



I like you more when your behaviors fit my motivational orientation: The effect of interpersonal regulatory fit on interpersonal evaluation



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ABSTRACT

The present study is one of the few to investigate regulatory fit as an interpersonal phenomenon. Three experiments were conducted to investigate the effect of the fit between evaluators' regulatory foci and the behavioral strategy of the person being evaluated during interpersonal evaluation. Study 1 found that after controlling for perceived similarity, interpersonal regulatory fit led to higher liking and competence evaluation ratings in general. Study 2 extended these findings under a formal interpersonal evaluation context—a graduate school admission interview—revealing that after controlling for perceived similarity, promotion-focused interviewers rated interviewees who demonstrated eager strategies as more likeable and competent, and more likely to be admitted, than did prevention-focused interviewers. These effects were mediated by interviewers' sense of feeling right. Study 3 further supported the mediator role of feeling right by revealing that fit effects were eliminated once evaluators were aware of the true source of feeling right. These findings suggest that interpersonal regulatory fit enhances interpersonal evaluation beyond similarity, and this effect is mediated by evaluators' feeling right.

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1. Introduction

Regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000) posits that individuals experience regulatory fit when the means by which they pursue a goal sustain their regulatory foci. Regulatory fit has been proven to enhance self-regulation through stronger motivation (Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, & Higgins, 2004), higher cognitive flexibility (Maddox, Baldwin, & Markman, 2006), and broader scope of attention (Memmert, Unkelbach, & Ganns, 2010). More important, by making people “feel right”, regulatory fit produces additional subjective value, which is reflected in higher monetary value assigned to a target object (Avnet & Higgins, 2006) and higher evaluations of the activity that provides the fit experience (Jin, 2011).

To date, regulatory fit literature has mostly focused on the fit/non-fit within an individual (the fit/non-fit between one's regulatory focus and his/her own strategy). However, it is also important and necessary to go beyond the intrapersonal level and explore regulatory fit from an interpersonal perspective, given the fact that self-regulation frequently occurs in social contexts (Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2011). For example, based on the intrapersonal fit effect, can we expect that interpersonal fit leads to additional value assigned to a person, when the person's behavioral strategy fits an evaluator's regulatory focus? The present study addresses this

question by examining whether interpersonal regulatory fit affects the individual's evaluation of the person who provides the fit experiences.

1.1. Regulatory fit theory

Higgins (1997, 1998) distinguished two distinct motivational systems in self-regulation, including promotion focus and prevention focus. While promotion focus serves as the motivation to attain advancement, aspirations, and accomplishment, prevention focus serves as the motivation to attain safety, obligations, and responsibilities. As a result, people with a promotion focus are sensitive to the presence and absence of positive outcomes, whereas those with a prevention focus are sensitive to the presence and absence of negative outcomes. When individuals' manner/strategy of goal pursuit fits their regulatory foci, they experience regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000). That is, promotion-focused individuals experience regulatory fit when they adopt eagerness-related strategies, which focus on attaining positive outcomes (e.g., studying hard at the library in order to obtain higher grades). In contrast, prevention-focused individuals experience regulatory fit when they adopt vigilance-related strategies, which focus on avoiding negative outcomes (e.g., turning down an invitation to go out with friends to avoid wasting time before an exam) (Higgins, 2000).

Independent of outcome, regulatory fit creates value by making people “feel right” about what they are doing. This value of fit can be transferred to the evaluation of the activity and object related to the fit

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experience: People enjoy the task more when the means they use fit their regulatory focus (Jin, 2011), and they assign a higher monetary value to the object they choose when their choice strategies fit their regulatory focus (Avnet & Higgins, 2006). As the fit experience creates value through feeling right, its effects are more associated with intensity than direction in the way that fit makes people feel better about positive outcomes and worse about negative outcomes (Alexander, Levine, & Higgins, 2010; Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, & Sassenberg, 2013). Additionally, when people are reminded of the true sources of the feeling-right experience before evaluation—when they are told that using certain strategies to pursue goals can make people feel right about their goal pursuit—the fit effect is eliminated (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003).

1.2. Interpersonal regulatory fit

Regulatory fit theory explains how an individual's goal pursuing process is affected by the fit/non-fit between his/her behavioral strategy and his/her motivational orientation. However, people usually pursue goals in some social contexts where they frequently interact with others (Righetti, Finkenauer, & Rusbult, 2011). As a result, we witness other people's behavioral strategies every day, and they either fit or do not fit with our regulatory foci. If the fit effect goes beyond the intrapersonal level and becomes an interpersonal phenomenon, or more specifically, if the interpersonal regulatory fit also produces a sense of feeling right and additional value, it will have a substantial influence on social interactions, which will greatly enrich the outcome of regulatory fit. Higgins (2012, p. 239) acknowledged this possibility: "It is also possible, however, to have individuals with different goal-pursuit concerns interact with someone else, or receive a message from someone else, who displays a manner of goal pursuit that does or does not fit their concerns."

To date, few studies have addressed interpersonal regulatory fit. In Santelli, Struthers, and Eaton's (2009) study on forgiveness, they found that the fit between a victim's regulatory focus and the strategy of a transgressor's repentance can lead to greater forgiveness. Similarly, Cesario and Higgins (2008) found that persuasion can be increased when the speaker's nonverbal cues fit the recipient's regulatory focus. In contrast, Alexander et al. (2010) investigated the role of interpersonal regulatory fit on people's hostility toward opinion deviances and found that when group members' regulatory foci fit the way opinion deviates present their arguments, group members evaluate the deviates more negatively. In the leader-follower relationship context, Hamstra, Sassenberg, Van Yperen, and Wisse's (2014) study first supported the association between the leader's regulatory focus and leadership behavior such that promotion-focused leaders showed more transformational leadership behavior and prevention-focused leaders showed more transactional leadership behavior. They further found that followers felt more valued by their leaders when the leader's leadership style fit the followers' regulatory foci.

These studies provide important evidence for the effects of interpersonal regulatory fit. While intrapersonal fit mostly manifests its effect in non-social outcomes (e.g., object evaluation and task enjoyment), the value of interpersonal fit can be transferred to social interactions (e.g., increased forgiveness, persuasion, hostility, feeling valued). However, one limitation of these studies is lack of control for confounding factors, of which the most important factor is similarity, a robust factor breeding attraction and positive interpersonal evaluation (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008). For example, in Santelli et al.'s (2009) study, promotion-focused victims showed more forgiveness toward the transgressor who apologized in an eager way. According to the intrapersonal regulatory fit phenomenon, promotion-focused victims themselves were more likely to use eager repentance when they apologized to others. Thus, it is possible that the victims' perceived similarity between themselves and the transgressor, instead of interpersonal regulatory fit, led to a more positive evaluation of the transgressor, which in turn enhanced forgiveness. In the same way, similarity might also

contribute to increased persuasion, hostility, and feelings of value reported in the other studies (i.e. Alexander et al., 2010; Cesario & Higgins, 2008; Hamstra et al., 2014).

1.3. The present study

Compared to the fruitful work on regulatory fit within an individual, little has been done to examine it at an interpersonal level. Although a few studies suggested the existence of an interpersonal regulatory fit effect (Alexander et al., 2010; Cesario & Higgins, 2008; Hamstra et al., 2014; Santelli et al., 2009), these findings do not rule out the confounding effects of similarity. Moreover, if interpersonal regulatory fit does provide additional value beyond similarity, would this increased value transfer to a more favorable evaluation of the person with whom one experiences fit? As Freitas, Liberman, and Higgins (2002) posted, "If another person's actions strategically fit one's own regulatory state, then it is possible that one will imbue the other person with additional value, as reflected in increased liking or attraction." However, this proposition has not been empirically tested. Therefore, the present study aimed to extend previous findings on interpersonal regulatory fit by (a) investigating the effect of interpersonal regulatory fit on interpersonal evaluation, (b) controlling for the effect of similarity, and (c) examining the mechanism of interpersonal regulatory fit. Based on the aforementioned findings supporting the interpersonal fit effect, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: *After controlling for similarity, the fit between the evaluator's regulatory focus and the behavioral strategy of the person being evaluated will lead to more favorable interpersonal evaluation.*

Previous studies provided evidence that a sense of feeling right is a mechanism for interpersonal fit. Cesario and Higgins (2008) found the fit between message recipients' regulatory foci and the speaker's non-verbal delivery style led to an increased sense of feeling right, which was associated with an increased level of persuasion. Santelli et al.'s (2009) results further supported the mediator role of a sense of feeling right in the relationship between interpersonal fit and forgiveness. Based on these findings, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: *The effect of interpersonal regulatory fit on interpersonal evaluation will be mediated by the evaluator's feeling right.*

We tested these hypotheses in three studies. In Study 1, we manipulated the eager versus vigilant behavior style of the person being evaluated, where eager behavior fits chronically promotion-focused participants and vigilant behavior fits chronically prevention-focused participants. We tested the effect of interpersonal fit on participants' evaluation of this person after controlling for perceived similarity (Hypothesis 1). Study 2 aimed to extend Study 1's findings under a typical formal interpersonal evaluation context: a graduate school admission interview. Specifically, we tested whether the fit between interviewers' regulatory foci and interviewee's behavior style would affect interviewers' ratings (Hypothesis 1), as well as the mediator role of interviewers' feeling right (Hypothesis 2). Study 3 adopted a different approach to further test the mediator role of feeling right by examining whether making the true sources of feeling right apparent to the evaluators would eliminate the fit effect (Hypothesis 2).

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants

Participants included 256 undergraduate students (155 females and 101 males) who were paid for their participation. They were recruited through the use of flyers posted around the university. Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 23 years ($M = 21.03$, $SD = 1.12$).

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