



The influence of regulatory focus and group vs. individual goals on the evaluation bias in the context of group decision making[☆]



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The evaluation bias is the tendency to prefer information confirming own decisions.
- We examined motivational preconditions of this bias in group decision making.
- Pursuing individual goals in a prevention focus enhanced the evaluation bias.
- A promotion focus and the group goal to perform well worked against the evaluation bias.
- The evaluation bias impaired memory for others' information and decision quality.

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ABSTRACT

Making good decisions as a group requires the consideration of information exchanged during a discussion, but individuals' evaluation bias (i.e., discounting of information contradicting and appreciation of information supporting members' initial preference) works against that. The current research studied motivational preconditions of this bias. It was predicted that pursuing individual goals (e.g., making a good impression or a good decision as an individual after a group discussion) in a prevention focus leads to a stronger evaluation bias than pursuing the same type of goals in a promotion focus or pursuing the goal to perform well as a group with either a promotion or a prevention focus. Four experiments supported this prediction and demonstrated that the evaluation bias is indeed associated with lower memory for critical information and lower decision quality. Hence, group goals are crucial for group decision performance – in particular in contexts inducing a prevention focus (e.g., when security is at stake).

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Decisions in business and politics are frequently made by groups of experts belonging to different domains. Groups have the potential to outperform individuals. This is in particular the case when the information available to each group member suggests an inferior decision (compared to the information available to the whole group). This distribution of information is likely to occur when experts of different domains come together. In such groups, each member possesses exclusive knowledge – so-called unshared information. A prototypic version of such a situation is the *hidden profile* paradigm (Stasser & Titus, 1985). In the hidden profile paradigm groups often fail to live up to their potential (for a meta-analysis see Lu, Yuan, & McLeod, 2012).

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While research focused for a long time on coordination deficits (e.g., not sharing the critical unshared information), Greitemeyer and Schulz-Hardt (2003) opened a new avenue of research on obstacles to optimal group decisions. They pointed out that the problem starts on the intra-individual level. Group decision quality suffers, because group members form an initial decision which provides the basis for an *evaluation bias*: the tendency to evaluate information supporting one's own decision as more relevant than information contradicting the own decision (also often called confirmation bias, for a review see Nickerson, 1998). The evaluation bias prevents that a person, once having formed a wrong initial decision based on a subset of information, will alter his/her decision after having been provided with all available information. This bias substantially contributes to the fact that hidden profile groups do not live up to their potential (Greitemeyer & Schulz-Hardt, 2003).

The preconditions of the evaluation bias in the group context are not very well understood yet, because research has concentrated on ways to overcome this bias (for summary see Schultz-Hardt & Mojzisch, 2013).

Beyond the group decision making context similar biases are barely related to cognitive abilities (Stanovich & West, 2008), whereas motivational factors seem to play a crucial role (e.g., attitudinal commitment, Sweeney & Gruber, 1984; or trait anxiety, Frey, Stahlberg, & Fries, 1986). Hence, motivation is also likely to influence the evaluation bias in the context of hidden profiles (cf., Butera & Mugny, 2001).

The current research sought to contribute to the understanding of the motivational sources of the evaluation bias. To this end, we tested the interactive impact of regulatory focus and goals on the evaluation bias. We predicted and found that a prevention focus (compared to a promotion focus) enhances the evaluation bias if decision makers pursue an individual level goal, but not if they pursue the goal to perform well as a group. Thereby, the current research contributes to the understanding of the intra-individual causes of low group decision performance.

Regulatory focus and defensive tendencies

According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997), two motivational foci should be differentiated: promotion focus and prevention focus. They differ in their underlying needs (achievement and accomplishment in a promotion focus vs. safety and security in a prevention focus). Individuals in a promotion focus tend to apply eager and enthusiastic strategies. In other words, they try to make hits by responding rather than not responding (or responding positively rather than negatively). This leads, among other things, to global thinking and trying out new things. In contrast, individuals in a prevention focus use vigilant and defensive strategies, or in signal detection terms: They try to avoid false alarms by not responding rather than responding (or responding negatively rather than positively). As a consequence, individuals in a prevention focus follow rules, try to avoid errors, and think rather locally.

The different strategies applied in the two motivational foci suggest that regulatory focus should affect defensive tendencies in (group) decision making. In particular, a prevention focus generally elicits a defensive strategy that aims for avoiding false alarms. Theorizing suggests that a bias such as the evaluation bias results from the motivation to avoid errors (for summary see Nickerson, 1998) – for example erroneously changing the initial decision in group decision making. Taken together, the evaluation bias constitutes a defensive tendency (cf., Butera & Mugny, 2001) that should be enhanced in a prevention focus.

At first glance, the prediction that a prevention focus leads to a stronger evaluation bias and thus works against individual performance in the context of (group) decisions might seem surprising, because research has shown that in analytic tasks (in contrast to creative tasks; Friedman & Förster, 2005) the prevention focus leads to better performance. Hidden profiles are analytic (rather than creative) tasks, as they require comparing alternatives by verifying how many pieces of information either support or question the respective alternative. There is, however, a crucial difference between individual and group decision making (cf., Greitemeyer & Schulz-Hardt, 2003): When deciding alone, individuals think carefully about the available information until they have come to a satisfying decision. Here, a defensive strategy facilitates the consideration of new information until a high level of certainty about the decision at hand is reached. In this case, avoiding false alarms implies avoiding to disclose a decision in a too early stage.

For group decision making, Greitemeyer and Schulz-Hardt (2003) suggested (and found) that the process is usually split into an individual preparation phase ending with an initial decision and a group discussion phase in which additional information is exchanged. The individual preparation phase before the discussion might follow the same pattern as in individual decision making, but this phase ends with a preliminary decision (i.e., an idea what the right decision might be). The information from the other group members becomes available only after the individual has made a preliminary decision. At this point, the prevention focus should lead to a tendency to defend the initial decision (no matter whether this happens when individually reading new information or receiving it in a group discussion, cf. Greitemeyer & Schulz-Hardt,

2003). Avoiding false alarms after an initial decision means to avoid indicating too early (and potentially erroneously) that one has changed his/her decision. Thus, individuals in a prevention focus should be more likely to stick to their initial decision (compared to individuals in a promotion focus). In sum, after an initial decision, the prevention focus should enhance defensive tendencies such as the evaluation bias.

Research applying regulatory focus theory to a number of phenomena has provided evidence that indirectly supports this prediction. First, Friedman and Förster (2001, Exp. 4) have shown that individuals in a prevention focus have a harder time to abandon an initial solution of a task than individuals in a promotion focus. Once having identified an initial solution to a word stem completion task, it took participants in a prevention focus longer to find an alternative solution.

Second, individuals' preference for stability is stronger in a prevention focus than in a promotion focus. Individuals in a prevention focus decide more often to continue a task instead of starting a new task after having been interrupted, and they are more reluctant to exchange objects they own for other objects (i.e., show a stronger endowment effect; Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; for similar findings concerning goal disengagement see Lench & Levine, 2008).

Finally, a prevention focus leads to stronger escalating commitment than a promotion focus. Having made an initial investment decision that turned out wrong (but not when others made this decision) individuals in a prevention focus are more likely to invest more money into the same project than individuals in a promotion focus (Molden & Hui, 2011). In other words, when individuals in a prevention focus have committed themselves to a decision, they have a harder time to give it up, even in the light of negative feedback (compared to individuals in a promotion focus).

All these empirical examples show that – in line with our reasoning above – individuals in a prevention focus have a harder time to change their decision or opinion compared to individuals in a promotion focus. Therefore, after individuals have made an initial decision, a prevention focus (compared to a promotion focus) should facilitate defensive strategies such as an evaluation bias with regard to the consecutive decision process.

However, strategic orientations like a regulatory focus do not work in a vacuum, but affect specific actions taken during goal striving (Brendl & Higgins, 1996). For the current context, this implies that the defensive strategy resulting from a prevention focus might result in different evaluations and actions depending on the specific goal individuals try to achieve in the discussion. In what follows, we put forward the argument that the impact of a prevention focus on the evaluation bias will only occur when pursuing an individual goal, but not when pursuing the group goal to achieve a good performance.

The moderating role of goals

Wittenbaum, Hollingshead, and Botero (2004) suggested, as an outcome of an extensive review, that group members in hidden profile-like situations do not necessarily pursue the goal to reach a good group decision, but they often rather form individual goals (such as making a good impression). In line with this conclusion, (a) high status group members (i.e., individuals who already achieved the goal to make a good impression) and (b) group members who are familiar with each other and therefore do not need to give special consideration to the impression they make on the others anymore, share more unshared information and perform better on hidden profile tasks (Gruenfeld, Mannix, Williams, & Neale, 1996; Wittenbaum, 2000). This indicates that in cases where individual goals and concerns do *not* dominate over group goals, group performance is superior.

This does not imply that any group goals would help to resolve hidden profiles. Testing the impact of different group standards, Postmes, Spears, and Cihangir (2001) demonstrated that groups with the norm to criticize each other to achieve performance improvement are more likely to solve hidden profiles than groups aiming at consensus. Even

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