our knowledge, the current studies are the
first to focus on the influence of social approach and avoidance motives for the initial step of
social interactions. As expected, social approach motives seem to have positive effects for the
initiation of social contacts, whereas social avoidance motives have negative effects.
Unfortunately, the current studies do not include measures of the success in initiating social
interactions. However, previous studies found that social approach motives have positive
consequences for social success (less loneliness, active social behavior) in social interactions
with friends and strangers (Gable, 2006; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a) as well as in romantic
relationships (Downey et al., 1998). This suggests that approach motives will not only make
it more likely to enter the new social situation but also contribute to a successful interaction.
Moreover, the present results also illuminate the association between social motives and
loneliness. Research by Gable (2006; Gable & Berkman, 2008) demonstrates that social
approach motives are negatively related to loneliness, whereas avoidance motives are
positively related to loneliness. Our studies suggest that one of the reasons for these
associations might lie in the decision to enter new social situations. People who do not enter
new social situations miss out on the chance to establish new relationships and, consequently,
might feel lonelier than people who enter new social situations and, thereby, have more
possibilities to get to know people and form new social bonds.
Chapter II

Processes Related to Initiating Social Contacts

Findings of the current studies underscore the role of attributions of previous social events and resulting specific expectations for future social events for the decision to enter new social situations. Note, that the associations of social avoidance motives and attributions and expectations were less consistent than those for social approach motives. One reason for these inconsistencies might be the situation of speed dating itself. Speed-dating events constitute a special form of a first social interaction because people have only very little time to get to know each other. Given this very short interaction period, participants need to be fairly active in order to make any impression on the interaction partner. As social approach motives are associated with active and self-confident behavior during social interactions (McAdams, 1992; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a), a speed-dating event is a well-suiting situation to establish new social relationships. In contrast, as social avoidance motives are associated with passive and inhibited behavior during social interactions (Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a), a speed-dating event does not constitute a well-suiting situation to get to know new people. If a situation does not afford behavior matching one’s motives attributions of acceptance or rejection might be difficult as it leaves open whether the outcome of situation is due to the situation or due to the person. In other words, the associations between social motives and attributions in a situation that does not afford behavior matching one’s motives are less reliable than in a situation that affords behavior matching one’s motives. This might be the reason why avoidance motives were unrelated to attributions.

Focusing on the different dimensions of attributions, the present findings show that social approach motives are equally associated with attributions of internality and generality. However, internality but not generality predicts specific expectations for an upcoming speed-dating event. The expectation of acceptance in a specific situation seems to be rather an issue of the locus of causality (i.e., internality) than the probability of occurrence (i.e., generality).
This is surprising given previous findings in the achievement domain. Weiner (1986, 2000) demonstrated that attributions of internality are related to feeling states, whereas attributions of generality influence the expectation of future success or failure. An important question for future research is whether the contradicting results from Weiner’s and our studies are due to differences between the achievement and social domain.

**Limitations**

One limitation of the present research concerns the generalizability of the results. First, both studies were conducted online and used self-report. This raises the question of the generalizability of the results to behavior in an actual social situation. Note, however, that the decision for participating in a speed-dating event concerned an actual decision. Although agreeing to participate in a social event is not identical to actually showing up for the event, the decision is a necessary precondition as only those who agreed to participate were given access to the speed-dating event. Second, as speed dating is a high-stake social situation our findings might not generalize to lower-stake social events. In low-stake social situations, people might not care as much about their social success or failure. As a consequence, social motives might be less influential in low-stake situations. Moreover, speed-dating events provide only little time to get to know the interaction partner. As discussed above, the associations between social avoidance motives and attributions might be stronger in less scripted and constrained situations. Third, as is true with all correlational studies, no causal inferences can be drawn. An intervention study targeting people’s motives could be one possibility to shed more light on the causal direction of the relations between social motives, attributions, expectations, and social behavior.

**Conclusion**

The present research emphasizes the role of social motives for consequences of positive and negative social experiences. The main conclusion of the current studies is that the experience of social acceptance or rejection alone does not determine whether people
Chapter II

enter a new social situation or not. Social approach and avoidance motives modulate the decision. This conclusion is in line with previous findings showing that not all people desire to reconnect after social rejection (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). Extending these findings, the current studies indicate some of the underlying social-cognitive factors (i.e., attributions and expectations) of such individual differences.
Chapter III

Motivational Antecedents and Emotional Consequences of
Attributions of Acceptance and Rejection

Wanting to Avoid Rejections Makes Social Rejections Even More Painful

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Paper submitted to: *Social Psychology*
Chapter III

Abstract

Three studies investigated the hypothesis that social approach and avoidance motives are differentially associated with emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection depending on attributions of social outcomes. One scenario study (Study 1, $N = 281$) and one study using actual social interactions (Study 2, $N = 128$) supported the hypothesis that approach motives are associated with attributions of acceptance, whereas avoidance motives are associated with attributions of rejection. Study 3 ($N = 232$) demonstrated that attributions of rejection mediate the association between avoidance motives and negative emotional reactions to rejection. People who wanted to avoid rejection felt more rejected than those who were less motivated to avoid rejection because they attributed rejection in a self-derogating way.

*Keywords: Social motives, approach, avoidance, attribution, emotional reactions*
Wanting to Avoid Rejections Makes Social Rejections Even More Painful

Relatedness is a central human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), rendering social acceptance and rejection psychologically very potent. Knowing that one is appreciated, liked, valued, and integrated fosters positive emotions and subjective well-being, whereas experiencing that one is unappreciated, disliked, devalued, or excluded fosters negative emotions and impairs subjective well-being (Gerber & Wheeler, 2009; Leary, 2010). Although people generally experience social acceptance (e.g., being liked) positively and social rejection (e.g., being disliked) negatively, there is a substantial amount of variability in people’s emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Whereas some people suffer from social rejection and consequently try to avoid similar situations, others are less affected and enter new social situations without fears of being rejected. Similarly, some people experience social acceptance as very positive, whereas others are less affected. To date, little is known about the factors contributing to the individual variability in reacting to social acceptance and rejection. The present research aims at closing this gap. We argue that dispositional social approach and avoidance motives influence how people attribute social outcomes. Attributions of social outcomes, in turn, are expected to be central for emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection.

Attributions and Emotional Reactions

Attributions refer to characteristic ways of explaining positive and negative outcomes on the three dimensions of internality, stability, and globality (Heider, 1958; Peterson & Buchanan, 1995; Weiner et al., 1987). Internality refers to whether the cause of an outcome is located internally (i.e., within the person) or externally (i.e., in the situation or other persons). Stability concerns the question whether the cause of an outcome is seen as relatively temporary (variable) or rather permanent and unchanging (stable). Globality characterizes whether the cause of an outcome is specific to the given situation or whether it holds across various situations (i.e., global).
Attributions of positive and negative outcomes affect people’s emotional reactions. Attributions characterized by high internality, stability, and globality are associated with high positive affect following positive outcomes, whereas the same attributions following negative outcomes are associated with high negative affect. For example, in the domain of achievement, internal, stable, and global attributions of positive outcomes are associated with feelings of pride and competence but lead to feelings of incompetence in the case of negative outcomes (Weiner, Russell, & Lerman, 1978, 1979). As of yet, there are no studies on the consequences of attributions of social acceptance and rejection, but it seems plausible to expect the similar outcomes as for attributions of achievement and failure. More specifically, when social acceptance is seen as stable across various situations and time and a matter of favorable personal characteristics (e.g., “I am a likeable person”), people should experience high positive affect. In contrast, the more people believe that social rejection is caused by unfavorable personal characteristics or their lack of social grace, and the more they believe that rejection occurs over time and across different interaction partners, the more negative emotions they should experience when faced with social rejection. In line with this suggestion, Takaku (2001) demonstrated that people react with negative emotions in situations of social mistreatment when they perceived the cause of the transgression as more stable and internal compared to less stable and internal.

Social Approach and Avoidance Motives and Attributions

The way people attribute positive and negative social outcomes is influenced by their general expectations. When general expectations are fulfilled, people are more likely to attribute the outcome to internal, stable, and global attributions than when general expectations are not fulfilled (Alden, 1986). Generalized expectations lie at the core of the definition of social approach and avoidance motives (Mehrabian, 1994). Social approach motives are characterized by expectations of positive social outcomes (i.e., social acceptance), whereas social avoidance motives are characterized by expectations of negative social
outcomes (i.e., social rejection). Thus, we hypothesize that social approach motives are positively associated with stable, global, and internal attributions of positive social outcomes (e.g., social acceptance), whereas social avoidance motives are positively associated with stable, global, and internal attributions of negative social outcomes (e.g., social rejection).

We do not expect that approach motives are associated with attributions of negative social outcomes and that avoidance motives are associated with attributions of positive social outcomes. This expectation is based on previous observations that social approach motives are particularly predictive in positive social situations, whereas social avoidance motives are particularly predictive in negative social situations (Gable & Poore, 2008; Gomez & Gomez, 2002).

Attribution patterns have been assessed in different ways. Some studies focused on the dimension of internality (e.g., Sedikides, Campbell, Reeder, & Elliot, 1998), others used an aggregate score of internality, stability, and globality (e.g., Peterson, et al. 1982). Still others (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1991) combined the dimensions of stability and globality into the dimension of generality. Theoretically, this combined generality construct is convincing because both, stability and globality, refer to the probability of the occurrence of an event across different situations and over time. In contrast, the dimension of internality refers to the locus of causality of an outcome (Miller & Ross, 1975). For example, I might blame my bad mood on a particular day for a negative social encounter (internal and variable attribution) but, given that I am typically in a good mood, I might not expect this to happen again (specific and variable attribution). Given these different meanings of internality and generality, we explore if attributions as measured by internality and generality differ in their associations with emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection.

**The Current Studies**

The hypotheses can be summarized in the following way:
Chapter III

(1) (a) Social approach motives are positively associated with internality and generality of attributions of social acceptance. (b) Social avoidance motives are positively associated with internality and generality of attributions of social rejection.

(2) (a) In situations of social acceptance, internality and generality are positively associated with feelings of acceptance. (b) In situations of social rejection, internality and generality are positively associated with feelings of rejection.

Three studies tested these hypotheses. Following a multi-method approach, we used hypothetical scenarios of social interactions as well as an actual social interaction that constituted social acceptance or rejection situation. Studies 1 and 2 explored whether the associations between approach and avoidance motives and attributions are affected by age. Although there is evidence for the association between social approach and avoidance motives and social-cognitive outcomes in young adulthood, little is known about this association in older adulthood. One exception is a study by Nikitin, Burgermeister, & Freund (2012) that found no age-related differences in the effect of social approach and avoidance motives on social-cognitive outcomes. In order to address further the question of the generalizability of the consequences of approach and avoidance motives across adulthood, we included both young and older adults in our studies.

**Study 1**

Study 1 used hypothetical scenarios of social interactions to test the association between social motives and attributions of social acceptance and rejection in young and older adults.

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were recruited using flyers and advertisements in student mailing lists. Older adults were recruited in senior citizen clubs. The participants completed self-report measurements at home (run online on www.soscisurvey.de or paper-and-pencil). The sample consisted of $n = 171$ younger (29% males, age range 18-30 years, $M = 24.30$, $SD$
The participants gave written informed consent before participation. After participation, they were debriefed and received 7.50 USD in the local currency as a means of compensation.

**Social approach and avoidance motives.** The Affiliation Tendency and Rejection Sensitivity Scales assessed social approach and avoidance motives (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986). The scales consist of a total of 50 items describing social motives, with 25 items assessing social approach motives (e.g., “I like to make as many friends as I can”) and 25 items social avoidance motives (e.g., “I am very sensitive to any signs that a person might not want to talk to me”). The response scales ranged from 0 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

**Attributions.** Attributions of social acceptance and rejection were assessed with an adapted version of the Attributional Style Questionnaire for Adults (subscale affiliation, Poppe, Stiensmeier-Pelster, & Pelster, 2005). The participants read two very brief acceptance scenarios (e.g., “You meet a person that you do not know well. This person compliments you.”), and two very brief rejection scenarios of new social situations (e.g., “You meet a person for the first time. This person behaves in a rejecting manner towards you.”). After each scenario, the participants rated the cause of the outcome on the dimensions of internality (“The cause lies in the circumstances or other persons” vs. “The cause lies in me”), stability (“The cause will change over time” vs. “The cause will be stable over time”), and globality (“The cause applies only to this situation” vs. “The cause applies to many other situations”). Each dimension was assessed with two items. The response scales ranged from -3 (external, variable, specific) to +3 (internal, stable, global). The dimension of generality was indexed by the mean of the stability and globality dimensions. The dimensions of internality and generality for the acceptance and rejection scenario were used separately for further analyses. The descriptive statistics and internal consistencies of all scales of Study 1 are reported in Table 1.
Chapter III

Table 1

Descriptives and internal consistencies (Cronbach’s α) for Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N Items</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>$\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach motives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance motives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions of acceptance scenarios</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.98</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions of rejection scenarios</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>1.19</td>
<td>.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Hierarchical regression analyses tested the role of age and social motives for the attributions of social acceptance and rejection with age (-1 = young, 1 = old) and social motives in the first step (see Table 2). In the second step, the interactions of social motives and age were entered as predictors of attributions. As no age × motives interaction reached statistical significance, we do not report them here.

As expected, approach motives predicted attributions of the acceptance scenarios, whereas avoidance motives predicted attributions of the rejection scenarios. Social approach motives were positively associated with generality of attributions of acceptance. Social avoidance motives, in contrast, were positively related to generality and internality of attributions of rejection. There were two unexpected findings. First, social avoidance motives predicted generality of attributions of acceptance. Second, social approach motives did not predict internality of attributions of acceptance.
To summarize, social approach motives (but not social avoidance motives) predicted attributions of generality in scenarios of social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives (but not social approach motives) predicted attributions of internality and generality in scenarios of social rejection. There is no evidence for differences in these associations between young and older adults.

Table 2

Hierarchical regression of attributions of scenarios of social acceptance and rejection on age and social motives (Study 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Attributions of acceptance</th>
<th>Attributions of rejection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>Generality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 ($R^2$)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.09***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach motives</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance motives</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The results represent standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

Study 2

Study 2 aims at replicating these findings in actual social interactions, experimentally manipulating social acceptance and rejection. To our knowledge, this is the first study to test the associations of social approach and avoidance motives and attributions in actual social interactions. Previous studies used either scenarios (e.g., London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007), hypothetical or actual feedback (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004), or cyber-ball (e.g., Williams et al., 2000) to manipulate social acceptance and rejection. Compared to scenarios, actual social interactions in the laboratory involve the experience (rather than the mental simulation) of being rejected or accepted and might thus be closer to the processes that
occur in social situations outside the laboratory. Given that the null finding regarding age-related differences in the associations between social motives and attributions in Study 1 can only be considered as very weak evidence for age-related stability in these associations, we again included young and older adults.

Method

Participants. Younger adults were recruited through the participant pool at our lab, via advertisements on the university campus, and on different online platforms. Older participants were recruited at a senior university, senior clubs, and via advertisements on different online platforms. The sample consisted of $n = 63$ young (59% males; age range 18-33 years, $M = 23.65$, $SD = 3.56$) and $n = 65$ older adults (52% males; age range 61-85 years, $M = 71.08$, $SD = 6.26$).

Procedure. After providing informed consent, the participants completed self-report measurements at home (paper-and-pencil or run online on www.soscisurvey.de) assessing social approach and avoidance motives. About one week later, the participants came to the lab for the social interaction part of the study. They were told that the purpose of the study was to investigate how people communicate with unfamiliar persons. To this purpose each participant interacted with two unfamiliar persons. The experimenter led the participant to an interaction room, where the first interaction partner (a confederate) had already arrived. The task was to get to know each other. Each participant interacted with a confederate of the same gender and age group. To guarantee standardized behavior on the side of the confederates, all confederates practiced and routinized their interaction behavior during a one-day training. Each participant had two separate interactions, each lasting five minutes: One interaction was characterized by social acceptance, the other by social rejection. To counteract potential sequence effects, the participants were randomly assigned to start either with the acceptance or rejection interaction. After each interaction, the participants completed a questionnaire on his/her experience of the interaction and attributions of its outcome. The session lasted on
average 80 minutes. After participation, the participants were fully debriefed and received approximately 30 USD in the local currency as a means of compensation.

**Manipulation of social acceptance and rejection.** Social acceptance and rejection were manipulated by the confederate’s behavior during the interaction. In the social acceptance condition, the confederate demonstrated an interest in the participant by verbal and non-verbal signs of attentiveness (e.g., by using the name of the participant frequently during the interaction). In the social rejection condition, the confederate showed initial interest but became more and more disinterested and unattended over the course of the interaction (e.g., by asking “Sorry, what was your name again?”).

As a manipulation check, the participants responded to the single item “Overall, I felt accepted by the other person” on a scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 6 (very much). The manipulation had the expected effect on the experience of the social interaction. The participants felt significantly more accepted in the acceptance condition ($M = 4.88, SD = 0.80$) compared to the rejection condition ($M = 3.42, SD = 1.33$), $t(127) = 11.65, p < .001, d = 2.07$.

**Social approach and avoidance motives.** As in Study 1, the Affiliation Tendency and Rejection Sensitivity Scales (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986) assessed dispositional social approach and avoidance motives.

**Attributions.** As in Study 1, an adapted version of the Attributional Style Questionnaire for Adults (Poppe et al., 2005) assessed attributions of social acceptance and rejection, respectively. Different to Study 1, each dimension was assessed with a single item in order to save time (the study was already very long). The descriptive statistics of all scales of Study 2 are reported in Table 3.
Table 3

*Descriptives and internal consistencies (Cronbach’s α) for Study 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social motives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach motives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance motives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions of acceptance interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>1.42</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attributions of rejection interaction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>1.87</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>1.36</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation check</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After acceptance interaction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.88</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After rejection interaction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

To test the role of age and social motives for the attributions of social acceptance and rejection, we ran the same analyses as in Study 1. In line with the hypotheses, social approach predicted attributions of acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives predicted attributions of rejection (see Table 4). Social approach motives were positively related to the generality of attributions of social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives were positively related to the generality of attributions of social rejection. Unexpectedly, none of the associations between social motives and attributions of internality were statistically significant. There was no significant age × motives interaction. Taken together, Study 2 replicated most of the findings of Study 1.
Hierarchical regression of attributions of actual interactions of social acceptance and rejection on age and social motives (Study 2)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Attributions of acceptance</th>
<th>Attributions of rejection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>Generality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1 ($R^2$)</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach motives</td>
<td>.17*</td>
<td>.25**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance motives</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. The results represent standardized regression coefficients. **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$, +$p < .10$. |

Study 3

Study 3 tested whether attributions of social acceptance and rejection mediate the association between social motives and emotional reactions to scenarios of social acceptance and rejection. The previous two studies have shown that the associations between social motives and attributions of social acceptance and rejection in hypothetical scenarios and actual social interactions are comparable. Therefore, for reasons of economy, Study 3 used again scenarios of social interactions to test the mediation hypothesis. The scenarios of Study 3 were constructed so as to reflect the social interactions of Study 2. We hypothesized that attributions of internality and generality of acceptance mediate the association between social approach motives and positive emotional reactions to acceptance, whereas attributions of internality and generality of rejection mediate the association between social avoidance motives and negative emotional reactions to rejection. As there was no evidence for age differences in the association between social motives and attributions in Study 1 and 2, Study 3 included only young adults.
Chapter III

Preliminary Study: Identifying Emotional Reactions to Social Outcomes

Study 3 aimed at investigating how intense people emotionally react to social acceptance and rejection. However, commonly used measurement instruments to assess emotions, such as the Multidimensional Mood Questionnaire (Steyer, Schwenkmezger, Notz, & Eid, 1997) or the Positive and Negative Affect Scale (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) assess general positive and negative affect that are not specific to social acceptance and rejection situations. In order to identify which emotions people experience in situations of social acceptance and rejection, a preliminary study was conducted with $N = 36$ participants (19% male; age range 20-42 years, $M = 27.83$, $SD = 5.35$). After providing informed consent, the participants read a scenario of social acceptance and rejection (run online on www.soscisurvey.de). The scenarios were constructed so as to reflect the situation of the social interactions of Study 2. After each scenario, the participants described how they would feel after having experienced such a situation. Two independent raters grouped the reported emotions into content categories (e.g., “happy” and “glad” were grouped into the category “happiness;” “angry” and “mad” were grouped into the category “anger”). To assess the interrater reliability, the number of identically categorized items was divided by the total amount of items (Freund, 1995). The interrater reliability between the two raters (percentage consistency) was 72.41% for emotions after social acceptance (positive emotions) and 70.0% for emotions after social rejection (negative emotions) representing good interrater agreements (LeBreton & Senter, 2007). We then selected the twenty content categories that consisted of the most frequently named emotions after acceptance and rejection, respectively. These twenty categories were analyzed by a maximum likelihood factor analysis to assess whether they loaded on different factors. The analysis revealed two factors with an Eigenvalue exceeding 1, explaining 37.0% and 13.6% of the variance, respectively. Adjectives describing negative emotions (frustrated, disappointed, dejected, annoyed, insecure, sad, furious, irritated, debased, tired) and one adjective describing a positive
emotion (relaxed, [reversed]), loaded on Factor 1. The remaining adjectives describing positive emotions (elated, happy, glad, in a good temper, contented, proud, confident, relieved, stimulated) loaded on Factor 2. These items were used in Study 3 to assess negative and positive emotional reactions to social outcomes by computing the mean of the positive and negative items, respectively.

**Method**

**Participants.** Participants were recruited through the participant pool of our lab and on different online platforms. Data of 17 participants were excluded because they failed to respond correctly to at least one of two control questions (detailed information is provided bellow). The definitive sample consisted of $N = 232$ persons (20% males; age range 18-33 years, $M = 23.55$, $SD = 3.07$).

**Procedure.** The participants completed the questionnaire online (run on www.soscisurvey.de). First, they gave informed consent. Then, they filled out a questionnaire assessing social approach and avoidance motives, and a questionnaire on their current positive and negative emotions (t1). As a next step, the participants read either a scenario of social acceptance or rejection. After the scenario, the participants again reported their current positive and negative emotions (t2). Then, they rated the causes of the social outcome (acceptance or rejection) regarding generality (stability, globality) and internality of attributions. At the end of the study, the participants were debriefed. A subsample ($n = 99$) participated afterwards in an unrelated study in the lab. These participants received 27 USD in the local currency as a means of compensation. The participants who completed only the online questionnaire could take part in a lottery drawing of ten book vouchers each worth approximately 10 USD.

**Social approach and avoidance motives.** As in Studies 1 and 2, the Affiliation Tendency and Rejection Sensitivity Scales (Mehrabian, 1970; German version: Sokolowski, 1986) assessed social approach and avoidance motives.
**Manipulation of social acceptance and rejection.** Half of the participants ($n = 116$) were randomly assigned to the acceptance condition. The participants were instructed to imagine taking part in a study where they get to know a new person of same age and gender within five minutes. The participants in the acceptance condition read a description of a social situation that resembled the positive social interaction of Study 2 (e.g., the interaction partner is interested and attentive). The social rejection scenario resembled the negative social interaction of Study 2 (e.g., the interaction partner is neither interested nor attentive). After reading the scenario, the participants responded open questions regarding the described situation (e.g., “How would you feel after this conversation?”).

To test if the manipulation induced social acceptance and rejection, we asked the participants to report their feelings of acceptance and rejection after having read the scenario. Three items assessed feelings of acceptance (affirmed, liked, accepted), three items assessed feelings of rejection (ignored, rejected, dismissed). The participants responded on a scale ranging from 0 (does not apply at all) to 6 (applies exactly). The manipulation had the expected effects on participants’ feelings of acceptance ($t[230] = 23.77, p < .001, d = 3.13$) and rejection ($t[230] = -25.81, p < .001, d = 3.40$). The participants felt more accepted after the acceptance scenario ($M = 4.69, SD = 1.00$) than after the rejection scenario ($M = 1.37, SD = 1.13$) and they felt less rejected after the acceptance scenario ($M = 0.24, SD = 0.55$) than after the rejection scenario ($M = 4.02, SD = 1.48$).

**Emotional reactions.** Based on the results of the preliminary study, we used ten adjectives describing negative emotions (frustrated, disappointed, dejected, annoyed, insecure, sad, furious, irritated, debased, tired, relaxed [reversed]) and ten adjectives describing positive emotions (elated, happy, glad, in a good temper, contented, proud, confident, relieved, stimulated). These emotions were assessed before (t1) and after (t2) the scenario of social acceptance and rejection.
Attributions. As in Studies 1 and 2, an adapted version of the Attributional Style Questionnaire for Adults (Poppe, et al., 2005) assessed attributions of the social acceptance or rejection described in the scenario with two items for each dimension. Subsequently, the items were aggregated into the two dimensions of internality and generality. The descriptive statistics and internal consistencies of all scales of Study 3 are reported in Table 5.

Control items. Two control items aimed at identifying participants who completed the questionnaire without properly reading the questions (“Please answer this question with ‘does not apply at all’”, “Please answer this question with ‘applies exactly’”). The participants who did not respond correctly to at least one of these questions (N = 17) were excluded from the analyses.
Table 5

*Descriptives and internal consistencies (Cronbach’s α) for Study 3*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social motives</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach motives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance motives</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributions of acceptance scenario</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.99</td>
<td>.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attributions of rejection scenario</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internality</td>
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<td></td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>1.25</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generality</td>
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<td>.69</td>
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<td><strong>Manipulation check</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptance</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>3.03</td>
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<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>.96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional reaction to acceptance scenario</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions (t1)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions (t1)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.47</td>
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<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions (t2)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions (t2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>0.51</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emotional reaction to rejection scenario</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions (t1)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions (t1)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.49</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions (t2)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions (t2)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.77</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Social motives and attributions as predictors of emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection. Using the SPSS macro “MEDIATE” (Preacher & Hayes, 2008; available on www.afhayes.com), multiple mediation analyses tested the association between social motives, attributions, and the emotional reactions separately for social acceptance and rejection. In the acceptance scenario we tested the association between social motives, attributions, and positive emotional reactions at t2 (controlling for positive emotions reported at t1). In the rejection scenario we tested the association between social motives, attributions, and negative emotional reactions at t2 (controlling for negative emotions reported at t1). In all mediation analyses, social approach and avoidance motives as well as the generality and internality of attributions were entered simultaneously as predictors of the emotions reported at t2 (after the scenario).

Social rejection. Figure 3 shows the regression-based path model for social motives and attributions as predictions of the emotional reactions to the social rejection scenario. Consistent with the hypotheses, social avoidance motives were positively related to the generality of attributions. Generality, in turn, was positively related to negative emotional reactions. The indirect effect of social avoidance motives via general attributions on negative emotions was statistically significant (CI [.003/.26]). Although social approach motives were negatively related to the generality of attributions, the indirect effect of social approach motives via attributions of generality after rejection did not reach statistical significance (CI [-.22/.004]). Social avoidance but not approach motives were associated with internal attributions. There was no significant association between internality and negative emotional reactions.
Figure 3. Path diagram of the regression-based causal model after scenario of social rejection (Study 3). The results represent unstandardized regression coefficients. Solid lines represent significant paths. ***p < .001. **p < .01. *p < .05. ’p < .10.

Social acceptance. In line with the hypotheses, social approach motives were positively related to internality and generality attributions of social acceptance. Social avoidance motives were not significantly associated with attributions of social acceptance. Contrary to the hypotheses, attributions neither predicted positive emotional reactions nor did they mediate the association between social motives and positive emotional reactions (see Figure 4).

Taken together, Study 3 largely replicated the findings of Studies 1 and 2 regarding the association between social motives and attributions. Additionally, Study 3 demonstrated that negative emotional reactions after social rejection are predicted by general and internal attributions that, in turn, are associated with social avoidance motives. Positive emotional reactions to social acceptance were not predicted by social motives and attributions.
Figure 4. Path diagram of the regression-based causal model after scenario of social acceptance (Study 3). The results represent unstandardized regression coefficients. Solid lines represent significant paths. ***p < .001. **p < .01.

Overall Analysis

In order to obtain a reliable estimate of the associations between social motives and attributions, we aggregated the data of all three studies, resulting in a total sample of 640 participants. Because the design and procedure of the studies were not identical, we included the studies as predictors. A hierarchical regression analysis was performed to test the association between social motives, studies and attributions. In the first step, attributions were regressed on social motives and studies (Studies 1-3: -1 = no participant of the study, 1 = participant of the study). This overall analysis revealed that, across all three studies, social approach motives positively predicted attributions of internality and generality after acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives positively predicted attributions of internality and generality after rejection. Consistent across studies, social approach motives did not predict attributions of rejection and social avoidance motives did not predict attributions of acceptance (see Table 6). In the second step of the regression analysis, the interactions of social motives and each study were entered. As only one out of sixteen interactions was
statistically significant, this interaction will not be interpreted further. We conclude that across three studies social approach motives predicted attributions of social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives predicted attributions of social rejection.

Table 6

*Hierarchical regression of attributions of social acceptance and rejection on study and social motives (Studies 1-3)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Attributions of acceptance</th>
<th>Attributions of rejection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internality</td>
<td>Generality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Step 1 ($R^2$)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 1</td>
<td>.05***</td>
<td>.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 2</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study 3</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>-.14**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach motives</td>
<td>.16***</td>
<td>.23***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidance motives</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The results represent standardized regression coefficients. *** $p < .001$. ** $p < .01$.

**General Discussion**

The current studies demonstrate that social approach and avoidance motives are differentially predictive of attributions of social acceptance and rejection: Social approach motives are related to attributions of social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives are related to attributions of social rejection. Speaking to the robustness of these findings, they were consistent across three studies using different methods and did not differ by participants’ age. Moreover, the current research shows that attributions play an important role for understanding the detrimental emotional consequences of social avoidance motives. It seems that wanting to avoid rejection intensifies feelings of rejection.
Social Motives and Attributions

Findings of the current studies underscore the role of social motives for attributions of social acceptance and rejection. These findings are consistent with previous research showing a positive association between social approach motives and positive outcomes such as high confidence and positive social interactions (Gable, 2006; Mehrabian, 1994), and research showing a positive association between social avoidance motives and negative outcomes such as low confidence and submissive behavior (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Mehrabian, 1994; Nikitin & Freund, 2010). Moreover, the present findings are in line with the notion that social approach and avoidance motives have different predictive value in different social situations. Social avoidance motives are related to the negative effects of negative social outcomes, but do not affect the experience of positive outcomes (Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2012). Conversely, social approach motives are related to the positive impact of positive social outcomes but do not buffer the effects of negative outcomes. More generally, these findings show that people’s generalized interpersonal expectations shape the interpretations and affective consequences of social outcomes. As has been shown by Murray, Derrick, Leder, & Holmes (2008), such interpretations can foster relationship formation, for instance by activating approach goals and behaviors that promote relatedness. Thus, the differentiation of the need to belong into the two constructs of social approach and avoidance motives adds to the understanding of how people experience social interactions (Gardner, Pickett, & Brewer, 2000; Pickett, Gardner, & Knowles, 2004).

Focusing on the different dimensions of attributions, the findings of the present research suggest that the association between social motives and the degree to which people attribute social outcomes to the dimension of internality is less systematic than the association with the dimension of generality. Although the association between social motives and both internality and generality were statistically significant in the overall analysis, across the three studies the associations were less reliable for internality than for generality. One possible
reason for this lower reliability is that social approach motives are associated with both positive view of self and others, whereas social avoidance motives are associated with both negative view of self and others (Nikitin et al., 2012; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Thus, people high on social approach motives might credit not only themselves for the positive outcome of a social interaction but they credit also others, although sometimes to a lesser degree. Similarly, people high on social avoidance motives blame themselves for the negative social outcome but they do it – although to a lesser degree – also with respect to others.

Why do Attributions Matter?

Previous research attests to the role of attributions for self-esteem and subjective well-being (e.g., Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978; Anderson, Krull, & Weiner, 1996; Fitch, 1970; Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004; Seligman, Nolen-Hoeksema, Thornton, & Thornton, 1990; Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986). The results of Study 3 suggest that attributions play also an important role for understanding emotional consequences of social avoidance motives. Social avoidance motives seem to lead to more intense negative emotional reactions to rejections because they are related to attributions of the rejection to stable and global causes. When believing that being rejected is the norm rather than the exception, it does not immunize but seems to sensitize towards further experiences of rejection. Interestingly, attributions of rejection to internal causes were not correlated with negative emotional reactions. One possible explanation of this unexpected finding is that negative emotions were not assessed specifically with respect to self and others. For example, if rejection is attributed internally, this could enhance feelings of shame (a self-related negative emotion). In contrast, if rejection is attributed externally, this could enhance feelings of anger (an other-related negative emotion). It might be that blaming oneself for a negative outcome leads to shame and embarrassment, whereas blaming others to anger and hostility. This might explain why only some people react with hostility to social exclusion (Ayduk,
Downey, Testa, Yen, & Shoda, 1999; Macdonald & Leary, 2005; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). Thus, irrespective of whether rejection is attributed to internal or external causes, both attributions are related to negative emotional reactions, albeit qualitatively different ones. Future research is needed to test if internal and external attributions of rejection elicit distinct negative emotions.

Finally, the results of the current mediation analyses suggest an asymmetry of positive and negative events in the realm of social acceptance and rejection (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001). The motives-attributions-emotions link was less pronounced for social acceptance than for social rejection. In other words, social acceptance seems to feel good, irrespective of people's motives or attributions. One reason for this might be that social acceptance is generally expected when people get to know each other. Rejecting a person we meet for the first time would be quite impolite or even rude.

Limitations

One limitation of the current studies concerns the correlational design. Although we manipulated social acceptance and rejection, the findings concerning motives, attributions, and emotions are correlational and do not allow causal conclusions. One possibility to shed more light on the causal directions could be the use of intervention studies targeting people’s motives. Due to ethical concerns, however, only half of the design seems feasible (i.e., decreasing people’s avoidance motives) as increasing avoidance motives might have detrimental consequences for the participants.

In addition, it is unclear if the present findings generalize to interactions with familiar social partners or close friends. However, previous research (e.g., Gable & Impett, 2012; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010) has found similar associations between social motives and behavioral reactions to rejection in close relationships. These associations might be even stronger in close relationships as the experience of acceptance and rejection by people to
whom one feels very close might be more self-relevant, thereby increasing emotional
reactions to acceptance and rejection (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010).

**Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, we maintain that the strengths of the current studies prevail. All three studies show that social motives affect people’s attributions. The findings indicate that social approach motives are related to self-enhancing attributions, whereas social avoidance motives are related to self-derogating attributions, which, in turn, are related to emotional reactions to social rejection. The main conclusion is that people differ in the intensity of their emotional reactions to social rejection because they hold different social motives. Social motives modulate the reactions by affecting motive-related causal attributions. These results underline the importance of social motives for understanding individual differences in social experience and behavior.
Overall Discussion

The present dissertation was primarily concerned with the question of why people differ in their experience and reactions to situations of social acceptance and rejection. Taking a motivational approach, the thesis had three major aims. The first aim was to examine the impact of social approach and avoidance motives on attributions of acceptance and rejection. The second aim focused on the association between social motives and attributions in both younger and older adulthood in order to examine whether the associations are stable or change across adulthood. The third aim centered on whether the attributions mediate the associations between social motives and the decision to enter a new social situation, and the association between social motives and the emotional reactions to acceptance and rejection. Chapter I discussed general concomitants of social approach and avoidance motives, explaining why some people are socially successful across the life span, whereas others are not. Focusing on the underlying social-cognitive processes that might explain why social motives are differently related to social outcomes, Chapter II and III presented first empirical evidence illustrating that attributions are an important mediator for the association between social motives and the decision to enter a new social situation (Chapter II) as well as for the association between social motives and the emotional consequences of social acceptance and rejection (Chapter III). Moreover, Chapter III addressed potential age-related differences in the relationship between social motives and attributions in scenarios and actual social interactions of acceptance and rejection.

The following section will summarize and interpret the findings of the three chapters. In doing so, it relates the findings to each other with respect to the main hypotheses. Moreover, it discusses further open questions that arise from the findings. Then, the chapter outlines the strengths and limitations of this research. This chapter closes by giving directions for future research.
Overall Discussion

**Differential Influence of Social Approach and Avoidance Motives on Social Outcomes**

Taking a theoretical approach, Chapter I discussed the influence of social approach and avoidance motives on different social outcomes across the life span. It argued that distinguishing social approach and avoidance motives and their concomitants allow us to explain why some people experience more loneliness in their social lives than do others. Discussing cognitive, behavioral, and emotional concomitants, Chapter I expanded previous research by demonstrating that social approach and avoidance motives are theoretically different and not simply inverse to one another. There are substantial differences between social approach and avoidance motives with regard to these diverse concomitants across different situations and at different ages. Consequently, social approach motives seem to be related to social success in establishing and maintaining social relationships, whereas social avoidance motives seem to be associated with social difficulties in initiating and maintaining social contacts. Based on these findings, I conclude that focusing on people’s social approach and avoidance motives may help us to understand why people experience loneliness in their social life. To the best of my knowledge, there is no research that focused on the concomitants of both social approach and avoidance motives in order to understand why people experience solitude. Moreover, by taking a developmental perspective, the present research offers first theoretical evidence that social approach and avoidance motives are influential at different ages.

In support of the conclusion resulting from Chapter I, Study 1 (Chapter II) demonstrated that approach motives were positively, and avoidance motives were negatively, related to the decision to participate in a speed-dating event. The decision to enter a new social situation is the very first step of initiating a new relationship. Consequently, the decision not to enter a new social situation might provide an explanation for why people experience loneliness. People who do not enter new social situations miss out on the chance to establish new relationships and, consequently, might feel lonelier than people who more
frequently enter new social situations and, thereby, have more possibilities to get to know people and form new social bonds. Study 1 (Chapter II) was, to my knowledge, the first to show a systematic difference in social approach and avoidance motives for the very first step of establishing new social contacts.

In sum, the first part of this doctoral thesis (Chapter I; Study 1, Chapter II) demonstrated that social avoidance motives have negative consequences, and social approach motives have positive consequences for social life. Note, however, that Study 1 (Chapter II) revealed a weaker association between social approach motives and social outcomes (e.g., the decision for a speed-dating participation) compared to social avoidance motives and social outcomes (e.g., the decision against a speed-dating participation). Thus, it seems that social avoidance motives are particularly detrimental for people’s social life. When people report equally strong approach and avoidance motives, avoidance motives might have a stronger impact on behavior and experience than approach motives as to approach rewards (e.g., acceptance) is generally less motivating than to avoid more painful outcomes (e.g., rejection). This interpretation is in line with previous research on the negativity dominance (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Future research should test this interpretation more directly.

Contradicting this interpretation, the empirical findings of Study 2 (Chapter II) and Studies 1-3 (Chapter III), demonstrated that both social approach and avoidance motives are associated with diverse social outcomes. However, the results indicated that social approach motives are particularly influential in positive social situations (but not in negative situations), whereas social avoidance motives are particularly influential in negative social situations (but not in positive situations). These findings are congruent with previous research (e.g., Derryberry & Reed, 1994; Gable & Poore, 2008; Gomez & Gomez, 2002; Nikitin & Freund, 2011; Romero-Canyas, Downey, Berenson, Ayduk, & Kang, 2010; Romero-Canyas & Downey, 2012; Strachman & Gable, 2006). Therefore, we cannot conclude that social avoidance motives always have a stronger impact on social outcomes. A more promising
Overall Discussion

interpretation might be that the valence of the situation (positive vs. negative) influences whether social approach or avoidance motives are more predictive. In sum, focusing on positive social information might boost the motive to approach positive social encounters, whereas focusing on negative social information triggers the motive to avoid rejection. To be able to seek out positive social encounters, people have to attend to signs of acceptance. Vice versa, in order to avoid rejection, people have to attend to and understand signs of rejection.

The Role of Social Motives and Attributions for Social Outcomes

Social Motives and Attributions

Extending the conclusion that social motives are differently related to positive and negative social outcomes, Chapters II and III focused on attributions as an underlying social-cognitive process that might explain why social motives are differentially related to social outcomes. Using a multi-methods approach, a total of four empirical studies (Study 2, Chapter II; and Studies 1-3, Chapter III) demonstrated that social approach and avoidance motives are differentially related to attributions of social acceptance and rejection. Social approach motives (but not social avoidance motives) were related to attributions of internality and generality of social acceptance, whereas social avoidance motives (but not social approach motives) were associated with the internality and generality of social rejection. Thus, the attribution pattern of social approach motives can be described as self-enhancing in positive social situations. The attribution pattern of social avoidance motives, in contrast, can be described as self-derogating in negative social situations. Speaking to the robustness of these findings, they were consistently found across different methods and did not differ by the age of the participants. Moreover, the present results were the first to show systematical differences between social motives and attributions of social outcomes.
Attributions as Mediating Processes for the Reaction to and Experience of Social Acceptance and Rejection

Besides examining the association between social motives and attributions, the current research demonstrated that attributions account for people’s decision to enter a new social situation (Study 2, Chapter II) as well as for how intense their emotional reaction is to situations of social acceptance and rejection (Study 3, Chapter III).

In Study 2 (Chapter II), we were able to predict the process of making a decision to participate in a speed-dating event by measuring social approach motives, attributions, and specific expectations regarding an upcoming speed-dating event. More precisely, social approach motives were associated with self-enhancing attributions of acceptance and rejection in a speed-dating scenario. The self-enhancing attributions, in turn, were associated with specific positive expectations towards a speed-dating event. These positive expectations then accounted for people’s decision to participate in an actual speed-dating event. Social avoidance motives, in contrast, were not associated with attributions. Instead, they were directly linked with the specific expectations and the decision to participate. Thus, the associations between social avoidance motives and attributions of acceptance and rejection were less consistent than those between social approach motives and attributions in the speed-dating scenario study (Study 2, Chapter II). As discussed in Chapter II, the characteristic of the speed-dating situation itself might be one reason for these inconsistencies. Thus, not only the valence of the situation (positive vs. negative), but also the characteristic of the situation itself (e.g., a speed-dating event vs. a social event with friends or a business meeting) might influence which of the motivational orientations are more predictive. Given the short interaction period in a speed-dating event, people have to be fairly active in order to make any impression on the interaction partner. As active and outgoing behavior is a concomitant of social approach motives (McAdams, 1992; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a), but not of social avoidance motives (Ayduk et al., 2003; Nikitin & Freund, 2010a), a speed-dating event might
Overall Discussion

not be a well-suited situation to establish new social relations for people with high social avoidance motives. In situations that do not match people’s behavior, attributions of acceptance and rejection might be less reliable as it is unclear whether the outcome is due to the situational characteristic or due to the person. This might be the reason why social avoidance motives were unrelated to attributions of the speed-dating scenario. Future research should take this issue into account and examine the current hypotheses in social situations that are equally predictive for social approach and avoidance motives. However, although the characteristics of speed-dating events do not seem to match social approach and avoidance motives equally, the present research demonstrated the usefulness of speed-dating events for studying the influence of social motives and social-cognitive processes for the decision to enter a new social situation. Previous research has shown that social motives are most influential in new and ambiguous situations (Gable, 2006; Levy, Ayduk, & Downey, 2001; Sokolowski & Heckhausen, 2006). Speed dating constitutes a sample case of a new and ambiguous social situation because it involves interactions with unfamiliar persons and has unknown outcomes. Moreover, speed dating provides strong incentives (a potential romantic partner) as well as potential costs (explicit rejection). Furthermore, speed daters receive explicit feedback about acceptance and rejection after speed-dating participation, which makes it possible to manipulate social feedback.

Whereas Study 2 (Chapter II) investigated the behavioral consequences of social motives and attributions, Study 3 (Chapter III) analyzed the emotional consequences. Study 3 showed that attributions mediate the association between social motives and emotional outcomes in situations of rejection. Note that the mediation was significant only for the association between social avoidance motives and emotional reactions, and not for the association with social approach motives. Again, this result supports previous findings that show social avoidance motives are particularly influential in negative social situations, whereas social approach motives are not influential in negative social situations (e.g., Gable
Overall Discussion

& Poore, 2008; Gomez & Gomez, 2002). In situations of acceptance, however, attributions did not mediate the association between neither of the motivational orientations and emotional outcomes. As such, the results indicate that people who want to avoid rejection also suffer most when they actually are rejected because they attribute this experience in a self-derogating way. Social approach motives do not seem to buffer the negative consequences of social rejection. Further, the results of Study 3 (Chapter III) suggest an asymmetry of positive and negative events (Baumeister et al., 2001; Rozin & Royzman, 2001) in the realm of social acceptance and rejection. The associations between social motives, attributions and emotional reactions were less pronounced after social acceptance than after social rejection. In other words, social acceptance seems to feel good, irrespective of people’s social motives or attributions. Why did approach motives and attributions not account for people’s emotional experiences in situations of acceptance? As discussed in Chapter III, social acceptance might be the norm rather than the exception when people get to know each other. Therefore, an acceptance situation like the one used in the scenario of Study 3 (Chapter III) might constitute a control condition that does not elicit strong cognitions. One could test this explanation by, for example, building up a stronger situation of acceptance (such as the speed-dating situation), by providing acceptance by an interaction partner that the participant really wants to affiliate with, or by building up strong expectations of rejection before presenting a situation of acceptance. Under such conditions, acceptance might elicit stronger emotional reactions, which might be more influenced by social motives and attributions. Future studies should test this suggestion systematically.

Taken together, the present findings provide the first empirical evidence that illustrates how attributions are important social-cognitive processes that allow us to understand why people differ in their decision to initialize new social relationships as well as why people differ in the intensity of their emotional reaction to social rejection.
Overall Discussion

Different Dimensions of Attributions

The results of the studies presented in this thesis demonstrated the importance of focusing on the different dimensions of internality and generality of attributions separately, as they were affected differently by social motives and had different consequences to social behavior and emotions.

Social motives affect internal and general attributions differently. Focusing on the different dimensions of attributions, the present findings suggested that the association between social motives and the degree to which people attribute social outcomes to the dimension of internality is less systematic than the association with the dimension of generality. Although the results sometimes revealed a significant association between social motives and both internality and generality, in general, the associations were less reliable for internality than for generality. As discussed in Chapter III, people high on social approach motives might credit not only themselves for the positive outcome of a social interaction, but they also credit others, although sometimes to a lesser degree. Similarly, people high on social avoidance motives blame themselves for the negative social outcome, but also with respect to others, although to a lesser degree. The dimension of internality might be less reliably associated with social approach and avoidance motives because it is not clear what precisely internality means. An internal attribution might refer to effort, abilities, or personal characteristics. An external attribution might refer to other persons or to the situation. Future studies should attempt to disentangle these different meanings of the internal dimension by using different unipolar scales that separately assess attributions to effort, individual abilities, the other person, and the situation. This methodological change could give a more specific insight into how people attribute social acceptance and rejection.

Internality and generality of attributions have different consequences for social behavior and emotions. The present results showed that the dimensions of internality and generality differed in their prediction of behavioral and emotional outcomes. The dimension
of internality (but not generality) predicted the behavioral consequence of entering a new social situation (Study 2, Chapter II), whereas the dimension of generality (but not internality) was correlated with emotional consequences (Study 3, Chapter III). These results give further evidence that internality and generality are not simply interchangeable. In the achievement domain, Weiner (1986, 2000) suggested that attributions of internality are particularly related to feeling states, whereas attributions of generality influence the expectation of future success or failure. Our results, however, suggest the opposite: Internality is related to future expectations and the decision to enter a new social situation and in the speed-dating scenario study, whereas generality is related to emotional states. Note, however, that we did not include emotions, future expectations, and behavior simultaneously in a single study. Therefore, we cannot conclude that internality influences future behavior solely and that internality does not influence emotional outcomes; nor can we conclude the opposite effects for generality. In the speed-dating study (Study 2, Chapter II), for example, the decision to enter a new social situation might already be the result of the expectation of success, along with the emotions experienced in the speed-dating scenario. This might be one reason why internality predicted the decision to enter an actual speed-dating event. Hence, future research should include people’s expectations, emotions, and subsequent behavior in a single study to further examine their association with the different dimensions of attributions. Moreover, another important question for future research is whether these contradicting results from Weiner’s and the current studies are due to differences between the achievement and social domain.

The Role of Age

Given that satisfying social relationships are important throughout people’s life (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), it is important to understand whether social motives affect social outcomes similarly across adulthood. Although—as with most personality characteristics—social approach and avoidance motives are relatively stable across adulthood (Caspi, Roberts,
Overall Discussion

& Shiner, 2005), there is little evidence for whether the association between social motives and different social outcomes changes or stays stable across adulthood. Extending previous research, two studies (Studies 1 and 2, Chapter III) conducted within this thesis examined whether there are age-related differences in the association between social motives and their outcomes. Neither of the studies provided empirical evidence for age-related changes in the association. Dispositional social motives seem to exert an important influence on social outcomes well into old age. Thus, although older people are more motivated and skilled in regulating their emotions than younger adults (Gross et al., 1997; John & Gross, 2004), those skills do not override the negative effects of social avoidance motives, leading to a weaker association between social motives and attributions of social acceptance and rejection in older adults relatively to younger adults. These findings speak for the stability hypothesis. In support of the stability hypothesis, Nikitin and Freund (2011) found no age-related differences in the association between social avoidance motives and the processing of emotional stimuli in a sample of young and older adults. Similarly, Nikitin and colleagues found stability in the effect of social approach and avoidance motives on daily social experiences and behaviors in young and older adults (Nikitin et al., 2012). To the best of my knowledge, these are the first studies that have examined the association between dispositional motives and their concomitants in both younger and older adulthood. Taken together, the present research adds to the findings that the influence of social approach and avoidance motives on diverse social outcomes does not show any age-related changes across adulthood. Hence, learning about the processes of social approach and avoidance motives allows us to describe and explain different patterns of behavior and experience in social life across adulthood.
General Strength and Limitations of the Conducted Research

The following section discusses general strengths and limitations that apply to the current studies. Further details about the strengths and limitations of each study can be found in the discussion sections of the respective studies.

General Strengths

The thesis provides a substantial gain in knowledge, combined with a theoretically deeper understanding of the processes related to social approach and avoidance motives that account for people’s differences in their experience of, and reaction to, social acceptance and rejection. The results demonstrated that people initiate new social relationships more often when they attribute previous social acceptance and rejection in a self-enhancing way. Self-enhancing attributions, in turn, are affected by people’s social approach motives. Moreover, the results showed that wanting to avoid rejection intensifies feelings of rejection. This association can be explained by self-derogating attributions. It is therefore the attributions that mediate the association between social motives and social outcomes. Hence, the present research adds to the understanding of why people differ in their experience and reaction to situations of acceptance and rejection. The thesis attests to the central role of attributions for understanding the behavioral as well as emotional consequences of social motives. The way people interpret the outcome of a social situation may have detrimental effects on the initiation of new social relationships and the emotional well-being. In addition, by simultaneously addressing the two motivational orientations, approach and avoidance, the present thesis demonstrated that these orientations differentially shape people’s attributions, and consequently their behavioral as well as emotional outcomes in social situations. The findings of the present thesis provide evidence that the distinction of approach and avoidance is fundamental for the understanding of how people interpret, experience and react to social situations of acceptance and rejection. By focusing on the social-cognitive processes of both social approach and avoidance motives, the empirical studies of the present thesis provide a
Overall Discussion

detailed explanation of what leads to functional and satisfying experiences in people’s social life.

Moreover, this dissertation adds to the understanding of people’s social experience and functioning across adulthood. The results provide evidence that dispositional social motives influence social-cognitive outcomes well into older age.

Another strength of the thesis relates to the different methods used within this research. Because the present research combines both scenarios and actual interactions of social acceptance and rejection, the findings are robust across several methods. This multi-method approach ensures that the hypotheses of the current thesis are independent of the method. Moreover, testing the hypotheses in actual social interactions with experimentally manipulated situations of acceptance and rejection involves the experience (rather than the mental simulation) of being rejected or accepted and might thus be closer to the processes that occur in social situations outside the laboratory. To my knowledge, this dissertation includes the first study to test the associations between social approach and avoidance motives and attributions in actual interactions of social acceptance and rejection. Previous studies used either scenarios (e.g., London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007), hypothetical or actual feedback (e.g., Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004), or cyber-ball (e.g., Williams et al., 2000) to manipulate social acceptance and rejection. Furthermore, the manipulation of actual social acceptance and rejection ensures that all participants experience the same situation. Therefore, we can disentangle situation related (acceptance vs. rejection) and person related (social motives, attributions) effects. Given that all the participants experienced the same situations of social acceptance and rejection, we can conclude that it is the dispositional social motives, not the situation per se, that determine how the participants attribute and consequently experience and react to the social situation.
Overall Discussion

Limitations

There are also some limitations associated with the conducted research. First, all of the studies were conducted on a quasi-experimental, cross-sectional basis. Although we manipulated social acceptance and rejection, only experimental studies with manipulated social motives are capable of drawing cause-effect relations. Generally, it seems difficult to manipulate social approach and avoidance motivation, and very little empirical evidence on successful manipulations exists (Strachman & Gable, 2006). Using Strachman and Gable’s (2006) approach, we tried to manipulate social approach and avoidance motives by approach and avoidance goals several times in our lab, but these manipulations have failed repeatedly. We made the anecdotal observation that people tend to reframe avoidance goals in terms of approach goals and vice versa. Thus, indirect manipulation methods might be more successful than induction of explicit goals. In line with this suggestion, Nikitin, Schoch, and Freund (2013) successfully manipulated social approach and avoidance goals by asking the participant to move a mannequin with a joystick towards happy faces (approach) and away from angry faces (avoidance). Such indirect manipulations might be used in future research to investigate causal effects of social approach and avoidance motives on attributions of social acceptance and rejection.

Moreover, to test age-related differences in the association between social motives and its concomitants, we used cross-sectional designs to compare younger with older adults. On the one hand, the cross-sectional nature of the designs confounds cohort and age effects (Baltes, 2009). On the other hand, extreme-group designs raise statistical concerns (Lindenberger, Von Oertzen, Ghisletta, & Hertzog, 2011). The present studies also did not include middle-aged adults. Therefore, these study designs leave open the question whether the development of the association between social motives and their concomitants might be characterized by a curvilinear trend. Ideally, future research should assess the associations
Overall Discussion

longitudinally across adulthood. However, longitudinal studies including the age range from young to old adulthood would span over several decades, making them extremely time costly.

A further limitation pertains to the generalizability of the results to interactions with a familiar social partner or close friends. However, similar associations have previously been found in close relationships (e.g., Gable & Impett, 2012; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010). In fact, these associations might be even stronger in close relationships as the experience of acceptance and rejection by people to whom one feels very close might be more self-relevant, thereby increasing emotional reactions to acceptance and rejection (Romero-Canyas et al., 2010).

Implications for Future Research

Success in Initializing New Social Relationships

In sum, the present findings highlight, among other things, the importance of social-cognitive processes for people’s decision to enter a new social situation. As previously discussed, this decision might, in turn, be one reason why some people end up lonely. If people avoid entering new social situations, they miss out on the chance to establish new relationships and, consequently, feel lonelier than people who enter new social situations and, thereby, have more possibilities to form new social contacts. This interpretation raises questions about whether social motives also influence how successful people are during the process of initiating new social contacts. In other words, do social approach and avoidance motives, in a sense similar to a self-fulfilling prophecy (Downey et al., 1998), lead to actual success or failure in initiating social contacts?

Social approach motives could help people not to try too hard to make a positive first impression (Aguilar, Downey, Krauss, Pardo, & Bolger, 2012) or giving up too easily in situations of social conflicts (Downey et al., 1998). Consequently, expecting acceptance in ambiguous social situations should result in higher success than expecting rejection. Although previous studies have found positive consequences of approach motives and
negative consequence of avoidance motives for social success in samples of friends (Gable, 2006), students in classes (McAdams & Powers, 1981), close relationships (Downey, et al., 1998), or other familiar people (see Mehrabian, 1994; for exceptions see Mehrabian & Ksionzky, 1985; Nikitin & Freund, 2010), to the best of my knowledge, none of the studies focused on the initiation of new social relationships itself. Analyzing people’s behavior as well as assessing whether people are liked by their interaction partners would give further insight into the objective success of initiating new social contacts. Such an approach could also disentangle whether social approach and avoidance motives are differently related to objective (e.g., behavior, whether they are liked by others) compared to subjective (e.g., emotions, cognitions) social success and failure.

Social Motives, Attributions and Specific Emotional Reactions to Acceptance and Rejection

The present research demonstrated that social motives and attributions account for differences in the intensity of people’s emotional reaction to social rejection. However, attributions should also affect specific emotional reactions to rejection and acceptance. Appraisal theories of emotions assume that people’s interpretation of a situation determines the distinct emotions they experience (e.g., Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1990; Reisenzein, 2001; Scherer, 2001; Siemer, Mauss, & Gross, 2007). In the achievement domain, people who attributed success to their ability (internal, stable attribution) reported feelings of competence, confidence and pride. In contrast, people who attributed success to luck (external, variable attribution) reported feelings of surprise and guilt. In situations of failure, attributions to ability were related to feelings of incompetence, resignation, and depression; whereas attributions to luck were related to feelings of surprise and astonishment (Weiner et al., 1978, 1979). Future research should therefore test the association between social motives, attributions and the specific emotional reactions to social acceptance and rejection.
Overall Discussion

**Costs of Social Approach Motives and Benefits of Social Avoidance Motives**

On one hand, although research has consistently demonstrated the positive effects of social approach motives (e.g., Elliot, Gable, & Mapes, 2006; Gable & Impett, 2012; Gable, 2006; Nikitin et al., 2012; Nikitin & Freund, 2008; Strachman & Gable, 2006), there might be circumstances under which the overconfidence related to social approach motives might blind people to the potential negative consequences the given situation and/or behavior might have. For example, people low in rejection sensitivity (which is similar to low avoidance motives and high approach motives) are more likely to initiate romantic relationships – even when they are already involved in a romantic relationship (Crew, Berenson, Downey, Bolger, & Kang, 2010). This suggests that the concomitants of social approach motives blind people to the potential harm they can cause to others. Moreover, their belief of being accepted may lead them to disregard rejections – they may persist in their pursuit of others even after disinterest has been indicated. In other words, social approach motives might cause people to feel insufficiently threatened by negative social outcomes and therefore to disengage from the kind of reactions that would lead to success in the given situation. On the other hand, there might be circumstances under which the concomitants of social avoidance motives are adaptive. For example, in job related domains where interpersonal factors matter, such as when applying for competitive jobs, the avoidance of rejection might motivate people to engage in the kind of preparations that would lead to success. For a broader understanding of the consequences of social approach and avoidance motives, future studies should examine under which circumstances the avoidance of rejection is more adaptive than the approach of acceptance.

**Practical Implication**

The present research suggests that teaching people to attribute social outcomes in a self-enhancing (but still realistic) manner might help them to reduce the negative effects of social rejection. Consequently, the self-fulfilling prophecy to which social avoidance motives
sometimes are related could be altered. Thus, future research should plan intervention studies that systematically test the effectiveness of targeting attributions.

**Conclusion**

Using a multi-method approach, the thesis demonstrated across several studies and age groups that social approach and avoidance motives are differentially related to people’s decision to initialize new social contacts, and to the intensity of their emotional reaction to rejection. Moreover, the thesis showed that attributions are important social-cognitive processes that account for why people differ in their experience of, and reaction to, social situations. Taken together, the present doctoral thesis does not only give evidence for Eberle’s notion (2000) that people do not see the world the way it is, but the way they are, but even more importantly introduces social-cognitive processes that explain why people differ in the way they see the world.
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Zusammenfassung


Die Dissertation ist in drei Kapitel gegliedert:


Die Kapitel II und III fokussieren auf die sozial-kognitiven Prozesse, die den Zusammenhang zwischen den sozialen Motiven und den interindividuellen Unterschieden im Erleben und der Reaktion auf Akzeptanz und Zurückweisung erklären können. Die Hypothese war, dass nach dem Erleben von Akzeptanz und Zurückweisung, die Annäherungsmotive mit einem selbstwertdienlichen und die Vermeidungsmotive mit einem selbstwertminderndenAttributionsstil einhergehen. Die Art der Attribution sollte dann
Zusammenfassung


Zusammenfassend zeigt die vorliegende Dissertation, dass die Attribution von Akzeptanz und Zurückweisung massgeblich durch die sozialen Annäherungs- und Vermeidungsmotive beeinflusst wird. Diese Attributionsmuster wiederum, sind für die interindividuellen Unterschiede bezüglich der Entscheidung, neue soziale Kontakte zu knüpfen sowie für die emotionale Reaktion nach Zurückweisung verantwortlich.
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