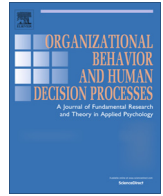




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/obhdp

Securing foundations and advancing frontiers: Prevention and promotion effects on judgment & decision making

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 19 June 2015

Revised 20 April 2016

Accepted 25 April 2016

Keywords:

Regulatory focus promotion prevention
decision making judgment

ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, research testing regulatory focus theory has made multiple contributions to understanding better many different psychological issues. In this article, we detail the foundations of regulatory focus theory, its wide-ranging impact, and its implications in particular for understanding the motivational underpinnings of judgment and decision making. We then explore new developments regarding the interactions between regulatory focus and the psychological experience of being above or below the status quo, and note how this research helps to further distinguish regulatory focus from more general models of approach-avoidance. We then close with a discussion of new research on the relation among regulatory focus, politics, and culture, and between regulatory focus and ethics—both of which may be of special interest to organizational psychologists and decision scientists.

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1. Introduction

Since its advent over one hundred years ago, the study of motivation in psychology has focused primarily on the fundamental tendency for humans (alongside other animals) to approach desirable end-states and to avoid undesirable end-states. These motives represent important foundational elements of any theory of human behavior and decision making (Freud, 1920/1950; Skinner, 1938; Watson, 1913), both in individuals and in organizational contexts, and continue to bear fruit in new and interesting ways (Carver, 2004; Elliot, 2005).

However, three decades ago, distinctions began to be explored within this larger framework of approaching pleasure and avoiding pain. It was noted that not all desired end-states are represented the same way, resulting in different motivational orientations towards those different desired end-states (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985). What was discovered was that success and failure was also experienced differently emotionally depending on the kind of desired end-state with which there was a match (success) or from which there was a *discrepancy* (failure). This theory, self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), was the starting point from which regulatory focus theory eventually developed.

2. Development of the theory

According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), individuals can represent desired end-states for themselves in two distinct ways: either as “ideal-self” end-states involving hopes and aspirations, or as “ought-self” end-states involving duties and obligations. When individuals perceive their “actual-self” as matching their “ideal-self,” they experience high-engagement positive emotions such as cheerfulness and joy. In contrast, when individuals perceive their “actual-self” as matching their “ought-self,” they experience low-engagement positive emotions such as calmness and relaxation (Higgins et al., 1985). Importantly, what this research showed was that success in “approaching desired end-states” can be emotionally experienced in two very different ways—either a high engagement emotion (ideal success) or a low engagement emotion (ought success).

This research also showed that discrepancies with these desired end-states were also associated with distinct emotional experiences. When individuals experienced discrepancies between their “actual-self” and “ideal-self,” they experienced low-engagement negative emotions such as sadness and discouragement. In contrast, when individuals experienced discrepancies between their “actual-self” and “ought-self,” they experienced high-engagement negative emotions such as anxiety and tension (Higgins, 1987; Higgins et al., 1985). Thus, failure in “approaching desired end-states” can also be emotionally experienced in two very different ways—either a high engagement emotion (ought failure) or a low engagement emotion (ideal failure).

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This research was important because, for the first time, a clear distinction within the overarching approaching pleasure motivational model had been identified—the distinction between approaching ideal end-states versus approaching ought end-states. This research was limited, however, in that it primarily identified personality distinctions, with little attention paid to situationally induced motivational states (for some attention, see Higgins, 1990). It was also limited in that it dealt only with self-regulation in relation to represented ideal and ought self-guides, which is a kind of self-regulation that only occurs in humans starting around 3–5 years-of-age (Higgins, 1989). These two features of self-discrepancy theory restricted its applicability.

Trying to overcome these limitations led to the development of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Rather than being limited to considerations of individuals' actual-self succeeding or failing to meet their ideal and ought self-guides, regulatory focus theory posits two general kinds of motivational concerns, flowing from two basic and distinct forms of survival (Bowby, 1969, 1973). The first, the *promotion focus*, is associated with nurturance, growth, and advancement from the status quo to better states. This includes, but is not limited to, the achievement of the hopes and aspirations associated with the ideal self-guide of self-discrepancy theory. The second, the *prevention focus*, is associated with safety, security, and the maintenance of the status quo against falling to worse states. This includes, but is not limited to, the achievement of the duties and obligations associated with the ought self-guide of self-discrepancy theory. Thus, regulatory focus (promotion and prevention) contains the basic elements of self-discrepancy theory (ideal and ought end-states, respectively), but is not limited to them. It emphasizes the strategic means used to approach these two desired end-states rather than simply the psychological distance between one's current state and these two desired end-states.

Similar to self-discrepancy theory, each regulatory focus can be measured as a chronic personality predisposition. However, again, measures of chronic regulatory focus center on the strategic inclinations towards the end-states rather than on one's current state relative to those end-states. Further expanding on self-discrepancy theory, regulatory focus can also be situationally induced as a momentary state by framing goal pursuit success and failure either as promotion concerns with gains and non-gains (corresponding to ideal successes or failures) or as prevention concerns with non-losses and losses (corresponding to ought successes or failures). Moreover, the two systems are independent of one another, such that an individual can be low in both, high in one but low in the other, or high in both.

There are two significant consequences that flow from these basic foundational distinctions between promotion and prevention. First, individuals with a strong promotion or prevention focus will conceptualize positive and negative end-states in different ways. Those with a strong promotion focus will conceptualize the status quo ("0") as an undesirable end-state ("non-gain") to be avoided, and advancement ("+1") as a desirable end-state ("gain") to be approached. In contrast, those with a strong prevention focus will conceptualize falling below the status quo ("−1") as an undesirable end-state ("loss") to be avoided, and maintenance

("0") as a desirable end-state ("non-loss") to be approached. In essence, this means that the status quo ("0") as an end-state will have a different valence dependent upon whether an individual has a stronger promotion focus or prevention focus: for promotion, the status quo is negative; for prevention, the status quo is positive.

There is a second significant consequence of the promotion-prevention distinction. Not only are successes and failures emotionally experienced differently, in a manner consistent with the findings of self-discrepancy theory, but the different concerns of promotion and prevention result in different preferred strategies of goal pursuit. When goals involve promotion focus concerns with advancement and aspirations, the preferred means for goal pursuit are *eager* strategies. In contrast, when goals involve prevention focus concerns with security and obligations, the preferred means for goal pursuit are *vigilant* strategies. This distinction is important because when goal pursuit concerns are combined with the use of an appropriate means for the achievement of that goal (such as using an *eager* means for a *promotion* goal), or if an experience serves to sustain the strategic means currently employed (such as *success* sustaining *eagerness*), then this creates the experience of regulatory "fit" (Higgins, 2000). On the other hand, if goal pursuit concerns are combined with an inappropriate means for the achievement of that goal (such as using a *vigilant* means for a *promotion* goal), or an experience serves to disrupt the strategic means currently employed (such as *failure* disrupting *eagerness*), then this creates a regulatory "non-fit." Research on fit and non-fit—although not restricted to regulatory focus research—has played an important role in the development of regulatory focus theory, and that research will be described in more detail below.

In sum, regulatory focus theory, by positing two distinct motivational systems of goal pursuit that have very different responses to status quo "0" and very different strategic preferences, goes "beyond pleasure and pain" and adds a new orthogonal motivational dimension to just the classic approach-avoidance distinction (Higgins, 1997). This theoretical expansion quickly led to several advances in research on decision making that supported the theoretical model and allowed it to be applied to multiple new domains. A summary of the important characteristics of the prevention focus and promotion focus is available in Table 1.

3. Theoretical challenges

Though the above theoretical advances demonstrate how regulatory focus theory goes "beyond pleasure and pain," one conceptual confusion that continually emerges is the conflation of regulatory focus theory with the more general model of approach versus avoidance. This is problematic because much of the research on regulatory focus—both in its earliest conceptions and in its subsequent advances—depends upon distinguishing between promotion and approach motivations, and distinguishing between prevention and avoidance motivations.

One source of this confusion is the use of the General Regulatory Focus Measure (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002), a scale that was developed on the premise that the primary concern of the

Table 1
Important distinctions between prevention focus and promotion focus.

Component	Prevention focus	Promotion focus
Primary concerns	Safety and security	Nurturance and growth
Primary goals	Oughts, duties, and obligations	Ideals, hopes, and aspirations
Success	Non-loss (0)	Gain (+1)
Failure	Loss (−1)	Non-gain (0)
Preferred strategy	<i>Vigilant</i> strategies; maintaining or restoring status quo	<i>Eager</i> strategies; exceeding and advancing beyond status quo

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