The effect of an undecided alternative on resolution of approach-approach and avoidance-avoidance conflict situations

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Thirty male and 30 female Ss from an introductory psychology class were presented with 21 approach-approach and 21 avoidance-avoidance conflicts typed on 3 x 5 cards. Conflicts were created by systematically pairing seven desirable personal characteristics. Each conflict had an "undecided" alternative. It was hypothesized that the undecided alternative would facilitate resolution of the avoidance-avoidance conflicts because the S was allowed to leave the field while having little effect on the approach-approach conflicts. The data did not substantiate that the undecided alternative facilitated resolution of avoidance-avoidance conflicts. A possible explanation is given.

Since Arkoff's (1957) study presented data which was consistent with Lewin's hypothesis that approach-approach conflicts are more easily resolved than avoidance-avoidance conflicts, few investigations have been reported which deal with the resolution of approach-approach and avoidance-avoidance conflict situations. Edwards & Diers (1962) had Ss, who were divided into low and high groups on the Edwards Social Desirability Scale, take the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS) allowing them to avoid choices which were difficult. Results showed that choices between pairs of socially undesirable statements were less easy to resolve as measured by per cent of no-choice statements, than were choices between pairs of socially desirable scale values.

In this investigation, it was of particular interest to determine what effect an additional "undecided" alternative would have on the resolution time of avoidance-avoidance conflicts involving two paired personal characteristics. It was predicted that the effect of an "undecided" alternative would be to decrease the mean resolution time of avoidance-avoidance conflicts by allowing the S to leave the field, while having little effect on approach-approach conflicts.

METHOD

The Ss were 30 male and 30 female students randomly selected from the introductory psychology class at Northern Illinois University. Conflicts were presented on 3 x 5 cards. Each card contained an undecided alternative. A tape recorder (visible to S) was used to record all experimental sessions. The time of each conflict resolution was determined by E who used a Standard Timer which was accurate to 1/100th of a sec. Timing began when E said "begin" and ended when S finished saying the "choice number and card number" aloud. Transcribed from the tape was the resolution time and Ss' choice for each card and whether the card was judged as easier or harder to resolve. An explanation of stimulus materials and procedure is given in Arkoff's (1957) study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 2(sex) by 2(conflict) analysis of variance yielded significant main effects for Sex, $F(1,58) = 8.65$, $p < .01$, and Conflict, $F(1,58) = 12.02$, $p < .01$. The approach-approach conflicts took significantly less time to resolve than avoidance-avoidance conflict situations with females displaying significantly shorter resolution times for both types of conflict than males. These results are consistent with Arkoff's findings.

The mean numbers of each type of conflict judged easier to resolve by Ss are presented in Table 1 with Arkoff's corresponding

Table 1
Mean Number of Approach-Approach and Avoidance-Avoidance Conflicts Judged Easier to Resolve

Sex	Present Study		Arkoff's Data	
	Approach-Approach	Avoidance-Avoidance	Approach-Approach	Avoidance-Avoidance
Male	15.47	8.10	12.72	8.28
Female	15.60	8.27	12.55	8.45
Both	15.54	8.19	12.64	8.36

data. The mean number of approach-approach conflicts judged easier to resolve in this investigation is greater than the mean number judged easier in Arkoff's data. This difference may be due to a slight procedural variation: in Arkoff's study, Ss were required to divide the cards into equal piles of 21 cards whereas, in this investigation, this requirement was not imposed. Like Arkoff's data, the mean number of approach-approach judged easier to resolve is greater than the mean number of avoidance-avoidance.

It was predicted that the effect of an "undecided" alternative would be to decrease the mean resolution time of avoidance-avoidance conflicts, while having little effect on approach-approach conflicts. The mean resolution time for the 21 approach-approach and 21 avoidance-avoidance conflicts was 123.71 sec and 135.05 sec, respectively, while in Arkoff's study, 122.00 sec and 153.16 sec, respectively. Thus, the mean resolution time for avoidance-avoidance conflicts decreased sharply from Arkoff's data, while mean resolution time for approach-approach conflicts remained about the same. It was further predicted that a S faced with an avoidance-avoidance conflict could leave the field by choosing the "undecided" alternative. Thus, the undecided choice could facilitate resolution of the conflict. In the avoidance-avoidance conflict situation, the male mean resolution time for one and three responses was 7.7 sec and for two (undecided) responses 7.6 sec. The female mean resolution time for one and three responses in the avoidance-avoidance conflict situation was 6.3 sec while two (undecided) responses took 6.2 sec. The hypothesis that an "undecided" alternative would facilitate resolution of the conflict because the S was allowed to leave the field was not verified. A S presented with an avoidance-avoidance conflict situation chose one of the three alternatives. If the S could make a choice (one or three), he did. If, at the end of the time required to make a choice, the S couldn't choose between a one or three response, he gave an undecided response (two). Thus, the undecided alternative would not facilitate resolution of the conflict. In summary, the results of this investigation agree well with Arkoff's results.

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NOTE

- 1. Now at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, Ky. 40506