

RUNNING HEAD: REGULATORY FOCUS

The Effects of Regulatory Focus on Teachers' Classroom Management
Strategies and Emotional Consequences

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Abstract

The study investigated how regulatory focus affected teachers' selection of classroom management strategies and the emotional consequences they experienced when these strategies failed. Primary school teachers (n=179) were randomly assigned to 2 framing conditions: promotion focus and prevention focus. As predicted, teachers with promotion focus adopted more approach strategies (e.g., praise) but less avoidance strategies (e.g. punish) than their counterparts with prevention focus. When the strategies failed, teachers with promotion focus experienced more dejection-related emotion (e.g., disappointment) than agitation-related emotion (e.g., anger) whereas teachers with prevention focus experienced more agitation-related emotion than dejection-related emotion. However, some results were inconsistent with the prediction. Compared to their counterparts with prevention focus, teachers with promotion focus experienced less negative emotion, either dejection-related or agitation-related.

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Different teachers have different philosophies or orientations to classroom management. Some teachers tend to spell out positive consequences of desired behaviors and adopt reward-based strategies, whereas others tend to inform students of negative consequences of undesired behaviors and adopt punishment-based strategies. The psychological factors that affect teachers' adoption of certain classroom management strategies have attracted attention from both educators and psychologists. The factors that most commonly studied are teachers' efficacy (Melby, 1995; Woolfolk, Rosoff, & Hoy, 1990), type and intensity of student misbehavior (Kearney & Plax, 1987), teacher's early socialization history (Kaplan, 1992), and teacher's gender and experience (Plax, Kearney, & Sorensen, 1990).

The present study puts forward an alternative factor for investigation. We examine how regulatory focus affects teachers' selection of classroom management strategies and the emotion they experience when these strategies fail. Teacher stress is a concern to many educational researchers (e.g., Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). There is evidence that lack of classroom control contributes to teacher stress (Lowenstein, 1991). With a new theoretical framework, we try to understand teachers' classroom management strategies and the negative emotions that are resulted from the failure of these strategies. Our study is based on the regulatory-focus theory developed by social psychologist, E. Tory Higgins (1997, 1998). His theory explains how people with different regulatory focuses (promotion vs. prevention) select different strategies (approach vs. avoidance) to achieve their goals and what emotional consequences (dejection vs. agitation) they experience when the strategies fail. We believe that this theory can provide a useful framework for explaining why teachers adopt certain classroom management strategies and experience certain emotional consequences.

In his theory, Higgins (1997) identifies three self-state representations: the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. The actual self is composed of attributes one believes he or she possesses. In contrast, the ideal self is composed of attributes one believes he or

she ideally possesses, and the ought self is composed of attributes one believes he or she ought to possess. Both the ideal self and the ought self are self-evaluative standards that people use to evaluate their actual self-states. They are also the self-directive standards that people use to guide their behavioral strategies.

On the basis of these two self-evaluative standards, people develop two distinct types of regulatory systems: the ideal self-regulatory system and the ought self-regulatory system. The former is related to ideal self-guides that represent an individual's hopes, wishes, or aspiration. The latter is related to ought self-guides that represent an individual's duties, responsibilities, or obligations. Higgins (1996) and Higgins, Roney, Crowe, and Hymes (1994) postulate that the ideal self-regulatory system focuses on the presence or absence of positive outcome (gain or non-gain) because ideal self is associated with desired end states. In contrast, the ought-self regulatory system focuses on the presence or absence of negative outcome (loss or non-loss) because ought-self is associated with undesired end states. Ideal self-regulation, therefore, engenders approach strategies, as it involves a concern with any means for reducing discrepancies between the actual states and the desired end states, i.e., approaching positive outcomes. On the other hand, ought self-regulation engenders avoidance strategies, as it involves a concern with any means for amplifying discrepancies between the actual states and the undesired end states, i.e., avoiding negative outcomes.

Higgins et al. (1994) found that individuals with a predominantly ideal self-regulatory focus chose significantly more approach strategies like "be generous and willing to give of yourself" as strategies for friendship than individuals with predominantly ought self-regulatory focus. In contrast, individuals with a predominantly ought self-regulatory focus chose significantly more avoidance strategies like "stay in touch and don't lose contact with friends" as strategies for friendship than their counterparts with predominant ideal self-regulatory focus. The results indicated that different self-regulatory systems (ideal vs. ought) involve different behavioral strategies (approach vs. avoidance).

Higgins (1987) and Higgins, Bond, Klein, and Strauman (1986) also postulate that different self-regulatory systems engender different emotional consequences. Higgins, Klein, and Strauman (1985) found that individuals with actual-ideal discrepancy experienced more dejection-related emotions than their counterparts with actual-ought discrepancy, whereas individuals with actual-ought discrepancy experienced more agitation-related emotions than their counterparts with actual-ideal discrepancy. Higgins (1987, 1989) argues that any chronic discrepancies between the self-concept with different self-guides are associated with different predispositions, and each type of discrepancy reflects a particular negative psychological situation. The actual-ideal discrepancy represents the general psychological situation of the absence of positive outcomes (i.e., failure to obtain the desired goals or desires). When individuals suffer from actual-ideal discrepancy, they are vulnerable to dejection-related feelings such as disappointment, shame, and dissatisfaction. In contrast, the actual-ought discrepancy represents the general psychological situation of the presence of negative outcomes (i.e., failure to avoid the undesired goals or undesires). When individuals suffer from actual-ought discrepancy, they are vulnerable to agitation-related emotions such as fear, anxiety, guilt, apprehension, and tension.

Higgins (1997) and Higgins and Silberman (1998) postulate that regulatory focus is a result of early socialization experience and can be conceived as a personality variable. However, people possess both of these two distinct systems. Momentary situations are able to induce one focus or the other temporarily. Higgins (1999) argues that personality and situation variables can be understood in terms of the same principles. He indicates that "individual with low chronic accessibility in priming could function like an individual with high chronic accessibility in a no-priming situation" (Higgins, 1999, p.85).

With experimental manipulation that emphasized the importance of either attaining positive outcomes or avoiding negative outcomes, Crowe and Higgins (1997) found that individuals with a predominately positive-outcome focus were prone to adopt approach

strategies but individuals with a predominately negative-outcome focus were inclined to adopt avoidance strategies. With similar experimental manipulation, Higgins, Shah, and Friedman (1997) also found that individuals under a positive-outcome-focus condition experienced more emotion in the dimension of cheerfulness/dejection than individuals under a negative-outcome-focus condition. In contrast, individual in the negative-outcome-focus condition experienced greater emotion in the dimension of quiescence/agitation than individuals in a positive outcome-focus condition.

We believe that the same principles of regulatory focus apply to teachers when they select strategies to manage student behaviors and when they encounter failure of their strategies. We predict that teachers in a promotion-focus condition designed to achieve positive outcome will adopt more approach strategies (e.g., reinforcing good behaviors) than avoidance strategies (e.g., punishing bad behaviors) in classroom management. They will also adopt more approach strategies than their counterparts in a prevention-focus condition designed to avoid negative outcome. In contrast, teachers in a prevention-focus condition will adopt more avoidance strategies than approach strategies, and they will further adopt more avoidance strategies than their counterparts in a promotion-focus condition. Finally, we predict that when teachers in a promotion-focus condition find that their strategies fail to achieve a positive outcome, they will experience more dejection-related emotion than agitation-related emotion. They will also experience more dejection-related emotion than their counterparts in a prevention-focus condition when facing failure. However, when the teachers in a prevention-focus condition find that their strategies fail to avoid a negative outcome, they will experience more agitation-related emotion than dejection-related emotion. They will further experience more agitation-related emotion than their counterparts in a promotion-focus condition when facing failure.

Method

Sample

The sample consisted of 179 primary school teachers who took in-service training courses at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. They were recruited on a voluntary basis with the assistance of their course instructors. Of the 179 participants, 141 were female and 38 were male. Their years of teaching experience ranged from 3 to 30 ($\bar{X} = 9$, $SD = 6.2$).

Procedure

The teachers were randomly assigned to one of the two experimental conditions: Promotion focus or prevention focus. There were 88 teachers in the promotion-focus condition and 91 teachers in the prevention-focus condition. In both conditions, the teachers completed a questionnaire in a group of 40 to 50 in their classroom after class. Most of the teachers were able to complete the questionnaire within 15 minutes.

Framing

Framing was used to activate the teachers' regulatory focus in the present study. In both experimental conditions, the teachers were asked to read a hypothetical scenario before they responded to the items in the questionnaire. In the promotion-focus condition, the teachers were told that an outstanding classroom discipline contest would be held in their school and they wanted their class to win the award. In contrast, the teachers in the prevention-focus condition were told that their headmaster was annoyed by the recent deterioration of discipline in their school and would like to identify and straighten up the class with the worst discipline as the first step of remedial action.

Strategies and Emotion

After the teachers were exposed to either the promotion- or prevention-focus scenarios, they were asked what strategies they would use to help their class win the discipline award or prevent their class from being identified as the class with the worst discipline. The teachers were asked to choose 3 strategies from a list of 6: 1) set up classroom rules and oblige students to follow them, 2) punish the students who do not follow classroom rules, 3) look for students' positive behaviors and praise them publicly for

it, 4) remind students to behave during class break, 5) set up a reward plan and reward those students who perform well in discipline, and 6) praise students whenever they follow classroom rules. Strategies 1, 2, and 4 were coded as avoidance strategies as they were designed to avoid the negative outcome that the class would be identified for the worst discipline. Strategies 3, 5, and 6 were coded as approach strategies as they were design to attain the positive outcome that the class would win the best discipline award. The teachers' scores on the measures of approach and avoidance strategies ranged from 0 to 3. A teacher received 3 points on the measure of avoidance strategies and 0 point on the measure of approach strategies if he/she chose all the 3 avoidance strategies.

After the teachers had indicated their choice of strategies, they were asked what they would feel if they had tried hard to implement these strategies but they still failed to achieve their goal. In the promotion-focus condition, they were told their class did not win the award. In the prevention-focus condition, they were told their class was identified as the class with the worst discipline. The teachers were asked to indicate the degree of their anger, disappointment, annoyance, and despondence on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much). As anger and annoyance are related to agitation, the ratings on these two items were summed for the measure of agitation-related emotion. As disappointment and despondence are related to dejection, the ratings on these two items were summed for the measure of dejection-related emotion. The scores of these two measures ranged from 2 to 10. The coefficient alphas for the scales of agitation-related emotion and dejection-related emotion were .90 and .66 respectively.

Manipulation Check

To evaluate if relevant regulatory focus was activated by the framing condition, a manipulation check item was included at the end of the questionnaire. The teachers were asked to rate the relative importance of positive outcome and negative outcome according to the scenario they had been described. They were asked to rate if “classroom discipline is outstanding” was more or less important than “classroom discipline is free from problem”

on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (free from problem is more important) to 7 (outstanding discipline is more important).

Results

Manipulation Check

An independent-sample t test was performed on the manipulation check item to verify if different regulatory focuses were activated in different framing conditions. The mean rating of the teachers in the promotion-focus condition was 4.10 ($SD = 1.36$) whereas that of the teachers in the prevention-focus condition was 3.32 ($SD = 1.53$). There was significant difference between their ratings, $t(177) = 3.36$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .37$. Compared to the teachers in the prevention-focus condition, the teachers in the promotion-focus condition rated "classroom discipline is outstanding" as more important than "classroom discipline is free from problem." The results indicated that the experimental manipulation was successful.

Regulatory focus and management strategies

Table 1 presents the mean scores of classroom management strategies adopted by the teachers in different framing conditions. Paired-sample t tests were performed on the mean scores of approach strategies and avoidance strategies in each of the experimental conditions. It was found that the teachers in the promotion-focus condition used more approach strategies ($\bar{X} = 1.85$) than avoidance strategies ($\bar{X} = 1.15$), $t(87) = 4.93$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .53$. In contrast, the teachers in the prevention-focus condition used more avoidance strategies ($\bar{X} = 1.74$) than approach strategies ($\bar{X} = 1.26$), $t(90) = 3.40$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .36$.

Insert Table 1 about here

Independent-sample t tests were also performed to compare the mean scores of the teachers in different experimental conditions on each type of strategies. The teachers in the promotion-focus condition adopted more approach strategies ($\bar{X} = 1.85$) than the teachers in the prevention-focus condition ($\bar{X} = 1.26$), $t(177) = 5.90$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .63$. In

contrast, the teachers in the prevention-focus condition adopted more avoidance strategies ($M = 1.74$) than the teachers in the promotion-focus condition ($\bar{X} = 1.15$), $t(177) = 5.90$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .64$.

The results support our hypothesis that teachers adopt more approach strategies in the promotion-focus condition but more avoidance strategies in the prevention-focus condition.

Regulatory focus and teachers' emotion

Table 2 presents the mean scores of emotion indicated by the teachers in different framing conditions. Paired-sample t tests were performed on the teachers' scores on the dejection-related emotion and agitation-related emotion in each of the experimental conditions. It was found that in the promotion-focus condition, teachers endorsed that they felt more dejection-related emotion ($\bar{X} = 5.23$) than agitation-related emotion ($\bar{X} = 4.75$) when the positive outcome could not be achieved, $t(87) = 2.56$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = .27$. However, the teachers in the prevention-focus condition endorsed that they felt more agitation-related emotion ($\bar{X} = 6.40$) than dejection-related emotion ($\bar{X} = 6.04$) when the negative outcome could not be avoided, $t(90) = 2.34$, $p < .05$, Cohen's $d = .25$.

Insert Table 2 about here

Independent-sample t tests were also performed to compare the mean scores of the teachers in different experimental conditions on each type of emotion. As expected, the teachers in the prevention-focus condition indicated more agitation-related emotion ($\bar{X} = 6.40$) than the teachers in promotion-focus condition ($\bar{X} = 4.75$), $t(177) = 5.38$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .56$. Contrary to our expectation, however, the teachers in the prevention-focus condition also indicated more dejection-related emotion ($\bar{X} = 6.04$) than the teachers in promotion-focus condition ($\bar{X} = 5.23$), $t(177) = 3.12$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = .33$.

The results only partially support our hypothesis that teachers experience more dejection-related emotion in the promotion-focus condition but more agitation-related

emotion in the prevention-focus condition when they fail to achieve their goal. When within-subject comparisons were made, we found that the teachers in the promotion-focus condition experienced more dejection-related emotion than agitation-related emotion. We also found that the teachers in the prevention-focus condition experienced more agitation-related emotion than dejection-related emotion. These findings were consistent with our expectations. However, when between-subject comparisons were made, we found that the teachers in the prevention-focus condition experienced more agitation-related emotion as well as dejection-related emotion than their counterparts in the promotion-focus condition. This was inconsistent with our hypothesis.

Discussion

The present study investigated how regulatory focus affected teachers' classroom management strategies and emotion when their strategies failed. As predicted by Higgins' (1997) theory of regulatory focus, teachers with a promotion focus were more inclined to adopt approach strategies than avoidance strategies, whereas teachers with a prevention focus were more inclined to adopt avoidance strategies than approach strategies. It was also found that teachers with a promotion focus tended to adopt more approach strategies than their counterparts with a prevention focus, whereas teachers with a prevention focus tended to adopt more avoidance strategies than their counterparts with a promotion focus. These results provide support for the application of Higgins's (1997) regulatory-focus theory in the study of teachers' selection of classroom management strategies.

When teachers are working in a promotion-focus situation, their aspiration-based beliefs are activated. With these beliefs, aspirations are for advancement purposes instead of obligation or necessity. Good behaviors are the maximum goal and the students are expected to strive toward the ceiling of accomplishment. Teachers, therefore, tend to choose strategies like praise and reward to encourage their students to meet the expectation. On the contrary, when teachers are working in a prevention-focus situation, their duty-

based beliefs are activated. With these beliefs, good behaviors are the minimum goal and students are not expected to fall below the minimum requirements. As a result, students are not entitled to reward for good behaviors because they are merely fulfilling their duties. However, they would be punished if they cannot meet the standard or fulfill their duties. In the present study, teachers in the prevention-focus condition tended to adopt punishment strategies more than reward strategies. In this respect, Higgins's regulatory-focus theory is consistent with Hamilton's theory of teachers' attributions of blame and credit for classroom act (Hamilton, Bulumenfeld, & Kusher, 1988). According to Hamilton et al. (1988), teachers have a greater tendency to punish undesirable behavior and not to reward desirable conduct when they endorse duty-based morality. On the contrary, they have a greater tendency to award desirable conduct and not to punish undesirable behavior when they endorse aspiration-based morality.

The present study shows that the theory of regulatory focus can predict and explain teachers' selection of classroom management strategies. However, the results of this study do not lend full support to this theory in the prediction of teachers' emotion when their strategies fail. As expected, within-subject comparisons showed that teachers in the promotion-focus condition experienced more dejection-related emotion than agitation-related emotion, whereas teachers in the prevention-focus condition experienced more agitation-related emotion than dejection-related emotion. Nevertheless, between-subject comparisons revealed that teachers in prevention-focus condition experience more agitation-related emotion as well as dejection-related emotion than their counterparts in the promotion-focus condition. These results are not predicted by Higgins' (1997) theory of regulatory focus.

The inconsistency may be an indicator that individuals with a prevention focus experience more intense emotion after failure than individuals with a promotion focus. Albert Ellis (1995), founder of Rational Emotive Behavioral Therapy, postulates that people suffer from distress because they believe that they "must" achieve something or

"must" be somebody. They inflict these obligations upon themselves and, therefore, are more likely to suffer from distress. Ellis encourages his clients to change their "must" statements into "prefer" statements in order to ameliorate their emotional discomfort. However, if the intensity of emotional discomfort is the same in promotion-focus and prevention-focus conditions, Ellis' clients gain little when they replace ought self-guides with ideal self-guides. At best, they only replace their agitation-related emotion with dejection-related emotion, i.e., they would feel depressed instead of anxious. Nevertheless, the results of the present study show that Ellis may be right in advising his clients to change their "must" statements into "prefer" statements. In our study, teachers in promotion-focus condition experienced less agitation-related emotion as well as less dejection-related emotion when they found that their strategies failed.

Nevertheless, it may be too hasty to conclude that the intensity of emotional discomfort of individuals in a promotion-focus situation is weaker than that of individuals in a prevention-focus situation. Caution must be used in interpreting the scores of dejection-related emotion due to the relatively low alpha coefficient level (.66) of the scale. Moreover, the inconsistency between the regulatory-focus theory and the results of the present study may be due to the artifact of the research design. One may argue that the scenarios used in the framing of focus carried different weight in case of failure. In the promotion-focus condition, failure was defined as not winning the award of best discipline, whereas in the prevention-focus condition, failure was defined as being identified as the class with the worst discipline. As there was only one award of best discipline, all classes but one would experience failure. In contrast, there was only one class that would experience failure in the identification of the worst discipline. The weight of failure was heavier for the latter than for the former. As a result, the intensity of emotional consequences would be higher for the latter than for the former. To test if the emotional consequences of promotion and prevention focuses have the same intensity, further

research is needed. Alternative explanation would be excluded if future studies keep the weight of failure constant for both promotion-focus and prevention-focus conditions.

In the present study, we used experimental manipulation to prime teachers for either focus. We did not measure teachers' regulatory focus before the experiment. Different teachers may have different predominant regulatory focuses. According to Higgins (1997), these differences are a result of different experiences in caretaker-child interactions. We speculate that they may also be related to different pupil control orientation and different cultural values of teachers. The developers of Pupil Control Ideology Scale (Willower, Eidell, & Hoy, 1967; 1973) found that some teachers might be more prone to authoritarian view that endorsed strict pupil control, whereas other might be more inclined to humanistic view that endorsed a more democratic atmosphere. Researchers in Chinese societies (Lu, 1997; Salili & Hau, 1994; Salili, Hwang, & Choi, 1989) also found that Chinese teachers tended to adopt punishment-based strategies more than reward-based strategies in their interaction. Obviously, there is a need to investigate regulatory focus as personality variable other than a situational variable. Such research will delineate how individual and cultural differences in regulatory focus may affect teachers' classroom management strategies and emotional consequences. It will also have more ecological validity than the experimental study that relies on priming. In the present study, regulatory focus was manipulated and the scenarios were contrived. As a result, there is possibility that teachers behave differently under the duress of the real situation.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, the present study shows that the theory of regulatory focus can predict and explain teachers' classroom management strategies and emotional consequences in an experimental setting. Further research is needed to test if the theory is viable in authentic setting. Nevertheless, the theory provides a promising framework for the investigation of teachers' classroom management strategies and emotional consequences.

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Table 1

Classroom Management Strategy Adopted by the Teachers in Different Conditions

Framing Condition	Approach Strategy \bar{X}	Avoidance Strategy \bar{X}
Promotion Focus (n=88)	1.85 ^{ac} (0.67)	1.15 ^{ad} (0.67)
Prevention Focus (n=91)	1.26 ^{bc} (0.66)	1.74 ^{bd} (0.66)

Note. The means share the same superscript are significantly different from each other. The numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

Table 2

Emotion Indicated by the Teachers in Different Conditions

Framing Condition	Dejection-Related Emotion \bar{X}	Agitation-Related Emotion \bar{X}
Promotion Focus (n=88)	5.23 ^{ac} (1.79)	4.75 ^{ad} (2.10)
Prevention Focus (n=91)	6.04 ^{bc} (1.71)	6.40 ^{bd} (1.99)

Note. The means share the same superscript are significantly different from each other. The numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.