

People higher in self-control do not necessarily experience more happiness: Regulatory focus also affects subjective well-being



Yi Ouyang^a, Yi Zhu^b, Wei Fan^a, Qianbao Tan^a, Yiping Zhong^{a,*}

^a Hunan Key Laboratory of Cognition and Human Behavior and School of Educational Science, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China

^b School of International Business, Southwestern University of Finance and Economics, Chengdu, China

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ABSTRACT

A number of studies have shown that self-control is a key variable influencing subjective well-being (SWB). The present research demonstrated the effects of regulatory focus on SWB. Study 1 surveyed college students and found that (1) promotion-dominant people reported more SWB than prevention-dominant people, even after controlling for the effect of TSC as a covariate, and (2) the direct effect of promotion focus on SWB was significant, but the direct effect of prevention focus on SWB was not significant in the model with TSC as a mediator. Study 2 manipulated situational regulatory foci and required participants to execute a self-control task. The results showed that the two groups did not differ in task performance, or self-control, however, the promotion-focused group reported more task pleasure. These results indicate that promotion focused people are happier than prevention focused people during goal pursuit, that people can chronically and situationally benefit from promotion focus, and moreover, that people higher in self-control do not necessarily experience more SWB.

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1. Introduction

Self-control is the capacity to alter or override dominant response tendencies and to regulate behavior, thoughts, and emotions (de Ridder, Lensvelt-Mulders, Finkenauer, Stok, & Baumeister, 2012). Previous research has shown that self-control is a key variable influencing subjective well-being (SWB) (Hofmann, Luhmann, Fisher, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2013; Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004), because people high in self-control are more likely to attain their goals and to be more successful and adaptive in multiple life domains (de Ridder et al., 2012). Many studies have confirmed that people high versus low in self-control are more likely to attain positive outcomes and avoid negative outcomes; for example, they are more successful in academic achievement, in maintaining interpersonal relationship, in leading healthy lifestyles, and in distancing themselves from delinquency, crime, and impulsive and addictive behaviors (de Ridder et al., 2012; Denson, DeWall, & Finkel, 2012; Gailliot, 2012; Holt, Bossler, & May, 2011; Kim, Namkoong, Ku, & Kim, 2008; Kuijer, de Ridder, Ouweland, Houx, & van den Bos, 2008; Righetti & Finkenauer, 2011; Tangney et al., 2004; Wills, Isasi, Mendoza, & Ainette, 2007).

However, self-control mainly reflects the effects on SWB of goal performance but neglect the effects on SWB of the process of goal pursuit. Fortunately, regulatory focus can be utilized to examine these effects. As regulatory focus theory proposed, promotion and prevention foci

are two distinct but coexisting basic motivational orientations dominating the ways for people to attain their goals (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001). Thus, regulatory focus could be an appropriate index reflecting the methods that are utilized in goal pursuit. In the case of promotion focus, people attempt to move toward opportunities for positive results (gain) and away from the absence of positive results (no-gain), thus they are inclined to utilize eagerness strategies, such as developing matched actions and taking advantage of all possible opportunities to achieve goals, even at the price of commission mistakes (Higgins et al., 2001). In the case of prevention focus, people attempt to move away from the presence of a negative outcome (loss) and toward the preservation of its absence (no-loss), and they are inclined to utilize vigilance strategies, such as avoiding goal deviations or mismatched actions to attain goals, even at the price of omission mistakes (Higgins et al., 2001).

In pursuit of specific tasks, it is known that the methods of utilization are determined by people's current preponderance regulatory focus, which either stem from a chronic or a situational regulatory focus (Higgins et al., 2001; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001). Chronic regulatory focus develops over time through socialization, such as the history of success in life experiences, and parenting. It can be assessed by regulatory focus questionnaires, such as the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) developed by Higgins et al. (2001). On the other hand, priming techniques, such as gain or no-gain and loss or non-loss related framework tasks, can induce situational regulatory focus. Moreover, chronic and situational regulatory foci have an identical influence on the means of goal pursuit (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). For

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: ypzhong@163.com (Y. Zhong).

example, with both chronic and situationally induced regulatory focus, people with a promotion (prevention) focus would use eagerness (vigilance) as means when approaching goal tasks (Higgins et al., 2001).

Promotion and prevention foci are motivations pointing to goals, therefore the strength of regulatory focus has a positive effect on self-control. Researches have proposed that motivation is a premise of self-control (Hofmann & Kotabe, 2012), and that enhanced motivation could promote self-control (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007). For instance, studies have shown that after self-control depletion, enhanced motivation could improve self-control (Muraven & Slessareva, 2003; Vohs, Baumeister, & Schmeichel, 2012), whereas weakened motivation could result in reduced self-control (Inzlicht, Schmeiche, & Macrae, 2014; Inzlicht & Schmeichel, 2012; Vohs et al., 2012).

Increasing evidences indicate that the type of regulatory focus may also affect SWB. One line of evidence is that promotion-focused people report more SWB than prevention-focused people. For example, promotion- versus prevention-focused people reported better quality of life (Manczak, Zapata-Gietl, & McAdams, 2014) and more relationship well-being when suffering relationship conflicts (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011) or lacking support from their partners (Hui, Molden, & Finkel, 2013), and they experienced less negative emotions when they experienced conflict in romantic relationships and failure in academic achievement (Joel, Burton, & Plaks, 2013). Idson, Liberman, and Higgins (2000) confirmed that pleasure from success in promotion goals was generally greater than pleasure from success in prevention goals, and pain from failure in prevention goals was greater than that in promotion goals.

The other evidence is that promotion- versus prevention-focused people process information more positively. In general, promotion-focused people are more concerned with positive cues and less sensitive to negative cues than prevention-focused people (Higgins, 1997; Higgins et al., 2001). Under high information load, promotion-focused people rely more on positive information and less on negative information than prevention-focused people (Yoon, Sarial-Abi, & Gürhan-Canli, 2012). Thus promotion-focused people recall more positive affect and less negative affect in past events in comparison with prevention-focused people (Pattershall, Eidelman, & Beike, 2011), and promotion-focused people also have higher expectancies (Grant, Idson, & Higgins, 2001) and more optimistic forecasts (Hazlet, Molden, & Sacket, 2011) for their performance than prevention-focused people.

However, the two evidences above are insufficient to conclude that the type of regulatory focus also affects SWB. The higher self-control may be the potential reason why promotion-focused people are happier than prevention-focused people. For example, Lisjak

and Lee (2014) found that when people had insufficient self-control resources, they tended to be prevention-focused and engage in self-protection behaviors. Cheung, Gillebaart, Kroese, and Ridder (2014) further proposed that people high in self-control were more promotion-focused on acquiring positive gains, and thereby increasing approach-oriented behaviors; whereas they were less prevention-focused on avoiding losses, thereby reducing avoidance-oriented behaviors.

To answer the question what is the effect of motivational orientations on SWB, two studies were designed in this research. Study 1 explored the relationships among chronic promotion and prevention focus, trait self-control (TSC), and SWB by means of survey research. Study 2 adopted experimental techniques to check whether situationally induced regulatory focus could affect SWB, which was measured by task pleasure.

2. Study 1: Chronic regulatory focus and SWB

People's chronic regulatory focus affects personality inclination and tends to be utilized in new goal-directed tasks (Higgins et al., 2001). If the means of goal attainment were to have an equal effect on SWB, then (1) promotion and prevention dominant people would report equal SWB when there was no difference in self-control, and (2) the direct effect of the two regulatory foci on SWB would not be significant if self-control were a mediator. A survey measured college students' responses to items for TSC, regulatory focus, and SWB was designed to check the hypothesis.

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

The 476 participants (206 male) were students aged from 18 to 23 years ($M = 19.81, SD = 0.92$). All were enrolled in introductory psychology or mental health courses and voluntarily took part in this research for course credit.

2.1.2. Measures

2.1.2.1. Trait self-control. We employed a Chinese version of TSC (Tan & Guo, 2008) ($\alpha = .81$), which was revised from the original version (Tangney et al., 2004) and contained 13 items (such as "I am good at resisting temptation" and "I do certain things that are bad for me, if they are fun" [recoded]). Participants assessed each item from 1 (*not at all like me*) to 5 (*very much like me*). Higher scores on this scale

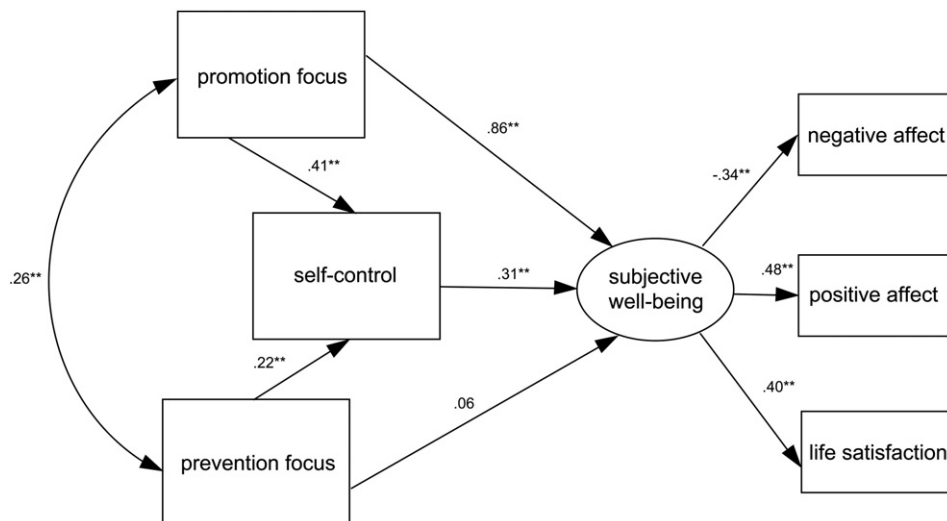


Fig. 1. Results of mediation analyses testing the effect of promotion focus and prevention focus on SWB as mediators of TSC (Study 1); * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

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