

Emotional context in decision-making: Challenging Lewin's motivational conflicts theory

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A recent series of experiments conducted by Ph.D. student Maya Enisman and Dr. Tali Kleiman from the Psychology department at the

Hebrew University of Jerusalem, challenges the longstanding theory of motivational conflict resolution introduced by Kurt Lewin. According to Lewin, conflicts between two undesirable outcomes (avoidance–avoidance conflicts) are typically harder to resolve than those between two desirable ones (approach–approach conflicts).

Lewin posited that avoidance–avoidance [conflicts](#), where individuals must choose between two undesirable outcomes, are typically more challenging to resolve compared to approach–approach conflicts, which involve choosing between two desirable options.

In avoidance–avoidance conflicts, the intensity of negative feelings associated with both choices and the difficulty in decision-making often lead to heightened [psychological distress](#).

Unlike approach–approach conflicts, where decision-making may involve selecting the option with the most benefits, avoidance–avoidance conflicts require navigating between two undesirable outcomes or finding a compromise to minimize [negative consequences](#).

Maya Enisman and Dr. Tali Kleiman's new [study](#), published in *Emotion*, includes five experiments and argues that the difficulty of resolving these conflicts is not solely the result of the type of conflict, but rather depends on the compatibility between the conflicts and the emotional context in which they occur.

The findings suggest that avoidance–avoidance conflicts are notably more challenging in positive affective contexts, but show no significant difference in resolution difficulty from approach–approach conflicts in negative contexts.

The study also introduces a neutral condition to provide a baseline for these effects, contrasting with previous research which did not account

for the impact of the affective context. These insights test the boundaries of the accepted wisdom that has prevailed since Lewin's theory was first proposed in 1931.

The researchers also pointed out the social influence of these conflicts, noting how avoidance-avoidance dilemmas are often depicted in idioms like "between a rock and a hard place," reflecting the deep-seated nature of such conflicts in human experience. In contrast, approach–approach conflicts are less likely to be expressed in similarly vivid terms, suggesting a social representation that aligns with Lewin's original findings.

"This study revisits a foundational theory in [social psychology](#) and opens new pathways for understanding decision-making conflicts under various contextual influences," stated Ph.D. student Maya Enisman, lead researcher of the study.

More information: Maya Enisman et al, The relative difficulty of resolving motivational conflicts is affective context-dependent., *Emotion* (2024). [DOI: 10.1037/emo0001353](https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0001353)

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