



# Measuring chronic regulatory focus with proverbs: The developmental and psychometric properties of a French scale



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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research is to design a new self-report questionnaire to assess individuals' orientations toward their goals based on the regulatory focus theory. This theory distinguishes self-regulation with a promotion focus from self-regulation with a prevention focus. Our questionnaire is different from the existing Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) in that our questionnaire enables participants to self-report their actions with items that are proverbs and sayings. Three studies were conducted to examine the reliability and validity of the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire – Proverbs Form (RFQ-PF). The first study involved creating a list of items leading to a preliminary version of the RFQ-PF. In the second study, 343 French participants were surveyed to test the factor structure of the RFQ-PF and to select the final items leading to an 18-item inventory.

This tool comprises two reliable subscales: (a) Prevention and (b) Promotion, with adequate internal consistency. Using confirmatory factor analysis, this two-factor structure was discussed in the third study ( $n = 277$ ). The RFQ-PF's convergent validity was also confirmed. These findings suggest that the RFQ-PF may be useful as a measure of dispositional regulatory focus in self-report models.

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## 1. Introduction

People differ widely from each other in how they approach the world. In everyday life, some persons tend to adopt risky or safe behavior, for example, risky behavior in traffic or in gambling games, like slot machines. These behaviors may be the result of broad self-regulatory strategies of promotion and prevention regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997).

According to the regulatory focus theory, there are two self-regulation strategies: (1) promotion-focus (i.e., looking for the presence or absence of positive outcomes: gains versus non-gains), and (2) prevention-focus (i.e., looking for the presence or absence of negative outcomes: losses versus non-losses).

Promotion-focus people would promote their ideal selves as guides for their behaviors (i.e., they are looking to be what they want to be). Prevention-focus people would instead prefer using their “ought” selves (i.e., they are looking to be what they think they have to be). Promotion and prevention are two orthogonal dimensions (Higgins, 1997). Each individual can have both a promotion-focus score and a prevention-focus score. Regulatory focus can be situational, i.e., induced by context,

but the theory states that people have a chronic focus, i.e., a “habitual” focus used by default (Shah & Higgins, 1997).

Regulatory focus also has emotional and behavioral consequences. Several studies have observed the effects of these strategies on information processing, performance, and decision-making (Higgins, 2000; Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Scholer, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2008; Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2010; Hamstra, Bolderdijk, & Veldstra, 2011). Promotion-focus people are more open to considering changes than prevention-focus people. For example, after being interrupted during a description task, the promotion focus individuals are willing to change if they believe that the new, alternative task is better than the original task. Prevention-focus individuals instead feel more obliged to stick to the original task as long as it is satisfactory (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999).

Similarly, Friedman and Forster (2001) observed that promotion-focus people provided an objectively “false-positive” response tendency on a recognition-memory-based signal-detection task than prevention-focus people. Furthermore, promotion-focus people also had better retrieval-from-memory verbal solutions to a series of word fragments compared to prevention-focus people. The results observed by these authors suggest that regulatory focus might influence creativity and the underlying cognitive processes.

Ouschan, Boldero, Kashima, Wakimoto, and Kashima (2007) surveyed several methods that have been used to measure self-regulatory focus. Two scales (the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) and the General Regulatory Focus Measure (GRFM)) have been widely used to

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measure dispositional regulatory focus (for RFQ: Higgins et al., 2001; and Faddegon, Scheepers, & Ellemers, 2008; for GRFM: Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Keller, Hurst, & Uskul, 2008; and Schokker, Links, Luttik, & Hagedoorn, 2010).

The RFQ contains two psychometrically distinct subscales designed to assess individual differences in regulatory focus. They are based on subjective histories of success in attaining goals in a promotion- or prevention-focused manner. The RFQ primarily centers on the self-guided conceptualization of ideals versus obligations, with four of items dealing with parental interaction and other past self-guided experiences capturing the obligation aspect of prevention focus. The RFQ involves 11 items, six items belonging to the Promotion scale and five items belonging to the Prevention scale. Higgins et al. (2001) reported a good internal reliability ( $\alpha = 0.73$  for the Promotion scale;  $\alpha = 0.80$  for the Prevention scale) and indicated that the scales also demonstrate good convergent and discriminant validity.

Lockwood et al. (2002) designed another scale of regulatory focus that assesses chronic promotion and prevention goals. It is based on the same theoretical constructs used by Higgins et al. (2001), but these authors aimed to provide direct and concise means of assessing chronic promotion and prevention goals. The scale includes a heterogeneous set of 18 items. These items are related to inclinations to focus on achieving success and positive outcomes or avoiding failure and negative outcomes. And they concern tendencies of fulfilling hopes, aspirations, and ideals or responsibilities and obligations. Lockwood et al. (2002) reported good reliability ( $\alpha = 0.81$  for the Promotion scale;  $\alpha = 0.75$  for the Prevention scale). They also observed that the two subscales were modestly correlated with one another ( $\alpha = 0.17, p = 0.01$ ). These approaches mainly focus on the nature of inclination for the goal achievement. Since the RFQ is based on individuals' subjective history of success at promotion- and prevention-focused self-regulation, participants need to have a good introspection capacity. The GRFM is originally a scale for measuring students' motivation (which correlates with affectivity (Lockwood et al., 2002)).

Another approach aims at considering the underlying strategies that lead to goal achievement. There are few studies on these self-regulatory strategies. Ouschan et al. (2007) suggest that regulatory focus can be associated with distinct strategies for goal attainment. They designed another scale to measure individual differences in the adoption of regulatory strategies. The Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale (RFSS) aims at reflecting individuals' current regulatory strategy orientations toward achieving success and avoiding failure. The RFSS subscales were observed to correlate with other measures of motivation and self-regulation, such as the Behavioral Inhibition System/Behavioral Activation System (BIS/BAS) scales (Carver & White, 1994) and the Sensitivity to Punishment and Sensitivity to Reward Questionnaire (SPSRQ, Torrubia, Ávila, Moltó, & Caseras, 2001). They were also observed to be weakly correlated with scales reflecting goal-based regulatory focus, such as the RFQ (Higgins et al., 2001).

Finally, a creative way to assess regulatory focus was developed and validated by Van Stekelenburg (2006). In this study, participants indicated their agreement with proverbial mottos. The promotion subscale consisted of eight statements such as, "he who does not dare, does not win," and the prevention subscale consisted of eight statements such as "better safe than sorry." Items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Hamstra et al. (2011) explain how promotion ( $M = 5.06, SD = 0.92; \alpha = 0.81$ ) and prevention ( $M = 4.45, SD = 0.92; \alpha = 0.71$ ) subscales were created by averaging the items for each subscale, and they observed a modest positive correlation ( $\alpha = 0.30, N = 126, p < 0.01$ ). According to Hamstra et al. (2011), proverbs are culturally embedded and allow assessing self-regulatory preferences unobtrusively, and they have the potential to contain a lot of meaning concerning needs, goals, and psychological situations in a very simple statement. This scale with proverbial mottos was used in several studies (Hamstra et al., 2011; Rietzschel, 2011). It seems to be intuitive to use for measuring self-regulatory preferences. Indeed, the

instructions given to the individuals allow them to project themselves into the different contexts. Rietzschel used this scale to assess a collective regulatory focus. Thus, we also think that this scale could be used for assessing self-regulatory preferences of others, thus adapting the instruction to a specific context. Finally, we also observe that there is a lack of a French validation of the scale to measure self-regulatory focus.

### 1.1. The present research

The purpose of the present research is to develop a new self-report questionnaire to assess individuals' inclinations toward their goals based on the regulatory focus theory. Our questionnaire is an alternative questionnaire to the RFQ by self-reporting the concordance of participants' actions with proverbs and sayings.

The aim of the studies that we report in this paper was to examine the psychometric properties and validity of our French version of the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire – Proverbs Form (RFQ-PF).

In Study 1, we report on the development of the RFQ-PF scale. The two scales of the questionnaire assess promotion and prevention strengths.

In the second study, we had two aims: to explore the factor structure of the RFQ-PF and assess its internal consistency and reliability by asking subjects to answer the RFQ-PF, and to examine its associations with RFQ and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS).

In the third study, we tested the convergent and discriminant validity of the scale and examined its associations with other scales of self-regulation and motivation.

## 2. Study 1

The first study aimed to create a list of items leading to a preliminary version of the RFQ-PF. In order to select the items for the questionnaire, we started by looking at a French website that takes an inventory of proverbs ([www.linternaute.com/proverbe](http://www.linternaute.com/proverbe)). We screened the 1778 proverbs proposed by this website for face validity. We began by generating a pool of items that were intended to reflect either promotion or prevention sensitivity. We consequently eliminated 1689 proverbs, because they were either not related to regulatory focus in their meaning or pure rephrasing of already-chosen proverbs. Thus, we ended up with a set of 89 proverbs: 48 proverbs expressing meaning related to prevention focus and 41 proverbs expressing meaning related to promotion focus.

Then, in order to select items in this set, we sent a web questionnaire to laypeople to find out which proverbs were correctly categorized. We used 16 descriptions (eight for each focus) of attitudes and behaviors related to the two focuses as described by Higgins. For each proverb, people were asked to check the attitudes and behaviors evoked for them by the proverb. We added two checkboxes: "This proverb is not relevant" and "I don't understand this proverb" to ensure the clarity and the understandability of the items. The 89 proverbs were presented in random order.

### 2.1. Method

#### 2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Data were collected from 78 participants (21 men and 57 women), aged 20–78 ( $M$  age = 44.9;  $SD$  age = 17.3). They were contacted by mail and asked to fill in the categorization questionnaire. Nine participants were excluded from further analysis because their answers were found to be inconsistent.

For a given participant, we considered a proverb to be relevant to promotion focus in two cases: (1) if only promotion-related items were checked and (2) if there were at least two more promotion-related items checked than prevention-related items checked. The relevance to prevention focus has been evaluated in the same way.

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