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## Regulatory Focus and Romantic Alternatives

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**M**odern humans face a social milieu teeming with possible romantic alternatives. Even after accounting for individual differences in the ability to attract romantic partners, however, not everybody responds to this social milieu in the same way; people differ markedly in how they attend to, evaluate, and

pursue romantic alternatives. In the present chapter, we (a) employ the principles of regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) to examine the strategic motivations that might underlie these differences, and (b) review a recent series of studies investigating the interplay between regulatory focus and individuals' responses to romantic alternatives (Molden, Finkel, Johnson, & Eastwick, 2008). We explore the idea that individuals who are broadly oriented toward eagerly pursuing gains (promotion-focused individuals) generally attend more closely to romantic alternatives, evaluate them more positively, and pursue them more vigorously than do individuals who are broadly oriented toward vigilantly protecting against losses (prevention-focused individuals).

## ROMANTIC ALTERNATIVES

An *alternative* refers to “one of the things, propositions, or courses which can be chosen” (*Random House Dictionary*). We use the term *romantic alternatives* to refer both to (a) substitutes for a particular romantic partner and (b) the romantic possibilities of singles. A large corpus of evidence demonstrates that individuals' perceptions of the romantic alternatives to their current partner powerfully predict relationship outcomes with that partner. For example, to the degree that individuals evaluate their alternatives positively, they tend to be less committed to their romantic partner (Le & Agnew, 2003; Rusbult, 1980) and are at greater risk of subsequent breakup (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 1996; Rusbult, 1983).

We suggest that there are at least three components of individuals' tendencies regarding romantic alternatives: attending to, evaluating, and pursuing them. *Attending to alternatives* refers to the tendency to perceive the people one encounters in the course of one's daily interactions as potential partners and to classify these individuals as romantic interests. *Evaluating alternatives* refers to the tendency to rate multiple romantic options as desirable at any given time. *Pursuing alternatives* refers to the tendency to be assertive in initiating a relationship with those alternatives whom the individual has evaluated positively.

## COMMITMENT AND ROMANTIC ALTERNATIVES

The best-developed line of research on romantic alternatives demonstrates that individuals' commitment to their current relationship can, via motivated cognitive processes, alter how they respond to romantic alternatives. According to interdependence theorists (Arriaga & Agnew, 2001; Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996), *commitment* refers to the extent to which individuals are psychologically attached to the relationship, intend for it to persist, and have a long-term orientation toward it. Highly committed individuals tend to be psychologically invested in and psychologically dependent upon their relationship (Agnew, Van Lange, Rusbult, & Langston, 1998), and they tend to be especially willing to sacrifice for their partner (Van Lange et al., 1997) and to forgive their partner's transgressions (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002).

Perhaps not surprisingly, greater commitment to a given relationship predicts less attention to and less positive evaluations of the alternatives to the relationship. For example, relative to their less committed counterparts, heterosexual individuals

who are strongly committed to their romantic relationship spend less time looking at attractive opposite-sex targets (Miller, 1997, 2008). Highly committed individuals are also more likely to evaluate such strangers as undesirable, especially if these strangers are both attractive and available (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989). In a related finding, college-aged individuals who are involved in exclusive (“committed”) romantic relationships tend to evaluate college-aged, opposite-sex strangers (but not college-aged, same-sex strangers or middle-aged, opposite-sex strangers) as less attractive than do individuals who are either single or involved in a nonexclusive romantic relationship (Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990). In short, individuals who are highly committed to their current romantic relationship tend to evaluate romantic alternatives as less desirable than do individuals who are less committed, and this tendency is especially strong when the alternative is threatening to the current relationship (see also Lydon, Fitzsimons, & Naidoo, 2003; Lydon, Meana, Sepinwall, Richards, & Mayman, 1999).

## REGULATORY FOCUS THEORY: PROMOTION AND PREVENTION MOTIVATIONS

Despite this impressive and long-standing literature on the link between relationship commitment and derogation of romantic alternatives, scholars have only recently started to advance more systematic analyses of the motivational underpinnings of individuals’ tendencies regarding romantic alternatives (Molden, Finkel, et al., 2008). This analysis begins with the straightforward observation that individuals are motivated to fulfill a variety of basic needs that are central to both their physical and social well-being. Scholars have frequently distinguished needs concerned with advancement (i.e., nourishment, growth, and development) from needs concerned with security (i.e., shelter, safety, and protection) (see Bowlby, 1969/1982; Maslow, 1955). Building upon this distinction, regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) proposes that motivations for advancement and security not only originate in different needs, but they also foster different modes of goal pursuit. That is, individuals represent and experience motivations for advancement (*promotion concerns*) differently from how they represent and experience motivations for security (*prevention concerns*; see Förster & Liberman, chap. 9, this volume; Unkelbach, Plessner, & Memmert, chap. 6, this volume).

When pursuing promotion concerns, individuals are focused on identifying and capitalizing on opportunities for gain that will bring them closer to the ideals they hope to attain. They strive toward the presence of positive outcomes (i.e., *gains*), while attempting to avoid the absence of positive outcomes (i.e., unrealized opportunities, or *nongains*). In contrast, when pursuing prevention concerns, individuals are focused on anticipating and protecting against potential losses that might keep them from fulfilling their responsibilities. They strive toward the absence of negative outcomes (i.e., safety from threats, or *nonlosses*), while attempting to avoid the presence of negative outcomes (i.e., *losses*; Higgins, 1997; Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008).

Because promotion concerns generate a focus on advancement, they motivate individuals to adopt judgment and information-processing strategies that involve

eagerly seeking gains, even at the risk of committing errors. That is, promotion-focused individuals prefer to take chances and to be overly inclusive when evaluating possibilities, so as not to overlook any opportunity that would allow them to achieve a gain. In contrast, because prevention concerns generate a focus on security, they motivate individuals to adopt judgment and information-processing strategies that involve vigilantly protecting against losses, even at the risk of forgoing possible gains. That is, prevention-focused individuals prefer to play it safe and to be overly exclusive when evaluating possibilities, so as not to commit to an option that might produce a loss (see Higgins & Molden, 2003; Molden & Higgins, 2005).

Examining how individuals consider alternative hypotheses provides a basic illustration of the difference between promotion-focused and prevention-focused judgment strategies that is relevant to the present research (Lieberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Lieberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2004, 2008; see also Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Förster, 2001). An eager, promotion-focused strategy of considering alternatives should involve being open to many possibilities, as this approach increases the chance of identifying correct hypotheses and of avoiding the omission of any information that might be important. In contrast, a vigilant, prevention-focused strategy of considering alternatives should involve narrowing in on what seems most certain, as this approach increases the chance of rejecting incorrect hypotheses and avoiding commitment to alternatives that are mistaken.

Several studies tested this possibility by examining the hypotheses people form about others' actions (Lieberman et al., 2001). In one study, participants read about a target person's helpful behavior and then evaluated several explanations for this behavior. Results confirmed that although they did not differ in which explanation they rated as most likely, individuals with promotion concerns generated more possible explanations and simultaneously endorsed a greater number of explanations as plausible than did individuals with prevention concerns. Similarly, we suggest that romantically unattached individuals will consider a greater number of possible romantic options if they are promotion-focused than if they are prevention-focused.

A conceptually related series of studies examined individuals' tendencies either to stick with the established course of action (resume an interrupted activity) or to switch to a new course of action (perform a substitute activity; Lieberman et al., 1999). Promotion-focused individuals were much more likely to switch to a new course of action than were prevention-focused individuals. Similarly, we suggest that romantically involved individuals will be more open-minded to romantic alternatives (potentially switching their focus to the new person) if they are promotion-focused than if they are prevention-focused.

Building on this research on judgment and information-processing strategies, we have argued that, as compared to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused individuals will pay more attention to romantic alternatives in their everyday lives, simultaneously evaluate a greater number of these alternatives as desirable, and pursue these desirable alternatives more vigorously (Molden, Finkel, et al., 2008). We further argue that regulatory focus should moderate the negative association of commitment with evaluation of alternatives, with promotion-focused individuals exhibiting a weaker negative association than

prevention-focused individuals. This interaction effect should emerge because promotion-focused tendencies to simultaneously evaluate numerous alternatives as desirable should partially counteract the alternatives-devaluing effects of commitment; in contrast, prevention-focused tendencies to evaluate alternatives negatively will not counteract the alternatives-devaluing effects of commitment and could even strengthen them.

## DO PROMOTION-FOCUSED AND PREVENTION-FOCUSED INDIVIDUALS DIFFER IN THEIR ROMANTIC STANDARDS?

We have argued that promotion-focused individuals are more likely than prevention-focused individuals to attend to alternatives, evaluate them positively, and pursue them vigorously. Might promotion-focused individuals also have lower standards for romantic alternatives than prevention-focused individuals do? The term *romantic standards* refers to individuals' tendency to be picky or selective in determining whether a given person is sufficiently appealing to meet their threshold for an acceptable romantic alternative.

One possibility is that promotion-focused individuals, because of their eager emphasis on achieving gains and avoiding nongains, are willing to consider as romantic alternatives individuals who span a greater range of objective desirability than will their prevention-focused counterparts. Alternatively, regulatory focus may not be associated with romantic standards. Rather, promotion-focused individuals' advancement-oriented strategies may cause them to see romantic alternatives in places prevention-focused individuals will not (e.g., when casually encountering the barista at Starbucks or the cute guy on the subway), which leads them to select among a larger pool of eligibles. If promotion-focused individuals have equally high standards to prevention-focused individuals but cast a wider net, then a larger number of people will exceed their threshold for a romantic interest. We did not initially advance firm predictions about the association of regulatory focus with romantic standards because regulatory focus theory could readily account for results indicating either that (a) promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals do not differ in their romantic standards or (b) that promotion-focused individuals have lower standards than prevention-focused individuals.

We tested the following three hypotheses in a series of three studies employing cross-sectional, longitudinal, and speed-dating procedures (Molden, Finkel, et al., 2008):

- H1:** Promotion-focused individuals attend more to, more positively evaluate, and more vigorously pursue their romantic alternatives than do prevention-focused individuals.
- H2:** Individuals who are strongly committed to their current partner (or to pursuing a relationship with a potential partner) evaluate romantic alternatives more negatively than their less committed counterparts do (see Johnson & Rusbult, 1989).
- H3:** The association of commitment with negative evaluations of romantic alternatives (H2) is weaker for promotion-focused individuals than for prevention-focused individuals.

## STUDY 1: REGULATORY FOCUS AND SELF-REPORTED ATTENTION TO AND PURSUIT OF ROMANTIC ALTERNATIVES

Our objective in Study 1 was to provide a first test of the hypothesis that promotion-focused individuals typically adopt an advancement-oriented strategy toward romantic alternatives (attending closely to them and pursuing them vigorously), whereas prevention-focused individuals typically adopt a more security-oriented strategy (attending less closely to them and not pursuing them vigorously). It also allowed us to explore whether the romantic standards of promotion-focused individuals differ from those of prevention-focused individuals.

Participants were 112 Northwestern University students (68 women, 44 men) enrolled in an introductory psychology course who volunteered in exchange for course credit. They completed questionnaires measuring regulatory focus, romantic alternatives, and romantic standards.

We assessed the strength of participants' motivations for promotion and prevention with the well-validated Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001), which asked participants to report how often in their lives they felt they had succeeded on both their generally promotion-focused goals (e.g., "How often have you accomplished things that got you 'psyched' to work even harder?") and their generally prevention-focused goals (e.g., "How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?"). Because perceptions of past success in a particular domain are related to greater expectations of and value for future success in that domain (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), participants' subjective reports of successful promotion or prevention self-regulation served as proxies for the overall strength of their promotion and prevention motivations. Many past studies using the RFQ have confirmed the validity of this approach (see Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003; Grant & Higgins, 2003; Higgins et al., 2001; Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007).

We assessed participants' *attention to alternatives* with a six-item measure (e.g., "I am distracted by other people that I find attractive"; see Miller, 1997). We assessed participants' tendencies to *pursue alternatives* with a two-item measure (e.g., "I usually initiate a dating or romantic relationship with someone rather than waiting for that person to initiate"). Finally, we assessed *romantic standards* with a one-item measure ("I am very picky about my choice of romantic partners").

As predicted, regulatory focus motivations significantly and positively predicted participants' tendencies to attend to and to pursue alternatives. Promotion-focused individuals were more apt to report attending to alternatives and pursuing them vigorously than were prevention-focused individuals. In contrast, no evidence emerged for any association of regulatory focus motivations with romantic standards.

Despite providing evidence supporting the hypothesized association of regulatory focus with the romantic alternatives dependent measures, Study 1 had several limitations. In addition to the various weaknesses associated with cross-sectional methods, this study did not investigate participants' evaluations of romantic alternatives, focusing instead on attending to and pursuing alternatives. To examine the

association of regulatory focus motivations with evaluations of romantic alternatives, we conducted an intensive longitudinal investigation of individuals who were involved in romantic relationships.

## STUDY 2: REGULATORY FOCUS AND CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVES TO AN ESTABLISHED RELATIONSHIP

In Study 2, we recruited a sample of participants who were involved in an established and stable romantic relationship. Participants evaluated the desirability of their romantic alternatives every other week for 6 months, starting 3 weeks into their first year of university study. We hypothesized that promotion-focused individuals (H1) and individuals who were less strongly committed to their partner (H2) would evaluate their romantic alternatives to be more desirable than would prevention-focused individuals or individuals who were more committed to their partner, respectively. In addition, we hypothesized that the negative associations of commitment with evaluations of romantic alternatives would be weaker for promotion-focused individuals than for prevention-focused individuals (H3).

Participants were 43 first-year Northwestern University students (25 women, 18 men) whom we recruited via flyers posted around campus. At study entry, most participants were 18 years old and they had been involved with their dating partners for over a year, on average.

After participants signed up for the study, we mailed them a questionnaire packet, which included a measure of their motivations for promotion and prevention. They brought these completed questionnaires to an initial laboratory session, where we trained them on the logistics of completing the online (i.e., Internet-based) questionnaires. These online questionnaires included time-varying assessments of relationship commitment and of the desirability of the alternatives to their current partner. Participants completed the first of these online questionnaires within the first 2 days after the laboratory session, and they completed subsequent questionnaires every other week for 6 months, for 14 online waves in total.

As in Study 1, we used the RFQ to assess the strength of participants' motivations for promotion and prevention. We assessed *commitment* with a two-item measure at each wave of the online questionnaires ("I am committed to maintaining this relationship in the long run" and "I think my partner is my 'soulmate'").

All of the Study 2 participants were involved in established and stable romantic relationships, so we concentrated on participants' evaluations of the desirability of the romantic alternatives to their current partner. We assessed *evaluation of alternatives* with the following item: "The alternatives to my current relationship (including being on my own) are desirable."

We tested our hypotheses with a two-step data-analytic procedure. First, we tested the regulatory focus (H1) and commitment (H2) main effect hypotheses in a simultaneous multilevel regression model predicting evaluation of alternatives from regulatory focus motivations and commitment. Supporting H1, greater promotion (compared to prevention) focus predicted more positive evaluation of one's alternatives. Supporting H2, greater commitment predicted more negative evaluation of one's alternatives.

Second, we tested our Regulatory Focus Index  $\times$  Commitment interaction effect hypothesis (H3) by adding this interaction term to the main effects model described in the preceding paragraph. The interaction effect was significant: The negative association of commitment with evaluation of alternatives was weaker for promotion-focused individuals than for prevention-focused individuals.

Taken together, the results from Studies 1 and 2 suggest that promotion-focused individuals attend to (Study 1), positively evaluate (Study 2), and vigorously pursue (Study 1) relationship alternatives more than prevention-focused individuals do. The results from Study 2 also suggest that the negative association of commitment with evaluation of alternatives is weaker for promotion-focused individuals than for prevention-focused individuals.

In Study 3, we examined whether the derogation of alternatives dynamics that have proven to be so robust among participants in established relationships also applies among romantically unattached participants who have developed interest in a potential romantic partner. For example, if single individuals are strongly committed to pursuing a full-fledged romantic relationship with a given potential partner, will they evaluate alternative potential partners more negatively than if they were less committed to pursuing a relationship with that partner? More importantly for the present chapter, if this negative association of commitment with evaluation of romantic alternatives emerges in a romantically unattached sample, will this association be stronger for prevention-focused individuals than for promotion-focused individuals? In addition, Study 3 included several measures of relationship standards, including a behavioral measure, to extend beyond the single-measure assessment in Study 1.

### STUDY 3: REGULATORY FOCUS AND CONSIDERATION OF ALTERNATIVES AMONG THE ROMANTICALLY UNATTACHED

Participants completed questionnaires measuring their promotion and prevention motivations, their romantic alternatives, and their romantic standards. They then attended a speed-dating event (see Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Finkel & Eastwick, 2008), where they met approximately 12 potential relationship partners. Finally, they reported on their romantic interest in these and in other potential partners over the course of a monthlong follow-up after the speed-dating event. In addition to attempting to replicate the results from Study 1 with data from the questionnaire participants completed before attending the speed-dating event, we hypothesized that promotion-focused participants (compared to prevention-focused participants) would evaluate their alternatives more positively, reporting a greater number of romantic interests following the speed-dating event and perceiving the alternatives to each of these romantic interests to be more desirable. And, as in Study 1, we also explored whether the romantic standards of promotion-focused individuals differ from those of prevention-focused individuals, this time employing both self-report and behavioral measures to generate three distinct assessments of participants' standards.

In addition to these predictions, which were derived from H1, we also tested (for the first time among singles) whether more committed individuals would evaluate their alternatives to a particular romantic interest as less desirable than would their less committed counterparts (H2)—and whether this effect would be weaker among promotion-focused individuals than among prevention-focused individuals (H3).

Participants were 163 Northwestern University students (81 women, 82 men) who were recruited through campus-wide advertisements and e-mails. The procedure consisted of three parts (for complete study details, see Finkel, Eastwick, & Matthews, 2007). In Part 1, participants completed an online *pre-event questionnaire* assessing both motivations for promotion and prevention, and measures of evaluation and pursuit of romantic alternatives.

In Part 2, participants attended a *speed-dating event*. Approximately 10 days after completing the pre-event questionnaire, they attended one of seven 2-hour speed-dating events that we hosted on Northwestern's campus. At each event, participants went on 4-minute "dates" with each of the ~12 opposite-sex individuals present, and they completed a brief *interaction record* questionnaire at the end of each date. Afterward, participants returned home and indicated through the study Web site whom they would or would not be interested in seeing again. If two participants were both interested in each other, they were notified of this "match."

In Part 3, participants completed a series of 10 *follow-up questionnaires*, which were administered through the study Web site. Participants completed the first of these 10 questionnaires 2 days after the speed-dating event, and they completed the rest of them every third day over the ensuing month. On these follow-up questionnaires, participants reported not only on matches whom they met at the speed-dating event, but also on romantic interests whom they met via other avenues ("write-ins").

We assessed the strength of participants' motivations for promotion and prevention on the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1) using an abbreviated and modified version of the measure we used in Studies 1 and 2. On the follow-up questionnaires (Part 3), participants completed a two-item measure assessing *commitment* to pursuing a relationship with each match or write-in. These items were: "I am committed to pursuing/maintaining a romantic relationship with [partner name]" and "I would like to have a serious relationship with [partner name]." (The study Web site automatically inserted into the question the actual first name of each romantic interest.)

We assessed three measures of participants' tendencies regarding romantic alternatives. *Pursuit of alternatives* was assessed on the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1) with the two-item measure from Study 1. The other two dependent variables were assessed on the follow-up questionnaires (Part 3). On each of these 10 questionnaires, participants reported whether each of their matches and write-ins did or did not have romantic potential. We summed the number of romantic interests to create our measure of *evaluation of alternatives (number)*; a larger number indicates an evaluation that one's social environment includes romantically desirable people. In addition to this quantity measure of romantic alternatives, participants also completed a one-item *evaluation of alternatives (desirability)*

measure assessing the alternatives to each match or write-in (“My romantic alternatives to [partner name] are desirable”). These two evaluations of alternatives measures referred not only to speed-dating matches but also to other potential partners whom participants met in their everyday life.

Building on Study 1, we also included three measures of romantic standards to explore the possibility that promotion-focused individuals have lower standards for romantic alternatives than prevention-focused individuals do. First, we assessed on the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1) *romantic standards (self-report)* with the same measure employed in Study 1. Second, we assessed at the speed-dating event (Part 2) *romantic standards (behavioral)* by calculating the proportion of speed-dating partners whom participants indicated they would like to see again. Third, we assessed on the postdate interaction records at the speed-dating event (Part 2) *romantic standards (desire)* by taking the average level of romantic desire participants exhibited across all of their speed dates (e.g., “I was sexually attracted to my interaction partner”).

These “behavioral” and “desire” measures allowed us to assess romantic standards within the closed field of eligible partners consisting of those opposite-sex individuals from the speed-dating event. The distinction between open versus closed field of eligible partners is crucial. If promotion-focused individuals have lower standards than prevention-focused individuals, then they should say yes to a larger proportion of the given set of ~12 potential partners they encountered at the speed-dating event (a closed field of eligibles), and they should rate these potential partners as more desirable. In contrast, if regulatory focus is not associated with romantic standards, then promotion- and prevention-focused individuals should only start to differ from one another on the follow-up questionnaires; only there does the field of eligibles go from closed (speed-dating event) to open (not only the matches from the speed-dating event, but also any other romantic interests developed in everyday life).

As predicted (H1), positive associations emerged for all three dependent measures. Individuals with a promotion focus generally pursued their romantic alternatives more vigorously than did individuals with a prevention orientation (Part 1). In addition, relative to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused individuals reported being romantically interested in a greater number of potential partners on the follow-up questionnaires, and they rated the alternatives to each of these romantic interests as more desirable (Part 3). Also, as in Study 1, no evidence emerged for any association of regulatory focus motivations with our romantic standards measures.

We next sought to test our commitment main effect (H2) and our interaction effect (H3) hypotheses. Recall that commitment was assessed as a partner-specific dependent measure at each of the 10 follow-up waves. As in Study 2, we first performed a simultaneous multilevel regression predicting evaluation of alternatives (desirability) from regulatory focus motivations and commitment. In this analysis, greater promotion (compared to prevention) focus continued to predict more positive evaluation of one’s alternatives, and greater commitment predicted more negative evaluation of one’s alternatives.

Next, we tested our Regulatory Focus Index  $\times$  Commitment interaction effect hypothesis (H3) by adding this interaction term to the main effect model described

in the preceding paragraph. The interaction effect was significant: The negative association of commitment with evaluation of alternatives was weaker for promotion-focused individuals than for prevention-focused individuals. In sum, the Study 3 results complement those from Studies 1 and 2 in suggesting that promotion and prevention motivations may influence people's tendencies regarding romantic alternatives across the initiation and development of their romantic relationships.

## SUMMARY OF EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The results from three studies supported the hypothesis that promotion-focused individuals attend more to romantic alternatives, evaluate them more positively, and pursue them more vigorously than prevention-focused individuals do. These results emerged for romantically involved individuals who reported on alternatives to their current partner (Study 2) and for romantically unattached individuals who reported on potential romantic partners in the month following a speed-dating event (Study 3). Despite these robust differences between promotion- and prevention-focused individuals across our core romantic alternatives measures, these individuals did not differ in their romantic standards in determining whether a given person is sufficiently appealing to meet their threshold for an acceptable romantic alternative (Studies 1 and 3). The results from Studies 2 and 3 also supported the hypotheses (a) that individuals who are strongly committed to a current (Study 2) or a potential (Study 3) partner evaluate romantic alternatives more negatively than their less committed counterparts do, and (b) that this association of commitment with negative evaluations of romantic alternatives is weaker for promotion-focused individuals than for prevention-focused individuals.

Given that our results were correlational rather than experimental, we sought to establish in auxiliary statistical analyses that they could not be readily explained by mechanisms other than regulatory focus. As such, we tested across studies whether the results were robust beyond any effects of participants' (a) sociosexuality orientation (Studies 1 through 3), (b) sex drive (Studies 1 and 3), (c) self-esteem or dating self-confidence (Studies 2 and 3), or (d) objective mate value or physical attractiveness (Study 3). In all cases, the regulatory focus results remained significant in these confound analyses.

## REGULATORY FOCUS AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

The present research represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential of regulatory focus theory to inform research on romantic relationships. For example, several lines of as-yet unpublished research demonstrate the value of distinguishing between promotion and prevention motivations to understand relationship dynamics. One line of research demonstrates that individuals tend to be especially happy and well-adjusted in their marriages to the extent that their spouse has a complementary rather than a similar regulatory focus (Lake et al., 2008). Experimental follow-up studies suggest that complementary regulatory focus orientations allow the couple to divide labor such that each person focuses on those tasks which

sustain either their eager versus vigilant goal-pursuit preferences (thereby leading to experiences of regulatory fit; see Higgins, 2000).

A second line of research demonstrates that trust is an especially important predictor of forgiveness for individuals in a promotion focus, whereas commitment is an especially important predictor for individuals in a prevention focus (Molden & Finkel, 2008). Because trust represents individuals' expectation that their partner will act in benevolent or beneficial ways (e.g., Holmes & Rempel, 1989), it should be an especially important consideration for promotion-focused individuals. In contrast, because commitment represents individuals' psychological dependence on their relationship and signals their motivation to maintain it (e.g., Arriaga & Agnew, 2001), it should be an especially important consideration for prevention-focused individuals. Results from a series of studies provided empirical support for these predictions.

A third line of research demonstrates that receiving promotion-focused social support from one's romantic partner promotes personal and relational well-being for both dating and married individuals, whereas receiving prevention-focused social support does so only for married individuals (Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, in press). The increased emphasis on relationship maintenance once a couple goes from dating to married seems to elevate the importance of prevention-focused goal pursuit, and the value of such pursuit for relationship well-being. Whereas having a partner who supports one's promotion-focused goals is important in both dating and marital relationships, having a partner who supports one's prevention-focused goals seems not to be especially important until individuals experience the structural commitment associated with marriage.

Our sense is that the motivational distinctions advanced by regulatory focus theory can readily inform relationships literatures well beyond romantic alternatives, similarity and complementarity, forgiveness, and social support. The low-hanging fruit is plentiful.

## IS IT BEST NOT TO DATE PROMOTION-FOCUSED INDIVIDUALS?

If promotion-focused individuals are more likely than prevention-focused individuals to attend to, positively evaluate, and vigorously pursue romantic alternatives, perhaps it is wise not to get involved with them romantically. After all, the relationships of romantically involved individuals who attend to alternatives (Miller, 1997, in press) and who evaluate these alternatives positively (Bui et al., 1996; Rusbult, 1983) are more likely to dissolve than the relationships of people who attend minimally to alternatives and evaluate them less positively. Why would people interested in pursuing a long-term relationship choose to date a promotion-focused individual when they could date a perfectly good prevention-focused individual instead?

We believe that the answer to this question is complex. If individuals' primary romantic goal is to find a partner who will not flirt with other people and who will not inspire jealousy, then they may well be better off dating prevention-focused rather than promotion-focused partners. It is likely, however, that dating promotion-focused individuals has advantages in other relational domains.

Promotion-focused individuals (compared to prevention-focused individuals) presumably pursue risky relationship strategies not only regarding alternatives to a given relationship partner, but also regarding this particular partner, and some of these risky strategies may well be relationship-enhancing. For example, promotion-focused individuals may be much more likely than prevention-focused individuals to whisk their partner away on a spontaneous and adventurous vacation toward the goal of advancing the well-being of the relationship.

Of course, this trade off analysis applies not only to which partners are best but also to which predominant motivational orientation one should adopt to ensure the best relationship outcomes for oneself. When one is single, being promotion-focused increases the likelihood that one will evaluate one's alternatives as desirable and find a romantic partner. However, once one is in a meaningful relationship, being promotion-focused decreases the likelihood that one will derogate other romantic alternatives. As such, perhaps promotion motivations and prevention motivations may be differentially advantageous at different stages of a relationship. Future research could examine whether the most satisfied individuals are those whose focus shifts from promotion to prevention once they find a partner to whom they want to commit.

## WHAT ABOUT APPROACH AND AVOIDANCE MOTIVATIONS?

In a compelling and influential program of research, Gable and colleagues have demonstrated the importance of distinguishing between approach and avoidance goals in romantic relationships (e.g., Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Updegraff, Gable, & Taylor, 2004; see Gable, 2006). This research has demonstrated, among other things, that approach goals are especially likely to predict positive relationship outcomes and that avoidance goals are especially likely to predict negative relationship outcomes. The distinction between approach and avoidance goals is sometimes interpreted as nearly identical to the distinction between promotion and prevention goals, but we suggest that these two distinctions differentiate between quite different pairs of motivations (see Higgins, 1997).

Although promotion concerns involve the presence versus absence of positive outcomes, this is not equivalent to a focus on desired end states. Similarly, although prevention concerns involve the presence versus absence of negative outcomes, this is not equivalent to a focus on undesired end states. Instead, promotion and prevention concerns determine whether individuals represent a desired or undesired end state in terms of growth and advancement versus safety and security (Higgins, 1997; Molden, Lee, et al., 2008). To illustrate, we revisit our forgiveness example. A promotion-focused person might work toward achieving forgiveness because she views doing so as an opportunity to become closer to her partner (i.e., as a gain that would bring relationship advancement), whereas a prevention-focused person might work toward achieving forgiveness because she views doing so as an obligation to maintain an important relationship (i.e., as a nonloss that would bring relationship security). Both of these women are pursuing the same

positive end state (forgiveness), but the first person represents this goal pursuit in promotion terms and the latter does so in prevention terms.

Furthermore, the results of the studies reported above demonstrate that it is concerns with prevention rather than promotion that predict a derogation of attractive alternatives to a current romantic interest or relationship partner. If prevention-focused individuals were more likely to experience or anticipate reduced relationship satisfaction, as would presumably be the case if they were generally motivated by avoidance-oriented relationship goals, one would instead expect increased thoughts about and more positive evaluations of alternatives to a current romantic interest or partner. That this pattern of findings did not emerge is further evidence that concerns with promotion or prevention are distinct from general motivations for approach or avoidance. Thus, future research on how people's motivations influence their relationship processes might profit from simultaneously examining the distinct, and perhaps even interactive, effects of these two separate motivational systems (for examples of research that simultaneously examines both approach and avoidance goals and promotion and prevention goals in nonromantic domains, see Carver, Lawrence, & Scheier, 1999; Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998; Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994).

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, scholars have increasingly examined the importance of self-regulatory processes in understanding relationship dynamics (e.g., Finkel, 2008; Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Vohs, Lasaleta, & Fennis, Chapter 17, this volume). The present chapter examined the link between regulatory focus motivations and tendencies regarding romantic alternatives. Three studies demonstrated that promotion-focused individuals are more likely than prevention-focused individuals to attend to romantic alternatives, evaluate them positively, and pursue them vigorously. In addition, two of the three studies demonstrated that the robust negative association of commitment with evaluations of romantic alternatives is weaker among promotion-focused individuals than among prevention-focused individuals. Intriguing follow-up topics, such as whether promotion-focused individuals are especially likely to cheat on their romantic partner or to pursue sexually open relationships, await future research.

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