Having Your Head in Rainy Clouds:
Expected Need Fulfilment and Social Functioning in Depression

Max Johannes Ziem, M.Sc.

Social withdrawal is a frequent and pronounced consequence of motivational deficits in depression and is linked to adverse outcomes such as chronic illness trajectories and heightened suicide risk. The approach–avoidance framework of human motivation offers a solid empirical basis for studying reduced social motivation in depression. Yet research on situational characteristics that elicit approach or avoidance remains sparse. Recent work has proposed integrating basic psychological need satisfaction and frustration, as conceptualized by self-determination theory, into this framework. Because the postulated needs for autonomy, relatedness, and competence are assumed to arise primarily in social environments, they appear especially promising as triggers for social motivation.

The present thesis aimed to improve the understanding and treatment of reduced social motivation specifically in depression. It examined in two studies whether expected need satisfaction and frustration can be integrated into the approach–avoidance framework, whether these expectations are subject to forecasting biases, and how imagery-based behavioral activation might best modify them to improve social functioning.

Study 1 employed an observational online design with participants screened as depressed or non-depressed, taking a primarily basic research perspective. Participants engaged in mental imagery of a quasi-randomly selected social interaction for the following day and reported their expected need satisfaction, need frustration, and social motivation. Findings provided initial evidence that our adapted scale—the situational Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale—can measure expected need satisfaction and frustration for social events and allows valid comparison between groups with and without clinically significant depressive symptoms. Social motivation was statistically predicted by expected need fulfilment across all needs combined—positively for satisfaction and negatively for frustration. Expected relatedness satisfaction and autonomy frustration emerged as the most robust predictors. Depressed participants reported poorer expected need fulfilment and greater ambivalence compared to non-depressed participants. Interestingly, both groups exhibited similar pessimistic forecasting biases, expecting less satisfaction and more frustration than they later experienced.

Study 2 strengthened the clinical context by including only participants screened as depressed and implementing a randomized controlled online trial of mental imagery-based behavioral activation. Participants scheduled pleasurable social activities for the upcoming week and engaged in either neutral or positive mental imagery for each activity. They reported on expected need fulfilment, social

motivation, and actual engagement. Both groups showed comparable levels of expected need fulfilment, motivation, and engagement. However, adherence to the mental imagery instructions was low, warranting cautious interpretation. The association between social motivation and expected need fulfilment from Study 1 was replicated, with expected autonomy satisfaction emerging as the most robust predictor. We found no evidence for forecasting biases or for a link between expected need fulfilment and actual social engagement.

In summary, the findings provide preliminary support for integrating need fulfilment into the approach–avoidance framework of motivation, as shown by repeatedly significant associations between expected need fulfilment and social motivation, particularly for autonomy and relatedness. However, the lack of associations with actual social engagement and inconsistent results for specific needs should provoke a critical discussion of the original theoretical assumptions. While depression appears characterized by more negative and more ambivalent expectations of need fulfilment in social events, forecasting biases do not appear as a specific feature of depression but rather as a general or context-dependent phenomenon. Finally, the comparable effects of neutral and positive mental imagery in online behavioral activation, coupled with low adherence rates, underscore the importance of developing and testing more engaging and specific interventions to improve social motivation in depression.