



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## Regularly focus in group contexts

Faddegon, K.J.

### Citation

Faddegon, K. J. (2009, January 20). *Regularly focus in group contexts*. Kurt Lewin Institute Dissertation Series. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13410>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/13410>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

---

## **Chapter 5**

### **General Discussion**

---

## INTRODUCTION

In the introduction of this thesis I discussed the burst of the internet bubble that took place at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As said, individuals' mind-sets became collectively focused on gains versus non-gains thereby neglecting potential losses. For another real-life example of collective focus, consider a recent medical study in the Netherlands that had to be abolished. This study examined the effects of probiotics on the infection of the pancreas. Small studies from outside The Netherlands reported positive results of this treatment. Consequently, the Dutch researchers thought it would be justified to perform a large study. They apparently neglected the risks of the treatment, and the number of people that died was larger than in the treatment group than in the control group. With the findings of this thesis we are able to explain how the above mentioned group phenomena may have taken place.

The aim of the current thesis was to examine the impact of group situations on the regulatory focus of group members and the influence of the group members' regulatory focus on the performance of the group. Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 considered how group members' regulatory focus can be affected by a group context (both top-down and bottom-up), whereas Chapter 4 examined the consequences of the group members' regulatory focus for team performance. In the current chapter I will summarize the main findings of these three lines of research and illustrate them with the just described examples. I will then discuss the theoretical implications of this thesis, followed by a section in which I will point out some strengths and limitations of the current thesis and present directions for future research. I will conclude with a discussion of some practical implications of the results.

## SUMMARY OF THE MAIN FINDINGS

### **Chapter 2: Regulatory Focus as a Group Identity**

In Chapter 2 the impact of the regulatory focus identity of the group on the behavioral responses of group members was examined. Based on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) we argued that a promotion or a prevention focus can constitute a part of the group's identity (i.e., 'collective regulatory focus') that in turn influences group members' responses in a promotion or prevention consistent way. It was predicted that collective regulatory focus would affect these responses in interplay with the group members' personal preferences for a promotion or prevention focus. The results of Experiments 2.1 and 2.2 confirmed this hypothesis. Furthermore, Experiment 2.2 supported our group identity rationale by showing that the endorsement of the collective regulatory focus was most pronounced for group members that highly identified with their group.

### **Chapter 3: Emergence of Regulatory Focus from the Group**

While Chapter 2 examined how the group influences the regulatory focus of group members (top-down), Chapter 3 considered the nature of the interdependency between group members as a bottom-up source from which the regulatory focus of group members emerges. To test our idea we compared group tasks with a disjunctive and a conjunctive interdependency structure. We expected that a disjunctive task, in which the performance of the best group member equals group performance, would lead to the emergence of a promotion focus. By contrast we expected that a conjunctive task, in which the performance of the worst group member equals the performance of the team, would give rise to a prevention focus. Experiment 3.1 and Experiment 3.2 indeed confirmed this prediction by showing more promotion consistent responses in the disjunctive group tasks and relatively more prevention consistent responses in the conjunctive group task. We thus can conclude that

group members' regulatory focus can also emerge from the nature of the interdependency structure of the group they are in.

#### **Chapter 4: Regulatory Focus Diversity and Team Performance**

In Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 we demonstrated the importance of the group context for the regulatory focus of group members. In Chapter 4 we wished to examine how in turn the regulatory focus of group members affects the performance of a group that works on a complex team task. Based on the specific behavioral responses typical for a promotion focus and a prevention focus we argued that a promotion focus and a prevention focus would lead to better performance on different aspects of complex group tasks and that groups diverse in regulatory focus would perform best overall. Study 3.1 provided initial support for this assertion by demonstrating that for groups working on a brainstorm task, a promotion focus among dyads contributed to the overall idea productivity. In Study 3.2, we examined regulatory focus diversity in professional hockey teams and demonstrated that prevention focus diversity positively contributed to the results of the teams in the hockey competition.

To return to the examples of the dotcom crash and the study on probiotics in The Netherlands, Chapter 2 of the present dissertation demonstrates that indeed groups of individuals can collectively come to adopt a promotion focus that is associated with framing outcomes in terms of gains versus non-gains, instead of loss versus non-loss, leading to increased risk taking. In addition, our findings demonstrate that the preferred regulatory focus can be part of the identity of a group and that this influence is especially pronounced among high identifiers. In the case of the dot com bubble this means the atmosphere present in this decade that the sky was the limit may have resulted in a collectively shared promotion focus especially strong endorsed by those persons that categorized themselves as connected to the world of internet and computers and identified with other members of this category. Similarly, in the case of the probiotics study, the positive results of

the previous smaller studies may have blinded the Dutch research group for potential negative outcomes and made them collectively adopt a promotion focus and this might especially have been the case for researchers highly identified with the probiotics industry. As a result, potential risks involved in performing a much larger study may have been neglected.

In the current thesis evidence is provided that the group context can affect group members' regulatory focus directly or in interplay with group members' personal regulatory focus preferences. It was demonstrated that the group can exert its influence on individual group members' regulatory focus in a top-down fashion as part of the identity of the group and in a bottom-up fashion, emerging from the interdependency nature of the group. In turn, this thesis provides evidence that diversity in regulatory focus can be beneficial for teams that work on complex tasks that require both promotion and prevention consistent responses.

In conclusion, this thesis underlines the importance of taking the social context into account when predicting an individual's regulatory focus consistent responses. As a result, it provides evidence that the group situation does not only affect the amount of group members' motivation but also the direction of that motivation. These insights may be applicable in many real-life situations where one wishes to get control over the behavioral responses of a group of individuals working on a team task. In the next paragraphs I will discuss some of the implications of the current thesis for the literatures on regulatory focus and group processes.

## **THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

### **Regulatory Focus as a Consequence of the Group**

Previous research on regulatory focus theory has demonstrated different pathways affecting an individual's regulatory focus. A first pathway

that impacts on an individual's regulatory focus is the individual's personal preference for a promotion or prevention focus that is assumed to be influenced by experiences during childhood with caretakers (Higgins, 1997). A second path-way is through outcome framing or priming (e.g., Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Friedman & Forster, 2001). The current thesis demonstrates that a third pathway can also be discerned, namely the group context. This is an important addition to the previously studied factors influencing an individual's regulatory focus that has added explanatory value beyond the first two levels. After all, human beings are social creatures that often participate in teams at work or socially (e.g., sport teams). Our findings further complement initial studies suggesting that in these situations an individual's regulatory focus cannot simply be inferred from personal preferences for a promotion focus or a prevention focus. Moreover, our research on collective regulatory focus (Chapter 2) shows that a promotion or prevention focused mind-set can also constitute a part of the identity of a group. This implies that an individual's regulatory focus is also a function of whether the individual's personal or social identity is salient. As the social identity of an individual is a cognitive construct that can be activated without the physical presence of the group, group contexts might even be able exert influence on the group members' regulatory focus in solitude. The present thesis thus demonstrates the importance of the group context as an additional pathway determining an individual's regulatory focus both in a top-down and bottom-up fashion and even in situations wherein the group is not physically present. Hereby this thesis is in line with the suggestion of Sassenberg and Woltin (in press) that group-based self-regulation indeed exists, and can contribute to the understanding of the motivational processes underlying group members' behavior.

### **Motivation in Groups: Direction versus Amount**

An important consequence of the current thesis is the input it provides for the literature on group motivation by demonstrating that group situations



can sculpture the regulatory focus of its members. There is evidence for the argument based on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) and regulatory fit theory (2000) that regulatory focus has consequences for both the amount of motivation and the direction of motivation. While previous research on group processes mainly considered the effects of the group context for the amount of group members' motivation (e.g. Kerr & Brun, 1983; Kravitz & Martin, 1986; Williams & Karakau, 1991), the current thesis shows that group contexts can also affect the direction or focus of group members' motivation. After all, the group member's regulatory focus determines whether motivation is directed at gains versus non-gains or at loss versus non-loss. In turn, this difference in what the individual's motivation is aimed at impacts on many different behavioral responses including creativity, analytical thinking, work-speed and accuracy (Förster, Higgins, & Taylor Bianco, 2003; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Seibt & Förster). This means that the influence of the group situation on the regulatory focus of group members has consequences for the group itself. It may determine for instance the creativity or accuracy of the team and thereby affect the likelihood that certain results are accomplished by the team.

### **Are Groups Promotion or Prevention Focused?**

A remarkably consistent finding in the current thesis is that we observed stronger effects of the group context on the promotion focus than on the prevention focus of individual group members. Previous research (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000) examined regulatory focus in relation with individuals' self-construals. Lee and colleagues (2000) and Aaker and Lee (2001) found that an independent self-construal in which the self is defined in its relational context with other individuals is associated with a prevention focus, whereas an independent self construal is associated with a promotion focus. This research thus seems to imply that a group situation that by definition implies interrelatedness between the individual and other group members should lead to a stronger prevention focus than when the individual

is alone. In the sense that the results of the current thesis mostly demonstrate promotion effects this is an interesting finding in its own right. Even though the self-construal of group members may become more interdependent as a result of the group context, the findings of this thesis show that this clearly does not imply that the group context excludes promotion focused responses. This is good news for many teams that try to obtain goals that are more likely to be obtained with a promotion focus rather than with a prevention focus (e.g., sport teams, development teams; for a further discussion of the implications for teams, see Practical Implications). For instance, in a brainstorm task our finding that the group can adopt a promotion focus already seems to be applied. That is, in the instructions for a typical brainstorm task group members are encouraged to come up with all ideas they can think of (so-called “freewheeling”) and not to criticize each other. The apparent goal of this instruction is to focus group members’ attention on gains versus non-gains instead of loss versus non-loss, in order to elicit more creativity by the group members. Our results indeed demonstrate that it is possible to shift the focus of a group to more promotion focus consistent responses and therefore can explain why these brainstorm instructions are effective in enhancing the creativity of group members’ responses.

How does the research by Aaker & Lee (2001) and Lee and colleagues (2000) relate to the research discussed in this thesis that demonstrates that group contexts can also elicit more promotion focus consistent responses among group members? Possibly, the ease with which the group context elicits promotion or prevention consistent responses among group members also depends on population characteristics. We conducted our experiments in Dutch-student populations containing young and highly educated individuals raised in a relatively individualistic Western culture. Both having a high level of education and growing up in an individualistic culture might cause individuals to have more independent self-construals than individuals that are lower educated and/or raised in collectivistic cultures. As these independent

self-construals have been found to be related to a promotion focus rather than to a prevention focus (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Lee et al., 2000), it might have been easier to activate a promotion focus than a prevention focus in our population. It would therefore be interesting to examine the impact of group situations in more collectivistic cultures or among participants with a strong interdependent self-construal. Possibly, among these individuals, group situations would be more successful in eliciting prevention consistent responses among group members.

Another reason for the stronger effects found for group influence on individual members' promotion focus compared to prevention focus may be that - as suggested by the findings of Aaker & Lee (2001) and Lee and colleagues (2000)- team situations in general indeed make group members more prevention focused. In other words, there may be a ceiling effect for the prevention focus of group members. Group situations might therefore be able to lift the promotion focus of group members, while the prevention focus is already at its maximum level and cannot be further raised by a prevention focus eliciting group situation.

### **Group effects on Implicit Beliefs**

In this thesis, evidence was provided that groups have an impact on the mind-sets of group members in terms of their regulatory focus. This means that the group situation can influence the way that group members unconsciously perceive the world, which may have important consequences for other areas in which implicit beliefs play a role. That is, the group context may also affect other types of group members' mind-sets or unconscious biases. For instance, the group context may influence a group member's implicit beliefs concerning gender or race. In that case the group context may also affect the responses of group members towards for instance women or ethnic minorities. More specifically, it may be that someone can be an implicit racist or sexist in one group situation and respond more unbiased in other group situations. As our

research demonstrated that implicit responses can be part of the identity of the group, these differences in responses based on implicit beliefs may even occur without the actual presence of the group but solely depend on which identity (personal or social) is salient. This may explain for instance that while an individual may personally hold emancipated beliefs, the individual does not respond in accordance with these beliefs when the work context is salient.

### Strengths and Limitations, and Directions for Further Research

The current thesis provides more insight in how and to what extent group members' regulatory focus is affected by the group context and how the regulatory focus of the group members impacts on the performance of the team. Of the six experiments discussed in this thesis, three were performed in virtual groups, two in experimental groups, and one in a real-life group. The fact that a multitude of experimental methodologies has led to converging conclusions substantiates the robustness and the external validity of our findings.

Although this thesis greatly contributes to our understanding of regulatory focus in group contexts, there also remain questions. For instance, as detailed above, it is not totally clear why in the present thesis more pronounced effects for promotion focus than for prevention focus were found. An experiment taking into account participants' self-construal (independent vs. interdependent) may find out whether these effects were driven by population characteristics. Another interesting issue that might be resolved in future research is to discern the effects of self-selection and the influence of the group on the group member's regulatory focus. For instance, Sassenberg and colleagues (2003) found that law students tended to be prevention focused and business administration students tended to be promotion focused. From this finding it is not clear whether these students chose their study based on their regulatory focus, or whether their regulatory focus was a consequence of their group membership. Future research may examine to what extent the regulatory focus of individuals determines which group they choose and to what extent group members' regulatory focus is a consequence of the group

context. With the present thesis I have already demonstrated the important role of the group for determining a group member's regulatory focus and the consequences this can have for team performance

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

The current thesis contributes to the understanding of how group situations affect (the direction of) group members' motivation. This knowledge may be applicable in many settings in which the functioning of a group is important, like in sport teams or work teams. As this thesis shows, the regulatory focus of group members can be affected by the regulatory focus identity as well as the interdependency structure of a team which in turn can affect important behavioral responses like the accuracy and creativity of the group members. So if, for instance, a manager of a nuclear power plant wishes that employees work more accurately it may be a good idea to introduce a motto for the team reflecting a prevention focus like: 'safety first'. Another way to influence the responses of the team could be to alter the nature of the interdependency of the team and to focus attention on the minimal performance group members should always reach to function well as a team member. By contrast, team members of an artistic collective in which creativity is much more important than accuracy, may profit from a motto reflecting a promotion focus such as 'think different!'. This collective may obtain best results in an interdependency structure in which excellent performance is required to function well as a group member, but only once in a while. Depending on the type of performance needed from its members, groups can thus be stimulated to adopt a promotion or prevention focus.

Another practical implication of the finding that groups of individuals can collectively come to share a focus on promotion or prevention is that depending on the regulatory focus of the team, employees might be interested

in different job opportunities. Employees working in prevention focused accountant team, for instance, may be much more concerned with retaining their job or with the uncertainty of contract extension than with their chances of a pay rise, or with their opportunities of promotion. Employees working in a promotion focused investment bank may, in contrast, attach more value to getting a promotion and expected salary growth over time than to the certainty of being able to keep the job for the rest of their life. These potential effects of collective regulatory focus may be important to consider when recruiting new employees or when trying to improve or maintain employees' job satisfaction.

As the examples above illustrate, the findings of the present thesis have many practical implications. The present thesis therefore provides not only new theoretical insights into how self-regulation functions in group contexts, but also insights into real-life group situations in which self-regulation plays a role. Moreover, these insights can be applied in (work-) group settings and may help to optimize the functioning of (work-) groups and the (work) satisfaction of group members. I hope the present thesis will inspire researchers to conduct research in the fascinating field of self-regulation in group contexts.

---