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## **Regulatory Focus and Romantic Alternatives**

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**Draft: January 3, 2008**

**Word Count: 5,954**

*This chapter is still in draft form and is intended exclusively for participants in the 2008 Sydney Symposium of Social Psychology. Please do not cite or distribute.*

### Regulatory Focus and Romantic Alternatives

Modern 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 perceive, 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 (Finkel, Molden, Johnson, & Eastwick, 2008).

#### *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 romantic possibilities aside from one particular partner and to 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).

There are at least three components of individuals' tendencies toward romantic alternatives: perceiving, evaluating, and pursuing them. *Perceiving alternatives* refers to the tendency to pay attention to romantic alternatives, to find them distracting, and to believe that there are plenty of them around. *Evaluating alternatives* refers to the tendency to view a relatively large number these perceived alternatives as plausible romantic interests and to rate the alternative options to any

given partner as desirable. *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*

Perhaps the best-developed line of research on romantic alternatives demonstrates that individuals' commitment to their current relationship can, via motivated cognitive processes, alter the way 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, many studies have demonstrated that greater commitment to a given relationship predicts less attention to and less positive evaluations of the alternatives to this 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 (Miller, 1997). 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).

One heretofore unanswered question is whether the association of commitment with the negative evaluation of relationship alternatives applies even before a given relationship has become “official.” Single individuals can have several potential relationship partners (crushes or merely people with whom they are open to exploring their romantic compatibility). 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 (i.e., will they show similar tendencies to individuals who are already romantically involved)? In the studies reviewed below, we examine the association of commitment to a particular partner with evaluation of alternatives to this partner for romantically involved individuals and for single individuals reporting on potential romantic partners.

#### *Regulatory Focus Theory—Promotion and Prevention Motivations*

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*).

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, 2007; also see Tanner & Swets, 1954).

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 anything 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.

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 (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001; 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 (Liberman 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 and simultaneously endorsed more of these explanations than did individuals with prevention concerns. 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) (Liberman et al., 1999). Promotion-focused individuals were much more likely to switch to a new course of action than were prevention-focused individuals.

Building on this research on judgment and information-processing strategies, we argue that promotion-focused individuals will be more likely than prevention-focused individuals to perceive romantic alternatives in their everyday lives, to evaluate these alternatives positively, and to pursue them vigorously. Furthermore, 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 evaluate alternatives positively should partially counteract the alternatives-devaluing effects of commitment; in contrast, prevention-focuses tendencies to evaluate alternatives negatively will not counteract the alternatives-devaluing effects of commitment and might 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 perceive 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 emphasis on achieving gains and avoiding nongains, are willing to consider romantic alternatives who span a greater range of desirability than will prevention-focused individuals. Alternatively, promotion-focused individuals' advancement-oriented strategies (in comparison to the vigilance-oriented strategies of prevention-focused individuals) may not cause them to have low standards. Rather, these advancement-oriented strategies may cause promotion-focused individuals to see romantic alternatives in places prevention-focused people will not (e.g., the barista at Starbucks, the cute guy on the subway), which leads them to select among a larger pool of eligibles, all of whom are above a certain threshold. 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.

In a series of three studies, we tested three hypotheses (Finkel et al., 2008):

**H1:** Promotion-focused individuals perceive, positively evaluate, and vigorously pursue their romantic alternatives to a greater extent than prevention-focused individuals do.

**H2:** Individuals who are strongly committed to their current partner (or to 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.

We conducted cross-sectional, longitudinal, and speed-dating studies to explore these hypotheses, testing H1 in all three studies and testing H2 and H3 in Studies 2 and 3. Study 1 examined general tendencies regarding romantic alternatives, Study 2 examined romantically involved individuals' tendencies regarding alternatives to their current partner, and Study 3 examined single individuals' tendencies regarding their romantic alternatives in the wake of attending a speed-dating event. In all studies, participants completed self-report measures of promotion and prevention orientations before completing additional tasks designed to assess their tendencies to perceive (Studies 1 and 3), evaluate positively (Studies 2 and 3), and pursue (Studies 1 and 3) their romantic alternatives. We also explored whether predominantly promotion-focused individuals had lower standards for romantic alternatives than prevention-focused individuals did (Studies 1 and 3). In addition, we assessed participants' relationship commitment to test whether strong commitment predicts negative evaluations of alternatives and whether this negative association is moderated by participants' regulatory focus (Studies 2 and 3) (Finkel et al., 2008).

### *Study 1*

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 (perceiving lots of them and pursuing them vigorously), whereas prevention-focused individuals typically adopt a more security-oriented strategy (perceiving few of 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 this domain (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953), participants' subjective reports of successful promotion or prevention self-regulation serve 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).

To examine how the strength of participants' regulatory focus motivations influenced their tendencies to perceive and to pursue romantic alternatives, we adopted the standard technique of subtracting their RFQ prevention score from their RFQ promotion score to create a single *regulatory focus index* (see Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004; Higgins et al., 2001; Molden & Higgins, 2007; Sassenberg, Jonas, Shah, & Brazy, 2007; Semin, Higgins, de Montes, Estourget, & Valencia, 2005). More positive scores on this index thus indicate a stronger promotion (relative to

prevention) focus, and more negative scores indicate a stronger prevention (relative to promotion) focus.

We assessed participants' tendencies to *perceive alternatives* with a 4-item measure (e.g., "I'm very aware that there are 'plenty of fish in the sea'" (see Miller, 1997). We assessed participants' tendencies to *pursue alternatives* with a 2-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 1-item measure ("I am very picky about my choice of romantic partners)."

As predicted, the regulatory focus index significantly and positively predicted participants' tendencies to perceive and to pursue alternatives. Promotion-focused individuals were more apt to perceive alternatives and to pursue them vigorously than were prevention-focused individuals. In contrast, no evidence emerged for any association of the regulatory focus index 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. That is, the Study 1 emphasis on perceiving and pursuing alternatives was informative, but it did not include any measures of evaluation of 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*

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 six months, starting three 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 perceive their romantic alternatives to be more desirable than would prevention-focused individuals or individuals who were more committed to their partner. 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 oriented 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 (although three were 17 and three were 19), and they had been involved with their dating partners for over a year, on average. Eligibility criteria required that each participant must be: (a) a first-year undergraduate at Northwestern University, (b) involved in a dating relationship of at least two months in duration, (c) between 17 and 19 years old, (d) a native English speaker, and (e) the only member of a given couple to participate in the study.

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 two days after the laboratory session, and they completed subsequent questionnaires every other week for six months, for 14 online waves in total.

As in Study 1, we used the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) to assess the strength of participants' motivations for promotion and prevention, and we subtracted participants' scores on

the prevention items from their scores on the promotion items to create a single *regulatory focus index*. We assessed *commitment* with a 2-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 zeroed in 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 the regulatory focus index 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 perceive (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 regulatory focus predicts similar tendencies regarding alternatives who might one day become a romantic partner. This study also included several measures of relationship standards, including a behavioral measure, to extend beyond the single-measure assessment in Study 1.

### *Study 3*

In Study 3, we sought to test our hypotheses among singles. 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, in press; Finkel & Eastwick, in press), 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 month-long 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, (a) reporting a greater number of romantic interests following the speed-dating event and (b) 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 measures of participants' standards.

In addition to these predictions, which were derived from H1, we also tested (for the first time ever among singles) whether more committed individuals would evaluate their alternatives to a particular romantic interest as less desirable than less committed individuals do (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 emails. 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 (the range was 9 to 13 dates, depending on session attendance), and they completed a brief *interaction record* questionnaire at the end of each date. Afterward, participants returned home and indicated through the study website whom they would or would not be interested in seeing again. If two participants were both interested in one another, they were notified of this "match."

In Part 3, participants completed a series of 10 *follow-up questionnaires*, which were administered through the study website. Participants completed the first of these 10 questionnaires two 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). Given space constraints on this questionnaire, we assessed these motivations with abbreviated, 2-item measures. The promotion scale included one item from the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) used in Studies 1 and 2 ("I have often accomplished things that got me 'psyched' to work even harder") and a new item we created for Study 3 ("It is

exceptionally important to me that I fulfill my hopes and aspirations”). The prevention scale also included one item from the RFQ (“Growing up, I typically obeyed rules and regulations that were established by my parents”) and a new item we created for the present research (“It is exceptionally important to me that I fulfill my duties and responsibilities”). The two new items were derived from other widely-used measures of regulatory focus (e.g., Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997; Liberman et al., 2001). As in Studies 1 and 2, we subtracted the mean of the prevention items from the mean of the promotion items to generate a *regulatory focus index*.

On the follow-up questionnaires (Part 3), participants completed a 2-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 website automatically inserted into the question the actual first name of each speed-dater or write-in classified as a romantic interest; participants provided the first name of write-ins when they initially reported on them.)

We assessed four measures of participants’ tendencies regarding romantic alternatives. Two of them were assessed on the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1). We used a 1-item measure of participants’ tendencies to *perceive alternatives* that was abbreviated from the Study 1 measure (“In general, I tend to have many options for romantic partners”) and a 2-item measure of *pursuit of alternatives* that was identical to the Study 1 measure.

The other two dependent variables were assessed on the follow-up questionnaires (Part 3). On each of these 10 questionnaires, participants answered the following question about each of their matches and write-ins: “What is the current status of your relationship with [partner name]?” Participants could choose one of the following response options to this question: (a) dating seriously, (b) dating casually, (c) friend with romantic potential, (d) acquaintance with romantic potential, (e) friend without romantic potential, (f) acquaintance without romantic potential, (g) no

relationship at all. We define the *evaluation of alternatives (number)* at each follow-up wave as the total number of matches and write-ins in whom participants had romantic interest (category a, b, c, or d). This is a measure of evaluation of alternatives because it assesses how many potential partners rise to the level of a romantic interest; 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 1-item *evaluation of alternatives (desirability)* measure assessing the alternatives to each match or write-in ("My romantic alternatives to [partner name] are desirable"). In sum, the tendency to perceive alternatives measure and the pursuit of alternatives measure were assessed on the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1), and the evaluation of alternatives (number) measure and the evaluation of alternatives (desirability) measure were assessed on the follow-up questionnaires (Part 3).

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 post-date 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 ("I really liked my interaction partner," "I was sexually attracted to my interaction partner," and "I am likely to say 'yes' to my interaction partner"). The "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; if promotion-focused individuals (relative to prevention-focused individuals) "yes" a larger number of this



specific set of ~12 partners or rate them as more romantically desirable on average, this would suggest that they have lower standards.

As predicted (H1), positive associations emerged for all four dependent measures. With regard to the two dependent measures from the pre-event questionnaire (Part 1), individuals with a promotion focus generally perceived romantic alternatives and pursued them more vigorously than did individuals with a prevention orientation. Similar results emerged for the two dependent measures from the follow-up questionnaires (Part 3): evaluation of alternatives (number) and evaluation of alternatives (desirability). 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. And building on the findings from Study 1, no evidence emerged for any association of the regulatory focus index with our romantic standards measures. Overall, these results closely replicate those of Study 1.

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. Only one of our four key dependent variables was assessed at this level of nesting—evaluation of alternatives (desirability)—and therefore only this variable is relevant for these commitment analyses. As in Study 2, we first performed a simultaneous multilevel regression model predicting evaluation of alternatives (desirability) from the regulatory focus index 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, Study 3 provided strong evidence concerning promotion-focused and prevention-focused individuals' tendencies regarding romantic alternatives when they are single and attempting to form new romantic relationships. The results complement those from Studies 1 and 2 in suggesting that the strategic orientations underlying individual differences in regulatory focus 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 perceive more 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 single 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 or pickiness 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. In addition, no evidence emerged to

suggest that our central effects could be explained by promotion-focused individuals (compared to prevention-focused individuals) having (a) a less restricted sociosexuality orientation (Studies 1 through 3), (b) a stronger sex drive (Studies 1 and 3), (c) greater self-esteem or dating self-confidence (Studies 2 and 3), or (d) greater objective mate value or physical attractiveness (Study 3).

### *Regulatory Focus and Romantic Relationships*

The studies reviewed herein are among the first to explore how regulatory focus dynamics play out in (current or potential) romantic relationships. Although scholars have investigated the importance of promotion and prevention motivations in social contexts such as interpersonal attribution (Lieberman et al., 2001), intergroup relations (Shah, Brazy, & Higgins, 2004), negotiation (Galinsky, Leonardelli, Okhuysen, & Mussweiler, 2005), and interpersonal conflict (Ayduk, May, Downey, & Higgins, 2003; Camacho, Higgins, & Luger, 2003), we are aware of no published research examining the importance of these motivations in romantic contexts.

We believe that the present research represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of the potential of regulatory focus theory to inform research on romantic relationships; the theory can help scholars hone their thinking about core issues in relationships science. For example, as-yet unpublished research demonstrates (a) 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); (b) 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); and (c) 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,

2008). Our sense is that regulatory focus theory can readily inform relationships literatures well beyond romantic alternatives, similarity and complementarity, forgiveness, and social support—and that the low-hanging fruit are plentiful.

*Is It Best Not to Date Promotion-Focused Individuals?*

If promotion-focused individuals are more likely than prevention-focused individuals to perceive, positively evaluate, and vigorously pursue romantic alternatives, is it wise to avoid becoming involved in a romantic relationship with them? After all, the relationships of romantically involved individuals who attend to alternatives (Miller, 1997) and who evaluate these alternatives positively (Bui, Peplau, & Hill, 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 surprise their partner with lavish presents or surprise vacations to advance the well-being of the relationship.

Of course, this tradeoff analysis applies not only to which partners are best, but also to which predominant motivational orientation in oneself results in the best relationships outcomes for

oneself. When one is single, being promotion-focused increases the likelihood that one will perceive desirable alternatives and find a romantic partner. However, once one is in a meaningful relationship, being promotion-focused decreases the likelihood that one derogate other romantic alternatives. As such, perhaps promotion or prevention motivations may each be more 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 (Impett, Gable, & Peplau, 2005; 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. Although some scholars view the distinction between approach and avoidance goals as nearly identical to the distinction between promotion and prevention goals, we suggest that these two distinctions differentiate between quite different pairs of motivations (see Higgins, 1997). Approach and promotion motivations differ from each other, as do avoidance and prevention motivations. Individuals can pursue either approach or avoidance goals toward either relationship growth (promotion) or relationship security (prevention); crossing these two motivational systems creates a  $2 \times 2$  motivational framework. One high priority direction for future research is to examine how approach and avoidance motivations interface with promotion and prevention motivations to influence relationship dynamics (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, & Hynes, 1994).

### *Conclusion*

Three studies demonstrated that promotion-focused individuals are more likely than prevention-focused individuals to perceive 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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