

Lab Project 3—Strategic Orientation in Individual and Group Decisions (Tory Higgins, John Levine, David Krantz, & Elke Weber; 2006-2009)

A classic issue in social psychology is how group decisions involving risk differ from individuals making the same decision alone. Group polarization describes the fact that groups will arrive at a more extreme risk attitude than the average pre-deliberation risk attitude of individual group members, i.e., can be more risky or more conservative. We propose that one important factor determining the extent of polarization in group decisions is the regulatory fit between the decision-making orientation of the members of the group and the cultural norm about the correct risk attitude for the decision—whether one should be normatively risky (e.g., considering alternative job offers early in one’s career) or normatively conservative (e.g., considering alternative retirement options).

Regulatory fit occurs when the manner of making a decision sustains (rather than disrupts) the regulatory orientation of a person or group (Higgins, 2000). Persons and groups can make decisions with a promotion focus orientation toward advancement and accomplishment or a prevention focus orientation toward security and responsibility (Higgins, 1997). A promotion focus is concerned with the presence or absence of positive outcomes (gains and non-gains), whereas a prevention focus is concerned with the absence or presence of negative outcomes (non-losses and losses). Making a decision in a risky or eager manner involves trying for “hits” (ensuring gains) and ensuring against errors of omission (non-gains), and thus it sustains or fits a promotion focus. Making a decision in a conservative or vigilant manner involves being careful (ensuring non-losses) and ensuring against errors of commission (losses), and thus it sustains or fits a prevention focus. People prefer to make decisions in a manner that fits their regulatory focus orientation. Thus, both individuals and groups prefer risky decisions when in a promotion focus and conservative decisions when in a prevention focus (Levine et al., 2000).

Promotion and prevention orientations can be chronic or they can be situationally induced. Individuals’ chronic promotion and prevention orientations can be measured using the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) (Higgins et al., 2000). This 11-item questionnaire measures both varying levels of promotion motivation and, independently, varying levels of prevention motivation. The validity and reliability of this measure have been demonstrated cross-culturally in English, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Hebrew, German, and Italian. The RFQ has been used, together with experimental manipulations of eager versus vigilant decision means, to study how regulatory fit (promotion + eager; prevention + vigilant) increases the perceived monetary value of a chosen alternative. It has also been used, together with (Prospect Theory) “gain/loss” framing, to examine how regulatory fit (promotion + “gain” framing; prevention + “loss” framing) increases negotiation performance, satisfaction and perceived fairness. Using the RFQ, groups can be experimentally created that vary in their proportion of chronic promotion or prevention members. The RFQ can also be used to determine the proportion of chronic promotion or prevention members in established groups.

Promotion and prevention orientations can be situationally induced by having people think about either their promotion goals (“What do you ideally want to accomplish? What are your hopes and aspirations?) or their prevention goals (“What do you believe you ought to achieve? “What are your duties and obligations?”). Studies

have also used this experimental method to induce a promotion or a prevention focus, together with experimental manipulations of eager versus vigilant decision means, to study how regulatory fit increases the value of a chosen alternative. Studies have also shown that it is possible to use such situational inductions to manipulate the promotion or prevention focus of groups (Levine et al., 2000).

Studies on regulatory fit, both when promotion and prevention are chronic and when they are situationally induced, have found various effects of regulatory fit. Regulatory fit increases the intensity or strength of activity engagement, which in turn can increase performance. When imagining prospective events during decision making, regulatory fit increases the imagined pleasure of positive events and the imagined pain of negative events. When a decision is made with regulatory fit, people are more satisfied with the decision and evaluate it more favorably. They also “feel right” about their decision and believe that what they did was right and fair. Finally, the value experienced when making a decision with regulatory fit is transferred to the outcome of the decision, such that the outcome is perceived as more valuable. These regulatory fit effects have been shown to be independent of just the positive or negative mood of the decision makers (Higgins, 2000; Higgins et al., 2003).

There are two ways in which promotion focus decision-makers could make a decision that would produce these kinds of regulatory fit effects: (a) The decision is made in a risky (eager) manner; and (b) The decision is made with “gain” (gains and non-gains) as the reference point or standard. There are also two ways in which prevention focus decision-makers could make a decision that would produce regulatory fit effects: (a) The decision is made in a conservative (vigilant) manner; and (b) The decision is made with “loss” (non-losses and losses) as the reference point or standard.

Research in this project will examine the following three hypotheses, among others:

(I) Members of a group will participate more and be more influential in the decision when their promotion or prevention focus (chronic or situationally-induced) fits (a) the normative manner of the decision to be made (i.e., promotion + risky norm; prevention + conservative norm) and (b) the gain/loss framing of the decision (i.e., promotion + gain framing; prevention + loss framing)—in comparison to non-fit conditions (i.e., promotion + conservative norm; prevention + risky norm; promotion + loss framing; prevention + gain framing).

(II) The higher the proportion of group members whose promotion or prevention focus fits the norm about how the decision should be made, the more the final decision will polarize toward that norm (i.e., a risky shift or a conservative shift), and the more the group will value their decision and believe that it was made in a fair way.

(III) A risky shift will be especially strong, highly valued and seen as fair when there is a high proportion of promotion group members, a risky norm and gain framing. A conservative shift will be especially strong, highly valued and seen as fair when there is a high proportion of prevention group members, a conservative norm and loss framing.

In addition to examining the above three hypotheses, the project will also explore the possibility that established groups can construct over time a shared reality about the promotion or prevention orientation of the group that is, to some extent at least, independent of the individual group members’ regulatory focus. To begin to examine this possibility, the standard RFQ measure will be modified to ask individual respondents

about a group to which they belong rather than about themselves as an individual. In addition to this new group RFQ, transcripts of group deliberations will be coded in terms of statements that have a promotion orientation and statements that have a prevention orientation. Not only would this provide an additional, convergent measure for a group's overall regulatory focus, but it would allow us to begin investigating whether the regulatory focus of a group becomes increasingly consensual over time, as well as the possibility that deliberations on particular types of problems tend to produce a particular group focus over time (i.e., a situational or task effect).

References

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