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Identifying the situational triggers underlying avoidance of communication situations and individual differences therein ☆

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ABSTRACT

People are actively involved in the selection and avoidance of the situations they face during everyday life. Moreover, such selection/avoidance behavior is subject to sizeable individual differences. Yet, to a large extent this phenomenon has been underinvestigated, and a full understanding of selection/avoidance remains lacking. In the present paper, we take a first step to a more in-depth understanding of situation avoidance, which is conceptualized in terms of individual profiles or signatures across situations. Two key objectives with regard to those signatures are being addressed, that is: (a) identifying the critical situational triggers that elicit avoidance behavior, and (b) identifying the most important individual differences in the link between these situational triggers and avoidance, along with their underlying process dynamics. To achieve these objectives, we performed an empirical study on avoidance of communication situations. This study revealed a set of person types that meaningfully differ in sensitivity to a few key situational features. These person types further appeared to differ from one another on several dispositional cognitive/affective forecast variables.

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1. Introduction

During the past decades, several leading psychologists have argued that people not only react to the situations and conditions of their lives but that they are also actively involved in the selection of them (e.g., Buss, 1987; Ickes, Snyder, & Garcia, 1997). Moreover, the kind of situations people select/avoid may differ across persons. Understanding situation selection/avoidance and individual differences therein is of crucial importance for a good understanding of personality.

For quite some time, however, psychologists considered situations as static entities people passively end up in. So far, there has been only a rather small number of studies on individual differences in situation selection/avoidance, most of them during the eighties and nineties (e.g., Furnham, 1982; Ickes et al., 1997), with recently a revival (e.g., Zakriski, Wright, & Underwood, 2005). A full understanding of situation selection/avoidance remains lacking due to this relative scarcity of empirical work. In the present paper, we take a first step into arriving at a more in-depth understanding of situation avoidance. To this end, we want to realize two objectives, that is: (a) capturing the mechanisms underlying situation avoidance and (b) revealing individual differences with respect to these mechanisms. We do so for the domain of communication behavior.

To achieve our first objective, that is, capturing the mechanisms underlying situation avoidance, we introduce the novel concept of *avoidance signatures*. Such signatures represent the intensity of avoidance as displayed by an individual in a broad range of hypothetical situations. The concept of avoidance signatures closely relates to the concept of behavioral signatures, as introduced by Mischel and Shoda (1995). Behavioral signatures represent the intensity of some behavior across situations for a certain individual. Avoidance signatures differ from general behavioral signatures in one essential aspect, in that they pertain to potential situations that one has not yet entered, instead of situations that actually have occurred. Obviously, this aspect is intrinsically related to situation avoidance, as this pertains to whether one would like to enter a possible situation. For both avoidance and behavioral signatures, it is of key importance that the situations across which the signatures evolve are characterized in terms of active psychological features, which concern the psychological content of situations (e.g., situations in which one feels uncertain) and, as such, influence a person's behavior. In our case, a key challenge then consists of identifying the active situational features or triggers that elicit situation avoidance.

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Our second objective relates to the fact that avoidance signatures are subject to individual differences. Such differences can take several forms. For instance, some people may be sensitive to certain situational triggers, whereas for others this is less or not the case; also, people can differ regarding the pattern of features that triggers avoidance. Hence, a key challenge is to unveil the critical differences in situational sensitivity that account for differences in situation avoidance.

We also study the processing dynamics at the basis of individual differences in situational sensitivity by connecting to the cognitive/affective processing system theory of Mischel and Shoda (1995). These authors postulate that a system of cognitive/affective processing variables underlies individual differences in behavioral signatures. With regard to such variables, they distinguish between 'encodings', 'expectancies and beliefs', 'affects', 'goals and values' and 'competencies and self-regulatory plans'. In the context of situation selection/avoidance, a key role can be expected to be taken by anticipated cognitive/affective variables, as opposed to experienced ones (e.g., anticipated obstruction by others, and anticipated satisfaction). Anticipated cognitive/affective variables relate to the exciting emerging domain of affective forecasting (Gilbert, Killingsworth, Eyre, & Wilson, 2009). This refers to the ability to pre-experience situations and to predict emotional reactions to them. Interestingly, whereas affective forecasting has been related to several types of decisions (Wilson & Gilbert, 2005), it has not yet been linked systematically to situational choices (apart from the study in motivation research of a few very specific affective forecasts-related concepts, such as fear of failure and hope for success (McGregor & Elliot, 2005)).

Summarizing, our aim is to arrive at a better understanding of situation avoidance, conceived in terms of avoidance signatures. This implies the challenge of identifying relevant active situational triggers that elicit avoidance behavior, along with individual differences in sensitivity to these triggers. Besides, we also study the dynamics underlying these individual differences in terms of various kinds of cognitive/affective forecasts.

We address these objectives in a study on avoidance of situations in which a conversation with another person is to be started. Next, we present the theoretical background of the situational features and the cognitive/affective forecasts included in this study.

2. Avoidance of conversations

2.1. Situational features

We focus on two aspects with relevance for the avoidance of conversations: the characteristics of the conversation partner and the topic of the conversation. Below, we discuss a few potentially relevant situational features that relate to each of those aspects.

The first feature pertains to the number of partners involved in the conversation. Previous research has shown individual differences in preferences for dyadic versus group interactions (e.g., men prefer to interact with groups, whereas women prefer dyadic interactions (Belle, 1989)). A second feature that may influence avoidance of a conversation is the level of familiarity with the conversation partner. Tschan, Semmer, and Inversin (2004) have shown that familiarity may increase sympathy and, as a consequence, also interaction frequency. Third, we include the effect of the expected contribution of the partner to the talk, as this yields a decrease in negative affect (Vittengl & Holt, 2000).

Regarding the topic of the conversation, firstly we include the level of certainty about this; previous research has shown that uncertainty in general leads to avoidance of interpersonal interactions (Duronto, Nishida, & Nakayama, 2005). Second, we assess whether one is more likely to avoid a conversation about a personal matter than about a professional one. Research has shown individual differences with respect to the preferences for personal versus professional conversations (e.g., women converse more frequently about intimate personal topics (Aries & Johnson, 1983)).

2.2. Cognitive/affective variables

We include dispositional measures of two types of cognitive/affective forecast variables: self-perceived competencies and self-efficacy expectations, and affects and values. Below, we briefly discuss each of these.

2.3. Self-efficacy expectations and self-perceived competencies

Previous research has shown that people with negative communication-related self-efficacy expectations tend to avoid interactions (Plant & Butz, 2006). In conversation situations, negative self-efficacy expectations may include expectations about getting criticism and making a bad impression.

We also study several self-perceived competencies. At this point, a distinction between three different phases of a conversation is useful, namely the beginning, the body and the end. Concerning the beginning, we study the competence to find a conversation topic and to initiate a conversation, as persons who are not able to initiate a conversation tend to avoid interactions (Muehlenhard & Scardino, 1985). Regarding the body of the conversation, it is important that a conversation passes smoothly. Several self-perceived competencies and self-efficacy expectations could be relevant in this respect, including the competence to be flexible, the competence to make small talk and the expectation to be unable to give an answer. Finally, we also include the competence to end the conversation smoothly.

2.4. Values and affective forecasts

We study both process- and outcome-related values and affective forecasts. Concerning process-related aspects, one may expect a key variable to be how people feel with respect to having to open up to others during a conversation (i.e., self-disclosure; Greene, Derlega, & Mathews, 2006). Previous research has documented clear individual differences in the expectation to disclose self-relevant aspects to others (Tardy, 1988) and in the affects associated with this. Furthermore, expected self-disclosure relates to the tendency to avoid certain social situations (Fantasia & Lombardo, 1975). We therefore include self-disclosure-related attitudes (which comprise both self-disclosure-related expectations and affective forecasts).

Regarding the outcome of the conversation, we consider specific and general outcomes. On a general level, we study negative affective forecasts associated with several aspects of failure (as already discussed above) in relation to communication-related self-efficacy expectations (i.e., affect with respect to making a bad impression and with respect to getting criticism). Regarding specific outcomes, we first focus on three things one may wish to gain from a conversation: getting to know many people, learning a lot from the conversation, and learning the opinion of the conversation partner. Second, we consider the fact that one may hope to 'get rid of something' during a conversation; concerning this we study the importance attached to getting things off your chest.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants were 111 students from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. Participation was in partial fulfillment of course credits. On

average, participants were 18.5 years old; 90 participants were women.

3.2. Materials

3.2.1. Communication stimuli

Participants were given abstract situational descriptions. Those were created on the basis of a facet-theoretical design by fully crossing the levels of five binary variables: (1) personal versus professional conversation topic, (2) certainty versus uncertainty about the conversation topic, (3) an acquaintance versus a stranger as conversation partner, (4) yes or no contribution from the conversation partner, and (5) one versus many conversation partners. A fully factorial combination of these features yielded 32 situations. In situations in which one had to face many conversation partners, the value of the first, third and fourth feature were required to apply to all partners involved (e.g., all partners had to be strangers). An example of a situation description include: "A situation in which you have to start a conversation about a personal topic you feel uncertain about, with a stranger who does not contribute to the conversation."

3.2.2. Cognitive/affective forecasts

We constructed a questionnaire with dispositional measurements of 29 cognitive/affective forecasts, including seven expectations, nine affects, six values, and seven competences (Table 1). Each variable was measured with three items.

Table 1
Overview of cognitive/affective forecast variables included in the study.

Expectancies
Expectancy that …
One will be unable to give an answer
One will get criticism
One will make a bad impression
The conversation will fall silent
One will not find the words
One will have to talk about oneself∗
One will have to take initiative during a conversation
Affective forecasts
Negative affect with respect to …
Not be able to give an answer
Getting criticism
Making a bad impression
Silences during conversations
Not finding the words
Making small talk
Talking about personal matters
Having to take initiative during a conversation
Having to talk about oneself
Values
Importance attached to …
Knowing a lot about the conversation topic
Knowing many people∗
The fact that the conversation partner is active∗
'Finding it important to get things off your chest'
The opinion of the conversation partner
Learning a lot
Competencies
Competence to …
Find a topic to talk about
Have a conversation
Strike up a conversation
Be flexible during a conversation
End a conversation
Make small talk
Have a deep conversation with someone

Note: Scales with ∗ are unreliable and therefore discarded.

3.3. Procedure

Participants completed both the situation avoidance and the cognitive/affective forecasts questionnaire during a group session. First, they were presented the situation avoidance questionnaire. Participants were encouraged to read every situation description carefully and imagine a hypothetical situation that matched the described features. Next, participants had to indicate to what extent they would avoid the situation in question (0 = I do not avoid that situation; 1 = I avoid that situation to a small extent; 2 = I avoid that situation strongly). (Note that our primary interest was in the distinction between avoidance and non-avoidance; yet, previous research revealed that participants prefer a three-response over a two-response scale (Preston & Colman, 2000)). Second, participants were presented the cognitive/affective forecast questionnaire with the request to rate the extent to which each item was applicable to them (1 = "not at all applicable" to 7 = "totally applicable"). The order of the items was randomized and the same randomization was used for each participant for both questionnaires.

3.4. Analysis

The data were analyzed by means of two-mode partitioning (Schepers & Hofmans, 2009). This clustering method operates directly on the data, without first converting these into similarities. It simultaneously groups situations into situation types and persons into person types. Furthermore, it indicates the probability that each situation type gets avoided by each person type. This method is particularly suitable for our research questions, since (1) the situation typology may reveal the most relevant situational features, and (2) the person typology along with the avoidance signatures of the distinct person types allows one to capture in a most insightful way the structure and content of the individual differences in situation avoidance.

Two-mode partitioning of person × situation data requires the choice of the number of person and situation clusters. For this purpose, first a series of models is fitted for a range of combinations of number of situation and person clusters. To choose between the different resulting models, a selection heuristic is needed. In the present study, we used for this purpose a combination of a numerical convex-hull-based method which in a comparative simulation study was found to perform best for two-mode partitioning (Schepers, Ceulemans, & Van Mechelen, 2008) and interpretability. This convex-hull-based method is a scree plot type procedure that looks for an optimal trade-off between model complexity (in terms of number of situation and person types) and model fit (in terms of variance accounted for).

To study the dynamics underlying individual differences in avoidance signatures, we checked whether the person types resulting from the two-mode partitioning differed in terms of each cognitive/affective forecast variable by means of an analysis of variance. In case of a significant overall effect, we further compared all pairs of person types by means of Tukey's honestly significant difference (HSD) test.

4. Results

In this study we addressed two questions (1) which of the situational features under study determine whether a person will avoid a communication situation, and (2) what are the predominant individual differences in the link between these situational triggers and avoidance behavior (along with their underlying process dynamics).

We fitted a series of two-mode partitioning models to the dichotomized data (obtained by merging the response categories "I avoid that situation to a small extent" and "I avoid that situation strongly"). This series comprised models with all possible combinations of 1 through 6 situation types and 1 through 6 person types. Based on the numerical convex-hull-based method and interpretability, a solution with five situation types and five person types was selected, explaining 47% of the variance in the data. We will now consider the situation and the person typologies as included in this model.

To interpret the situation typology, we examined the feature patterns of the situations belonging to each of the five situation types. This revealed that the situation typology is based on three situational features: (1) certain versus uncertain about the conversation topic, (2) yes versus no contribution from the conversation partner and (3) an acquaintance versus a stranger as conversation partner. The other two features ("one versus more partners" and "professional versus personal topic") did not discriminate between the situation types, since all situations with the same pattern with respect to the first three features belonged to the same situation type regardless of their value on the other two features. Those features can therefore be considered to be irrelevant in that they do not determine situation avoidance.

Table 2 characterizes each situation type in terms of the patterns on the three discriminating situational features subsumed by it. From this table, one may derive that *Situation Type 1* pertains to situations in which there is neither a problem with oneself (i.e., one is not uncertain about the conversation topic) nor with the other (i.e., the conversation partner is neither a stranger nor someone who does not contribute to the conversation). *Situation Type 2*, which includes two feature patterns, pertains to situations that imply exactly one problem with the conversation partner. In *Situation Type 3* the conversation partner is cursed with two problems. *Situation Type 4* concerns situations in which there is only a problem with oneself. Finally, *Situation Type 5* pertains to situations that imply a problem with oneself in conjunction with at least one problem with the conversation partner.

The person typology comprised five person types, consisting of 10%, 16%, 20%, 43% and 11% of the participants, respectively. Fig. 1 shows the corresponding avoidance signatures. Persons of *Person Type 1* almost exclusively avoid situations of the last two situation types, that is, in which one feels uncertain about the conversation topic. Therefore, we will label them as "*self-focused avoiders*".

The avoidance behavior of persons belonging to *Person Type 2* solely depends on the characteristics of the conversation partner: whenever there is a problem with the partner, they avoid starting a conversation. We will call them "*other-focused avoiders*".

Person Types 3 and *4* take both their own characteristics and those of the conversation partner into account. Yet, they do so in different ways: *Person Type 3* avoids situations in which there is both a problem with oneself and with the conversation partner; we will refer to them as "*conjunctive self/other avoiders*"[2]. For their part, persons of *Person Type 4* avoid conversations as soon as there is at least one problem, either with oneself or with their conversation partner; we will label them as "*disjunctive self/other avoiders*".

Finally, persons of *Person Type 5* do not differentiate between the situation types in that they avoid all of them. We will further call them "*all-avoiders*."

To study the dynamics underlying individual differences in avoidance signatures, we tested whether the person types resulting from the two-mode partitioning differed in terms of the cognitive/affective forecast scales (given the small cardinalities of several person types, for all tests an α-level of .10 was used). Before performing these tests, we checked the reliability of the cognitive/affective forecast scales by calculating Cronbach's alphas. Twenty-six cognitive/affective forecast scales had a reliability larger than 0.70 and were retained for further analyses. Three scales did not meet this criterion and were discarded (marked by an $*$ in Table 1). Analyses of variance identified significant overall differences between the person types for 4 forecasts scales, namely the expectancy that the conversation will fall silent ($F(4,106) = 2.40$, $p < 0.10$), the expectancy that one will get criticism ($F(4,106) = 2.00$, $p < 0.10$), negative affect with respect to making a bad impression ($F(4,106) = 2.07$, $p < 0.10$), and competence to strike up a conversation ($F(4,106) = 2.30$, $p < 0.10$). The results of pair-wise comparisons of the person types for these four forecast variables are presented in Table 3. From this table it appears that *conjunctive self/other avoiders* rate their conversation-related competencies higher and their negative self-efficacy expectations lower than both *self-focused avoiders* and *disjunctive self/other avoiders*. Furthermore, *disjunctive self/other avoiders* have higher negative affect with respect to making a bad impression than *all-avoiders*.

Table 2
Characterization of each situation type in terms of the feature pattern(s) of the situations belonging to it.

Feature	Situation type							
	1	2		3	4	5		
Uncertain about topic	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1
A stranger as partner	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	1
No contribution from partner	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	1

5. Discussion

In this paper, we introduced the new concept of avoidance signatures. A key element in constructing such signatures is the specification of their feature basis. This implies the questions pertaining to the relevant active situational features and in which configurations they come into play. Our analysis revealed that three features determine whether or not people avoid a conversation. Obviously, all three refer to some kind of obstacle. Two further distinctions stand out. A first, qualitative one, pertains to whether the obstacle is internal or external in nature. Within the external obstacles, a second, quantitative, distinction pertains to their mere number. Five feature patterns resulted from all this, namely: (1) no obstacles (2) an internal obstacle (3) one external obstacle (4) two external obstacles and (5) an internal together with at least one external obstacle.

Persons further meaningfully differ in the feature basis of their avoidance behaviour. More specifically, five person types were identified, each with a well-defined avoidance profile across the situational feature patterns. In particular, one person type (Person Type 1) appeared to be sensitive to internal obstacles only, whereas another one (Person Type 2) only cares about external obstacles. Two further person types (Person Types 3 and 4) are sensitive to both kinds of obstacles, yet with different rules (i.e., a disjunctive and a conjunctive one, respectively), which imply quite different levels of situation selectivity. Finally, Person Type 5 avoids all situations regardless of their characteristics. These persons can be considered to display a lack of discriminative facility (Cheng, 2003). Previous research has linked such an avoidant strategy to several maladaptive outcomes, including diminished psychosocial functioning and life quality (Mendlowicz & Stein, 2000).

[2] Logically speaking, Person Type 3 avoids situations if and only if (a) one is uncertain about the conversation topic and [(b) the conversation partner is a stranger or (c) the partner does not contribute to the conversation]. Interestingly, it is very hard if not impossible to identify this type of very meaningful rule through standard analysis techniques such as multiple regression.

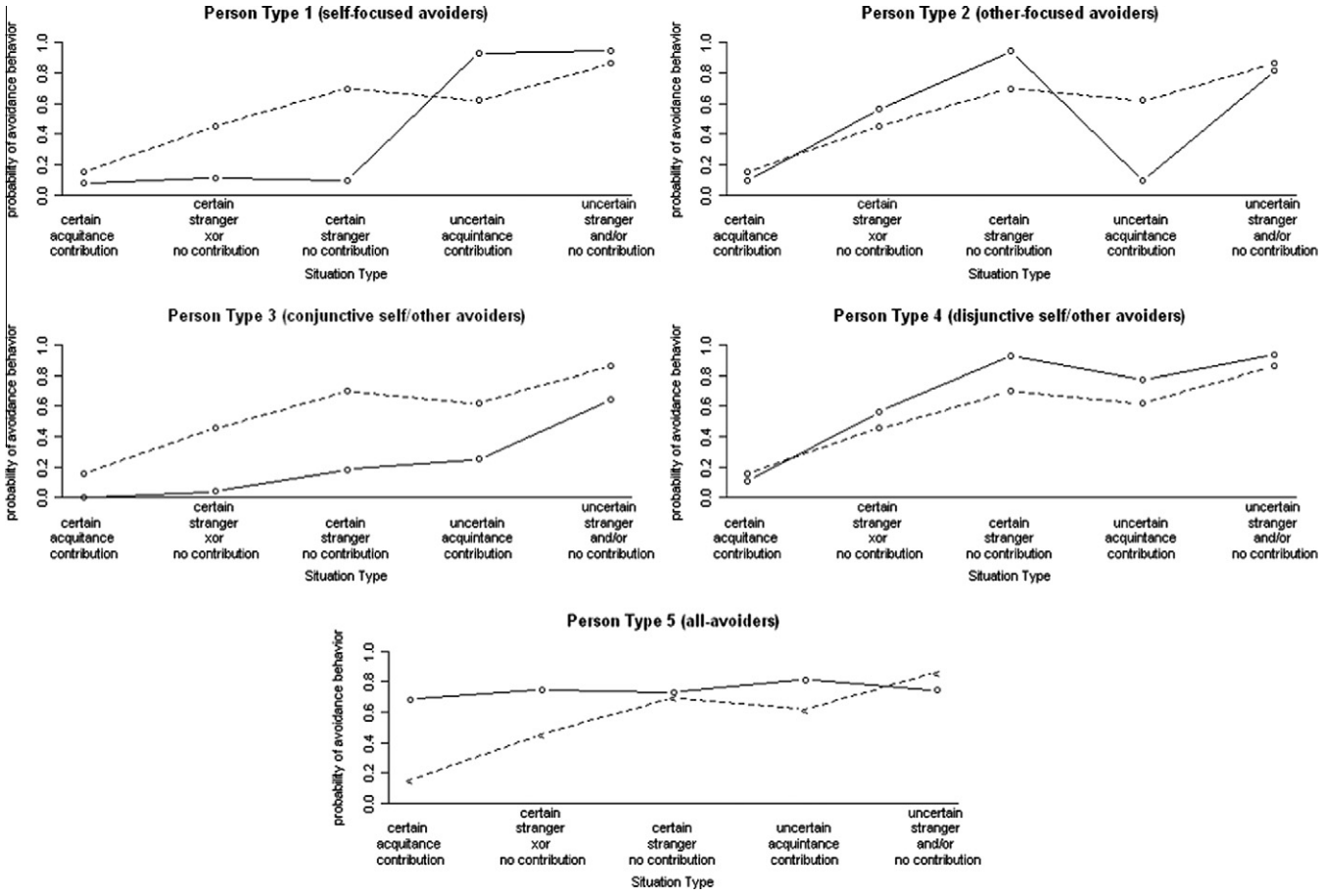


Fig. 1. Graphical representation of avoidance signatures of five person types. The signatures indicate the probability of avoidance of each situation type (characterized in terms of the discriminating features "certainty about conversation topic", "familiarity of conversation partner" and "contribution of partner to the talk"). The dotted line represents the mean probability of avoidance for each situation type.

Table 3
Mean scores of the different person types across those cognitive/affective forecast variables for which the overall person type main effect appeared to be significant.

Cognitive/affective forecast variable	Person type[1]				
	Self	Other	Conj	Disj	All
Expectancy that …					
The conversation will fall silent	10.56[a]	9.59[ab]	7.00[b]	10.44[a]	8.67[ab]
One will get criticism	7.50[a]	6.05[a]	5.09[a]	7.15[a]	7.92[a]
Negative affect with respect to…					
Making a bad impression	12.44[ab]	11.77[ab]	11.82[ab]	13.17[a]	10.25[b]
Competence to…					
Strike up a conversation	13.89[a]	14.59[ab]	17.36[b]	13.98[a]	15.67[ab]

Note: Means in the same rows with different superscripts are significantly different based on Tukey's HSD test ($p < 0.10$).
[1] Self = self-focused avoiders, Other = other-focused avoiders: Conj = conjunctive self/other avoiders; Disj = disjunctive self/other avoiders; All = all-avoiders.

The cognitive/affective forecast data yielded insight into at least part of the dynamics underlying individual differences in avoidance signatures. *Conjunctive self/other avoiders* display the least amount of avoidance behavior. This is in line with their positive conversation-related self-efficacy expectations and self-perceived competence. Otherwise, the latter findings nicely link up with previous results on the important role of self-efficacy expectations as a basis of avoidance behavior (Plant and Butz, 2006). The high level of situation avoidance of *disjunctive self/other avoiders* seems to be rooted in the fact that they fear to make a bad impression, together with negative conversation-related self-efficacy expectations and self-perceived competences. This fear to make a bad impression comprises both an internal (i.e., failure) and an external aspect (i.e., failing in the eyes of others). Linking up with this, persons of the disjunctive person type tend to avoid situations that include an internal or an external obstacle. Remarkably, *all-avoiders* score the lowest on negative affect with respect to making a bad impression. Hence, their avoidance cannot be attributed to this type of fear. Finally, the fact that *self-focused* persons have negative conversation-related self-efficacy expectations and self-per-

ceived competences connects to their avoidance of situations in which they are uncertain about the conversation topic. Indeed, self-efficacy expectations and competences are of key importance in conversations on topics one is uncertain about.

Apart from these encouraging results, three possible limitations of our study deserve reflection. First, the vignettes used in this study varied a few situational features only. Obviously, many other situational aspects may be relevant and were not included in our study (e.g., time pressure, hierarchical status of other person, familiarity of the environment etc.). Second, the sample of participants was imbalanced, with more women than men. This could imply a problem, as previous studies documented gender differences in the domain of communication. To find out whether this could hamper the generalizability of our findings, we repeated the two-mode partitioning analysis for men and women separately. No major gender differences were found, with both men and women taking only the three above mentioned features into account, and with their signatures being highly similar (the only exception being that the all-avoiders person type did not show up for men). Also, the percentage of persons belonging to each person type is highly comparable for men and women. Third, one could object to our study being based on avoidance of hypothetical situations in a laboratory context. At this point, one should, however, first note that the concept of hypothetical situations is inherently implied by the notion of situation avoidance, which concerns whether one would enter a potential situation. Second, although situation avoidance typically can only be inferred indirectly in a daily life context, it would be useful, indeed, to supplement in future work the findings from the present study with ESM data.

6. Concluding remarks

Up to now, psychologists almost exclusively studied the effect of situations and stimuli on behavior. This is somewhat mistaken, since people select/avoid situations and stimuli in a nonrandom way, and since the implied patterns of selection/avoidance behavior are subject to sizeable individual differences. In this paper, we contributed to the understanding of situation selection/avoidance by proposing a framework based on the concepts of avoidance signatures (linking up with the contextualized personality system of Mischel and Shoda (1995)), and cognitive/affective forecasts (linking up with the exciting emerging domain of affective forecasting). Furthermore, we proposed and applied a promising methodology as associated with this framework.

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