Childhood Negative Events, Avoidance Motivation and Health in Adulthood

Objectives
My summer research project has two objectives: 1) to determine whether negative life events in childhood are independently related to avoidance motivation, controlling for other factors; 2) to determine whether avoidance motivation helps to mediate the association between childhood negative events and mental health outcomes in adulthood.

Introduction
The establishment of personal goals in an individual's life is a continuous process of setting expectations and ultimately, finding ways to realize them. Not only do personal goals serve to steer a person in a particular direction, they also represent the interpretative lens through which one sees the world. Likewise, goals do not merely set a course of action for the future, they also reflect the expectations each individual has of the current state of the world. The central nature of personal goals has led psychologists to ask if there are important differences in the kinds of goals people set.

One difference in goal setting that has received attention in recent years is the distinction between approach and avoidance motivation. This distinction is particularly important because avoidance motivation, defined as a pattern of goal setting geared towards avoiding undesirable outcomes, has been linked with negative aspects of mental and physical health. In particular, individuals who set more avoidance-oriented goals appear to exhibit greater levels of negative emotionality and neuroticism as well as physical health symptoms (Elliot & Sheldon, 1998; Elliot & Thrash, 2002).

Given that avoidance motivation is associated with adverse health outcomes, it is important for psychologists to understand its underpinnings. Theorists have posited that avoidance motivation is largely biologically determined (Elliot & Thrash, 2002), based upon research examining the role of temperament in approach and avoidance motivations. However, these same theorists note that to say biology has a substantive role in avoidance motivation does not mean environment does not (Elliot & McGregor, 2001; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; McClelland, 1973).

Since the possibility that environmental factors contribute to avoidance motivation has not been ruled out, I believe additional research directed towards identifying these factors is warranted. In particular, I believe that the occurrence of negative life events in the sensitive developmental years of childhood and adolescence may lead to increased avoidance motivation. Like avoidance motivation, negative life events in childhood also lead to negative mental health outcomes (Gibb, Butler & Beck, 2003). Furthermore, the occurrence of negative life events appears to lead a number of motivationally-relevant cognitions to become less positive. A number of studies suggest that individuals who have experienced negative life events view the world as less pleasant and less controllable (e.g., Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

In my prior research, I have found that a relationship exists between avoidance motivation and negative life events during in childhood. Specifically, I found a correlation between reports of childhood abuse and neglect and avoidance motivation in adulthood. These results have encouraged me to delve more deeply into the relations between childhood events and avoidance motivation as well as their associations with mental health.

There are two ways I would like to extend my prior research in my work over the summer. First, because my study was correlational, it did not control for a variety of factors, such as demographic variables, nor did it allow me to test the unique contributions of negative events in childhood against those that occur in adulthood. By learning about and using multiple regression analysis, I hope to address this limitation. Second, my prior research did not examine the relations of mental health with negative childhood events or avoidance motivation. This summer I would like to explore whether increased avoidance motivation is one reason for the link between childhood abuse and mental health outcomes.

Methods

1) The first portion of my research will be to conduct an extensive literature review on relations between childhood trauma, avoidance motivation, and mental health in adulthood. I will also be learning about statistical techniques important for my project (i.e., multiple regression analysis and mediation testing).

2) I will be doing analyses using data gathered by my mentor via a web-based survey she conducted with a nationally representative sample of U.S. citizens. In collaboration with Knowledge Networks (KN), a survey research organization that maintains a nationally representative, Web-enabled, research panel of potential respondents, she has administered Web-based surveys since September 11, 2001 to a national sample of U.S. residents. The KN panel is developed using traditional probability methods for creating national survey samples and is recruited using stratified random-digit-dial (RDD) telephone sampling. The distribution of the KN panel closely tracks the distribution of census counts for the U.S. population on age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, geographical region, employment status, income, education, etc. KN provides households in the panel with free Web access and an Internet appliance, which uses a telephone line to connect to the Internet and uses the television as a monitor. In return, panel members participate in brief Internet surveys three to four times a month. Surveys are confidential, self-administered and accessible any time of day for a designated period, and participants can complete a survey only once.

    The survey for the present study took place between November 10 and December 3, 2001, and included 1382 people, 933 of who came from a random sample of KN members who had responded to a previous KN survey about their experiences of 9/11. The sampling strategy also included over-sampling KN adult panelists from each of four targeted communities in which there have been recent major community disasters: Littleton, CO and the surrounding Denver metropolitan community (the Columbine High School shootings); Miami, FL (Hurricane Andrew); Oklahoma City, OK (the Federal Building bombing); and New York, NY (the terrorist attacks).

    The survey included several measures important for my research (see Appendix). First, it included an open-ended assessment of personal goals that my graduate student mentor and I have coded for approach and avoidance content. Second, respondents completed a checklist of 30 stressful events they may have experienced at some point in their lives (e.g., natural disaster, death of family member, child abuse), and if so, at what age the events occurred. Third, the survey contained several measures relevant to mental health. The positive dimension of mental health was assessed using a positive affect scale developed by Diener, Smith, and Fujita (1995) and also with the Satisfaction with Life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). The negative dimension of mental health was assessed as distress, using the 25-item Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL-25, Derogatis, Lipman, Rickels, Uhlenhut, & Cori, 1974).

3) Last, I plan to co-author a journal article, based upon the findings of my research.

Timeline

Phase 1: June –July
-   conduct literature review
-   learn about multiple regression analysis

Phase 2: July – August
-   doing analyses to achieve the stated objectives

Phase 3: August – September
-   co-writing a journal article based upon research findings

Responsibility

With the help of my graduate student mentor, I will be learning statistical techniques relevant to my research. I will also prepare a literature review and conduct statistical analyses to test relations outlined in my objectives. Further, I plan to assist in writing a journal article based upon these research findings.

References

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APPENDIX: KEY MEASURES

NEGATIVE LIFE EVENTS (TRAUMA)

Now we'd like to ask you about some events that may have happened to you during your lifetime (Other than events related to the September 11 attacks). Please indicate whether an event has happened to you.

In the boxes, please tell us how old you were when it happened.

If it has happened to you more than once, please tell us each age when it occurred.

If it is or was ongoing, please give us an age range (e.g., 14-17).

Event	Has it happened to you?	If so, How old were you?
A.Suffered a serious accident or injury	____	___ ___ ___ ___
B.Were physically attacked or assaulted	____	___ ___ ___ ___
C. Serious accident or injury of loved one	____	___ ___ ___ ___
D. Suffered a serious illness	____	___ ___ ___ ___
E. Serious illness of a family member	____	___ ___ ___ ___
F. Death of your mother	____	___ ___ ___ ___
G. Death of your father	____	___ ___ ___ ___
H.Death of your brother or sister	____	___ ___ ___ ___
I. Death of your grandparent	____	___ ___ ___ ___
J. Death of your child	____	___ ___ ___ ___
K. Death of a friend	____	___ ___ ___ ___
L. Got divorced yourself	____	___ ___ ___ ___
M. Experienced your parents' divorce	____	___ ___ ___ ___

N. Experienced serious financial difficulties (i.e., no money for food or shelter)	____	__ __ __ __
O. Experienced a major fire, flood, earthquake, or any natural disaster in your community	____	__ __ __ __
P. Suffered a <u>loss</u> in a major fire, flood, earthquake, or any natural disaster in your community	____	__ __ __ __
Q. Experienced a tragedy or disaster in your community caused by people (e.g., a shooting, bombing, etc.)	____	__ __ __ __
R. Suffered a <u>loss</u> in a tragedy or disaster in your community caused by people (e.g., a shooting, bombing, etc.)	____	__ __ __ __
S. Lived in dangerous housing or neighborhood	____	__ __ __ __
T. Been discriminated against because of your ethnicity, religious background, or sexual orientation	____	__ __ __ __
U. Been exposed to dangerous chemicals or biological agents	____	__ __ __ __
V. Were neglected (as a child) by your parent(s)	____	__ __ __ __
W. Witnessed violence between your parents as a child	____	__ __ __ __
X. Been hit or pushed by your partner/spouse	____	__ __ __ __
Y. Been shamed, embarrassed, or told repeatedly that you are "no good"	____	__ __ __ __
Z. Had someone touch or feel private areas of your body or touched/felt another's private areas under force or threat	____	__ __ __ __
AA. Had sexual relations under force or threat	――	__ __ __ __
AB. Had an unwanted pregnancy	____	__ __ __ __
AC. Other event Specify_____	____	__ __ __ __
AD. Other event Specify_____	____	__ __ __ __

PERSONAL GOALS (FOR CODING APPROACH/AVOIDANCE)

What are your current goals for the future? Please list 3 goals below. Please enter them so that "Goal 1" is the goal that is MOST important to you, "Goal 2" is the SECOND-most important, and "Goal 3" is the THIRD-most important of the three.

Goal 1 _____

Goal 2 _____

Goal 3 _____

MENTAL HEALTH QUESTIONS

1. Distress

Listed below are some symptoms or problems people sometimes have. Please read each one carefully and describe how much that symptom bothered or distressed you in THE PAST WEEK, INCLUDING TODAY.

	0	1	2	3
	Not at all	A little	Quite a bit	Extremely

_____suddenly scared for no reason
_____feeling fearful
_____ faintness, dizziness, or weakness
_____nervousness or shakiness inside
_____heart pounding or racing
_____trembling
_____feeling tense or keyed up
_____headaches
_____spells of terror or panic
_____feeling restless, can't sit still
_____feeling low in energy, slowed down
_____blaming yourself for things
_____crying easily
_____loss of sexual interest or pleasure
_____poor appetite
_____difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
_____feeling hopeless about the future
_____feeling blue
_____feeling lonely
_____thoughts of ending your life
_____feeling of being trapped or caught
_____worrying too much about things
_____feeling no interest in things
_____feeling everything is an effort
_____feelings of worthlessness

2. Positive affect
Below is a list of ways people sometimes feel. During the past week, including today, how often have you had the following feelings?

1	2	3	4	5
Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	All the time

_____affection
_____joy
_____love
_____happiness
_____contentment
_____caring
_____pride
_____fondness

3. Life satisfaction

Below are five statements with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1-7 scale below, please indicate your agreement with each item.

1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree

_____ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
_____ The conditions of my life are excellent.
_____ I am satisfied with my life.
_____ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
_____ If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.