

**Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst: Regulatory
Focus Optimality in High and Low-Intensity Conflict**

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Abstract

Purpose – In this paper, we propose that a more optimal regulatory focus in conflict reflects a mix of promotion and prevention considerations because conflict often elicits needs for promoting wellbeing as well as needs for preventing threats to security and interests. Two studies employing distinct methodologies tested the hypothesis that social conflict is associated with better outcomes when the parties construe the conflict with a regulatory focus that reflects a combination of both promotion and prevention orientations.

Design / methodology / approach - Study 1 was an experiment that framed the same low-intensity conflict scenario as either prevention- or promotion-focused, or as both. In Study 2, we mouse-coded stream-of-thought accounts of participants' actual ongoing high-intensity conflicts for time spent in both promotion and prevention focus.

Findings – In Study 1, the combined framing resulted in greater satisfaction with expected conflict outcomes and goal attainment than did either prevention or promotion framing alone. However, a promotion frame alone was associated with greater process and relationship satisfaction. These results were replicated in Study 2.

Originality / value – Prior research on regulatory focus has emphasized the benefits of a promotion focus over prevention when managing conflict. The present research offers new insight into how these seemingly opposing motives can operate in tandem to increase conflict satisfaction. Thus, this research illustrates the value of moving beyond dichotomized motivational distinctions in conflict research, to understand the dynamic interplay of how these distinctions may be navigated in concert for more effective conflict engagement. It also illustrates the value of mouse-coding methods for capturing the dynamic interplay of motives as they rise and fall in salience over time.

Keywords: regulatory focus, social conflict, motivation, optimal dynamics, conflict management

Hoping for the Best, Preparing for the Worst:

Regulatory Focus Optimality in High- and Low-Intensity Conflict

Social conflict clearly has motivational underpinnings, as do efforts to resolve conflicts between individuals, groups, and nations. Accordingly, the attempt to identify the fundamental motives at work in conflict and conflict resolution has provided a consistent focus of theoretical and empirical attention in the social sciences (e.g., Deutsch, 1973; James, 1906; Lewin, 1936; Zartman, 2000). This work has revealed that the specific motives associated with conflict are numerous, reflecting local conditions, personal histories, and cultural narratives. But when viewed in terms of basic dynamics, the idiosyncratic motives for conflict resolution can be viewed as reflecting one of two basic orientations: achieving gain and striving for conflict resolution in order to reach a better state versus avoiding loss and seeking conflict resolution in order to prevent harm (Zartman, 2000).

This basic dichotomy in conflict motives maps onto the distinction between promotion and prevention in regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998). In a promotion mode, people are especially sensitive to experiences that enhance positive outcomes (e.g., attaining money or resources, gaining power or enhancing self-esteem). In a prevention mode, people are especially sensitive to experiences that increase the risks of negative outcomes. Thus, the same state of affairs can be valued to the extent that it promotes one's wellbeing and/or to the extent that it prevents an erosion of one's current level of wellbeing or reduces the intensity of negative outcomes.

In recent years, scholars have investigated a variety of aspects of social conflict from the perspective of regulatory focus theory (e.g., Appelt & Higgins, 2010; Brebels, DeCremer, & Sedikides, 2008; Cropanzano, Paddock, Rupp, Bagger, & Baldwin, 2008; Galinsky, Leonardelli, Okhuysen, & Mussweiler, 2005; O'Brien & Oyserman, 2010; Santelli, Struthers, & Eaton, 2009). It is commonly assumed in this research that people adopt one orientation or

the other when addressing social conflict and that those with a promotion orientation are generally more likely to perceive and bring about positive outcomes for the conflicting parties than are those with a prevention orientation.

But conflict is often a dynamic, mutable process where the issues change over time (Lewin, 1936; Pondy, 1967; Vallacher, Coleman, Nowak, Bui-Wrzosinska, Liebovitch, Kugler, & Bartoli, 2013), and thus is likely experienced as a mix of perceived opportunities and felt concerns. Although early pioneers of peace psychology such as James (1906), Follett (1973/1924), and Lewin (1936) appreciated the interplay of competing orientations in conflictual social relations, contemporary research commonly dichotomizes the motivational basis of conflict into chronic orientations, styles or traits, or into contrasting situational conditions, like prevention or promotion (Appelt & Higgins, 2010; Galinsky et al., 2005; O'Brien & Oyserman, 2010). We suggest that a more optimal approach to viewing regulatory focus in conflict reflects a mix of promotion and prevention considerations. Individuals who have a chronic orientation towards one or the other focus may be biased in their respective views, but unwillingness or inability to adopt the other orientation would likely blind them to the threats (in the case of promotion people) and opportunities (in the case of prevention people) that are likely to rise and fall in relative salience in an evolving conflict scenario.

In two studies we explored the interplay of both modes of self-regulation (prevention and promotion) in situations of social conflict. Study 1, an experiment, manipulated the framing of the same conflict scenario as prevention-focused, promotion-focused, or combined prevention and promotion-focused. The second study involved participants' moment-to-moment self-coding of stream-of-thought accounts of an actual conflict, to investigate how the mix of time spent considering prevention and promotion motivations were associated with different conflict experiences and outcomes.

Regulatory Focus

The basic hedonic principle that people are motivated to approach pleasure and avoid pain has been incorporated in several classic models in psychology, such as approach versus avoidance tendencies (Miller, 1944), desire for success versus fear of failure in achievement motivation (McClelland, 1958), behavior activation versus behavior inhibition systems (BAS vs. BIS), in hedonic orientation (Gray, 1990), and positive versus negative reinforcement in operant conditioning (Skinner, 1953).

In regulatory focus theory, Higgins moves beyond this distinction and proposes two different ways of self-regulation that operate when individuals strive for desired end-states to approach pleasure or to avoid pain. The two types of self-regulation are: prevention and promotion. In a promotion mode individuals strive for aspirations and accomplishments, are sensitive to the presence of positive outcomes, and use approach as a strategic means. In a prevention mode individuals strive for responsibility and safety, are sensitive to negative outcomes, insure against errors, and use avoidance as a strategic means (Higgins, 1997, 1998). These two modes do not represent endpoints on a single scale, but rather two distinct ways of scaling self-regulation (Higgins, 1997; Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk, & Taylor, 2001). The relative salience of these two modes for any individual is determined by prior socialization experiences, but is also responsive to variations in situational factors, such as reward-cost contingencies, stress, cues to goal attainment versus social obligations, and social comparison (Higgins, 1998). Even though it has been noted that both modes can operate in one situation (Higgins, 1997), people have been shown to differ in their default ways of self-regulation, so that one can speak of promotion and prevention people (Higgins et al., 2001).

Regulatory Focus Optimality in Social Conflict

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins 1997, 1998) suggests that people can engage in and attempt to resolve conflict for two very different reasons: to enhance personal or collective outcomes or to avoid deterioration in an existing state of affairs. Thus, a party to a conflict

may view it as an opportunity to increase her/his access to resources or to enhance her/his status, whereas another party may view the conflict as necessary to avoid a loss of resources or an erosion of status or safety.

As noted, the relevance of regulatory focus for understanding various aspects of social conflict has not gone unnoticed. Generally speaking, this research has shown that compared to prevention-focused individuals, promotion-focused people achieve superior outcomes in negotiations (Galinsky, et al., 2005; Appelt & Higgins, 2010), prefer gain-maximizing strategies (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011), and are more creative and open to change (Friedman & Forster, 2001), but are also more likely to retaliate against transgressions (Brebels, DeCremer, & Sedikides, 2008). Given that conflict triggers anxiety in most individuals (Deutsch, 1993) and is therefore likely to elicit a prevention focus to mitigate harm, it follows that holding a stronger promotion orientation would help to keep people open to more flexible, integrative processes. On the other hand, focusing on promoting preferred outcomes at the expense of preventing harms could be disastrous in conflict, leaving disputants vulnerable to damage.

We propose that in unfolding processes of social conflict, prevention and promotion modes of experience can operate in combination or in an iterative fashion and affect the relative salience of different concerns. This is particularly likely in the great majority of conflicts which are mixed-motive, where the disputants have both cooperative and competing goals operating (Deutsch, 1973), and in conflicts that change (e.g., escalate or deescalate) over time, which often evidence a transformation of motives (Fisher & Keashley, 1990; Pruitt, Kim, & Rubin, 2004). Under these conditions, both potential losses and gains can rise and fall in importance and effectively override a disputant's predisposed tendencies for prevention or promotion. Therefore, we suggest that having the capacity to assume both foci - prevention and promotion - might be more optimal for navigating conflicts effectively.

Our thinking builds on ripeness theory (Zartman, 1989, 2000, 2001, 2005) and readiness theory (Pruitt, 2005, 2012), which also suggest that divergent motivational tendencies often underlie a willingness to resolve conflict. Ripeness theory specifies the diverging social conditions (a mutually hurting stalemate and a mutually perceived way out) necessary for decision makers to be willing to start negotiations or mediations, whereas readiness theory reframes these in terms of the diverging individual motivations necessary for resolving conflicts. Readiness theory proposes that people are more inclined to negotiate conflict when: (a) they are motivated to end the conflict because they perceive it as painful and dysfunctional (i.e., the conflict cannot be won, has high costs and a continuation carries high risks); and (b) they are optimistic that it will be possible to locate a way out – a mutually acceptable solution to the conflict.

Thus, a readiness to negotiate emerges through some combination of two core motives: prevention of new or continued costs and consequences and promotion of a preferred state. Whereas the basic idea of divergent motives in conflict resolution is theoretically founded, empirical evidence is scarce (Pruitt & Kugler, 2014).

Hypothesis 1: Disputants who adopt a combined promotion and prevention orientation to conflict will experience more satisfaction with the process and outcomes of a conflict, compared to those who are focused on either promotion or prevention concerns alone.

Below, we describe two studies in which we tested our hypothesis employing distinct methodologies.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested our hypothesis in an experiment where we manipulated the framing of a low-intensity conflict scenario as prevention-focused, promotion-focused, or a combination of both.

Method

Participants. One hundred and twenty seven participants (71% females; mean age = 31.75 years, $SD=12.02$) completed our questionnaire via the Internet. The questionnaire was advertised in various cities in the USA. Participants were asked to imagine themselves in a work-related conflict scenario, so we emphasized work experience in our recruitment (90% of the participants had work experience). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 3 framing conditions for the conflict: 42 received a prevention frame, 43 a promotion frame, and 42 a combined prevention and promotion frame.

An a-priori estimate of sample size using G*power (Faul, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) had yielded a minimum of $N=119$ (linear multiple regression with three predictors [i.e., independent variable in addition to trait promotion and trait prevention included as control variables], α -error probability = 0.05, β -error probability = 0.95). We based our estimate on a medium effect size following Cohen (1992), given that other authors had found medium effects when investigating the effect of regulatory focus (e.g., Galinsky et al., 2005; Santanelli et al., 2009).

Design and procedure. The study had three experimental conditions. Participants read a low-intensity workplace conflict scenario where the framing of the situation and two subsequent reflection questions emphasized either a *promotion focus*, or a *prevention focus*, or a *combined promotion and prevention focus*:

Imagine you and your co-worker are working together on a common project. You will both co-lead the coordination of the project. This task is interesting and [*Promotion:*] *it is a great opportunity for both of you to further your careers;* [*Prevention:*] *it is important to both of you in order to not jeopardize your status within the company;* [*Combined:*] *it is a great opportunity for both of you to further your careers and not jeopardize your status within the company.* You and your co-worker meet to work on the project and share what each of you has done so far. You worked hard to be prepared for the meeting and [*Promotion:*] *you are excited to see this project succeed;*

[Prevention:] you are concerned about the consequences of not completing this project; [Combined:] you are concerned about the consequences of not completing this project, but you are also excited to see it succeed. Your co-worker shows up with very little done and, on top of that, barely acknowledges what you've accomplished by yourself. A week later, the project is running behind and you plan to meet again, but your co-worker calls you and says there was a family emergency. There is much left to be done before anything can be submitted on the project and so you do a significant amount of the work yourself because [Promotion:] this project is so important to achieving your goals within the company; [Prevention:] you do not want to face the consequences of not completing the project; [Combined:] this project is so important to achieving your goals within the company and you do not want to face the consequences of not completing it.

[Promotion:] Ideally, what would you like to see happen here? How might you respond in order to achieve this goal successfully? [Prevention:] What are your most serious concerns here? How should you respond in order to prevent something negative from happening? [Combined:] Ideally, what would you like to see happen here and what are your most serious concerns here? How might/should you respond in order to achieve your goals and to prevent something negative from happening?

Participants then completed a questionnaire concerning their perception of the conflict scenario, where the manipulation check and dependent variables were assessed. They then completed a distraction task (writing from 30 to 0 backwards), after which their trait levels of promotion and prevention were measured. Finally, they were offered the opportunity to take part in a lottery in which 1 participant out of 50 won \$250.

Measures. To assess the effectiveness of the *regulatory focus manipulations*, two items were presented immediately after the conflict scenario: one assessed the degree to which participants were sensitive to negative outcomes and losses and thus had a prevention

focus (“Things got worse through this conflict”); the other assessed the degree to which participants focused on the positive outcomes and gains and thus had a promotion focus (“It was possible to use this conflict to make things better overall”).

The questionnaire assessing participants’ feelings and perceptions of the conflict scenario consisted of 5 scales: satisfaction with the relationship to the other party (4 items), perceptions of mutuality between parties (3 items), satisfaction with the interpersonal processes (4 items), perceived attainment of one’s own goals (3 items), and satisfaction with the approach to the conflict (3 items). The items were created by the authors for the purpose of this study but build on items used by Brodbeck, Kugler, Fischer, Heinze, and Fischer (2011) as well as Kugler, Coleman, and Fuchs (2011).

We conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis (principal axis factoring) with a promax rotation to explore whether the different aspects of the perceptions of the conflict situation were distinct from each other. The items and the results of the Factor Analysis are shown in Table 1. The results resulted in four factors with an Eigenvalue < 1 , which explained 70.46% of the variance. The items of the *satisfaction with interpersonal process*, *perceived attainment of one’s own goals*, and *satisfaction with the approach to the conflict* loaded on separate factors, but the items of *satisfaction with the relationship to the other party* and the *perceptions of mutuality between parties* were closely related and loaded on a single factor. In subsequent analyses, we therefore combined the two scales to create a measure of *satisfaction with relationship quality*.

Participant’s trait-level chronic *promotion* (9 items) and *prevention orientation* (9 items) were measured using the regulatory focus scale developed by Lockwood, Jordan, and Kunda (2002). All items were assessed on 7-point Likert scales from 1 = “not at all” to 7 = “extremely”.

The reliabilities of all the scales were $\alpha > .81$ and are displayed in see Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Results

All analyses were conducted with SPSS 23. The correlations between the various measures are shown in Table 2.

The effectiveness of the manipulation was assessed by looking at the correlation between the two manipulation check items and the following contrasts for the 3 different conditions: -1 = promotion frame; 0 = combined frame, 1 = prevention frame. Following Higgins et al. (2001), participants with a promotion frame should be especially sensitive to positive outcomes and participants with a prevention frame should be especially sensitive to negative outcomes. Participants with a combined frame were expected to be sensitive to both positive and negative outcomes and thus medium contrasts were chosen. We expected and found a positive correlation with the item “It was possible to use this conflict to make things better overall” ($r = .18, p = .046$) and a negative correlation with the item “things got worse through this conflict” ($r = -.26, p = .003$).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

We hypothesized that a frame representing both prevention and promotion would be associated with more positive conflict perceptions, as assessed by all 4 factors. To test the hypothesis, we performed a regression analysis using the following contrasts for the three different conditions: -1 = promotion-frame, -1 = prevention-frame, 2 = combined frame. The trait measures for regulatory focus were included as control variables. The results are shown in Table 3 (Model 1). We found that a combined frame versus a pure promotion or prevention frame was associated with higher levels of satisfaction with goal attainment and satisfaction with the conflict approach. However, we did not find effects for satisfaction with relationship quality or satisfaction with the interpersonal process.

For exploratory purposes, we conducted regressions with different contrasts to explore whether a promotion frame would be instrumental for the satisfaction with the relationship and a positive interpersonal process. A positive influence of a promotion focus in conflicts

was shown in previous research (see introduction). Hence, we chose the following contrasts for the three experimental conditions: prevention frame = -1; combined frame = 0; promotion frame = 1 (promotion is not present in the prevention frame; promotion is present in the combined frame but not exclusively; promotion is exclusively present in the promotion frame). As shown in Table 3 (Model 2), a promotion frame was associated with higher perceptions of satisfaction with relationship quality and satisfaction with the interpersonal process. This was not the case for perceptions of goal attainment and satisfaction with the conflict approach.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

Discussion

The findings from Study 1 provide partial support for our hypothesis, but also suggest that the effects of different regulatory foci may depend on which aspect of the conflict perception is considered. First, our analyses supported the idea that a combined prevention and promotion motivational orientation is optimal with regard to satisfaction with one's approach to the conflict and the likelihood of goal attainment. In other words, sensitivity to both threats and opportunities seems to provide the best foundation for setting a viable course and achieving one's outcomes in conflict. With regard to the relational aspects of the conflict, on the other hand, a predominant promotion orientation was found to be most beneficial. This unexpected finding raises the possibility that addressing different aspects of conflicts—namely goal-related outcome tasks versus the relational process—may be best served by employing different types of regulatory foci. The notion that task versus relationship conflicts cannot be viewed in the same way is well established in research, especially in the study of team conflict (cf., DeDreu & Weingart, 2003; DeWit, Greer, & Jehn, 2012). Relationship conflict is typically considered more destructive than task conflict. Perhaps emphasizing the potential for opportunity, while downplaying the possibility of loss, is the optimal perspective for interacting with others in a conflict situation where facilitating a constructive interpersonal

process is central. When focusing on the outcome of a conflict, however, acknowledging the potential for both gain and loss may be the optimal perspective. This finding was further explored in Study 2.

Study 2

In Study 2, we explored the relative promotion and prevention focus in participants' stream-of-thought accounts of an ongoing personal conflict characterized by high intensity. In light of the results of Study 1 and the utilization of a new methodology, our hypotheses were revised as follows:

Hypothesis 2a: When describing a personal conflict narrative, the greater amount of time spent in both a promotion and prevention regulatory focus (rather than in a promotion-only or prevention-only focus), the greater will be the experience of satisfaction with the outcome-related aspects of the conflict.

Hypothesis 2b: When describing a personal conflict narrative, the greater amount of time spent in a promotion regulatory focus (as opposed to a prevention focus or combined

Method

Participants. We invited 90 students to our laboratory at a large Northeastern University in the USA. Given some participants did not finish the questionnaire at the end of the study or had technical problems when coding their stream-of-consciousness, our final dataset consisted of 83 participants (71% female; mean age = 27.04 years, SD = 5.40).

An a-priori estimate of sample size using G*power (Faul, Lang, & Buchner, 2007) had yielded a minimum of N=89. Again, we based our estimate on a medium effect size (see Study 1). We intended to calculate polynomial regressions and response surface analyses techniques (for a detailed description see "Analyses" below). For this analysis, it is recommended to base the estimation of sample size on an increase in R² of the congruence effect beyond the two main effects. Thus, we estimated the sample size with a linear multiple

regression with 3 predictors and 1 tested predictor, α -error probability = 0.05, and β -error probability = 0.95.

Design and procedure. About one week prior to a laboratory session, participants completed an online questionnaire that assessed dispositional characteristics of regulatory focus and demographic information. At the laboratory session, participants were asked to think for a few minutes about an ongoing, difficult conflict in which they are currently involved, and to talk for 5 minutes about the conflict in private (into a recording device). To initiate the stream-of-thought narrative, participants were given the following instructions: “Please talk about your thoughts and feelings and why the conflict is important to you.” Upon completion of their narrative, they filled out a questionnaire asking about their perceptions of the conflict. The perceptions included scales related to the relational aspects of the conflict (i.e., satisfaction with the relationship and the interpersonal process), a scale addressing the outcome (i.e., seeing a solution to the conflict), and scales addressing both relationship and outcome (i.e., felt responsibility to change the conflict and intentions to approach the other party in order to resolve the conflict). Finally, participants listened to the audio recording of their stream-of-thought narratives and coded it twice: once for prevention orientation and once for promotion orientation. Upon completion, participants were debriefed and received US\$15 in compensation.

Measures. *Participant’s prevention versus promotion foci* while reflecting on a personal intense conflict was measured by asking them to code their own stream-of-thought about the conflict. This coding employed the mouse-paradigm, a computer program developed by Vallacher and Nowak (e.g., Vallacher, Van Geert, & Nowak, 2015). This program registers the moment-to-moment position of a mouse-controlled cursor on the screen as participants listen to and indicate the feelings expressed in an audio narrative they have recorded. In the present study, participants listened to the audio recording of their stream-of-thought narratives twice (in counterbalanced order) – once to indicate their moment-to-

moment expressions of promotion focus and once to indicate their moment-to-moment expressions of prevention focus. For prevention, participants were instructed to listen to their own audio recordings of the conflict and move the mouse to the right side of the monitor if they felt they took a prevention approach (trying to avoid losses) at any point in time and move the mouse to the left side if they felt they did not take a prevention approach. For promotion, participants were asked to move the mouse to the right side of the monitor if they felt they took a promotion approach (trying to seek ideal goals) at any point in time and move the mouse to the left side if they felt they did not take a promotion approach.

In each case, they used the mouse to move the cursor between two areas: prevention versus not-prevention or promotion versus not-promotion. Therefore, the mouse paradigm allowed us to capture participants moment-to-moment foci on prevention and promotion as they reflected on their conflicts.

Upon completion of the mouse procedure, participants' completed a questionnaire consisting of scales assessing their feelings about and perceptions of the conflict. The items included satisfaction with the *process and satisfaction with the relationship* (adapted from the respective subscales by Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006; 4 items each), *felt responsibility to change the conflict* (adapted from Morrison & Phelps, 1999; 4 items were used; 1 item was excluded due to low fit in the reliability analysis), *intentions to approach the other party in order to resolve the conflict* (4 items), and *seeing a solution for the conflict* (3 items). The items for the two latter two scales were developed for this study.

Similar to Study 1, we conducted an Exploratory Factor Analysis (principal axis factoring) with a Promax Rotation to explore whether our conflict-related outcome variables were distinct from one another. The items and the results of the Factor Analysis are shown in Table 4. The results showed four factors with an Eigenvalue < 1 , which explained 71.78% of the variance. The items of the felt responsibility to change conflict, intentions to approach the other party in order to resolve conflict, and seeing a solution for the conflict loaded on

separate factors, but the items of satisfaction with the process and satisfaction with the relationship loaded on a single factor. In subsequent analyses, we therefore combined the two scales to create a measure of satisfaction with relationship and process.

To test whether participants followed our instructions and thought about a difficult conflict, we also asked participants about the *level of escalation* of the conflict using the scale by De Dreu, Nauta, and Van De Vliert (1995; 7 items).

Participant's *trait levels of promotion and prevention* were measured one week before the laboratory session (with an online questionnaire), using the scale developed by Lockwood et al. (2002; 9 items each).

All items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale from 1= "not at all" to 7="extremely." The reliabilities of all the scales were $\alpha > .78$ (see Table 5).

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

Analysis. The main analyses were calculated with polynomial regression and response surface analyses techniques suggested by Shanock, Baran, Gentry, Pattison, and Heggstad (2010). This technique allows one to analyze how two independent variables in combination predict a dependent variable. A polynomial regression is represented by the following equation: $Z = b_0 + b_1X + b_2Y + b_3X^2 + b_4XY + b_5Y^2 + e$. A response surface analysis indicates whether there is a significant slope of perfect agreement ($a_1 = b_1 + b_2$) or disagreement ($a_3 = b_1 - b_2$) as the variables X and Y relate to Z, the dependent variable. Further curvature along the line of perfect agreement ($a_2 = b_3 + b_4 + b_5$) and the perfect line of disagreement ($a_4 = b_3 - b_4 + b_5$) of the variables X and Y as they relate to Z can be calculated. In our case, the two independent variables X and Y are prevention focus and promotion focus, respectively. The dependent variables Z are the different scales regarding the perceptions of the conflict. Using the response surface analysis, we explored whether prevention and promotion in combination predicted conflict perceptions.

Results

Participants indeed thought about difficult conflicts, as the level of conflict escalation was on average $M = 4.78$ ($SD = 1.10$, 1 = low levels of escalation, 7 = high levels of escalation). The correlations between all variables are shown in Table 5. Participants' trait scores for prevention and promotion were unrelated to our dependent variables, so the trait measures were not included in subsequent analyses.

On average, participants focused 35% ($SD = 22\%$) of the time on prevention and 27% ($SD = 21\%$) of the time on promotion. This difference was significant $t(82) = 3.16$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.35$). The greater focus on prevention is reasonable in light of difficult disputes participants were asked to describe. Because of the absolute difference between prevention and promotion focus, we z-standardized the variables for the polynomial regressions.

INSERT TABLE 5 HERE

To test how prevention and promotion focus related to perceptions of the conflict, we conducted response surface analysis using the R-package "RSA" by Schönbrodt (2016). All results are shown in Table 6. We found that seeing a solution for the conflict was highest when participants were focused on prevention and promotion in combination, as indicated by a significant positive estimate for a_1 and otherwise insignificant estimates. In other words, we found an additive effect for prevention and promotion focus, which is visualized in Figure 1. For the variables felt responsibility to change the conflict and intentions to resolve the conflict with the other party, we found a different pattern: the variables were highest when promotion focus was high, independent of the prevention focus. This was reflected by a significant positive result for a_1 , a significant negative result for a_3 , and insignificant results for a_2 and a_4 . An example for this pattern is shown in Figure 1. For the variable satisfaction with the process and the relationship, the results indicate an almost significant ($p = .05$) negative a_3 , which indicates that the satisfaction is higher when the discrepancy between promotion and prevention is such that promotion is higher than prevention.

INSERT TABLE 6 HERE

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Discussion

The results of Study 2 were consistent with the results of Study 1 and supported our revised Hypotheses 2a and 2b. On the one hand, a combined focus of prevention and promotion was associated with more positive perceptions of conflict outcomes. On the other hand, the more participants focused on promotion and not on prevention, the more positive they felt about the relational aspects of their ongoing conflict. We also assessed aspects that were both outcome and relationship related (responsibility to change the conflict and intentions to resolve the conflict), which were positively related to a promotion focus, but here a prevention focus was not detrimental as it was for relational aspects.

General Discussion

This article introduces a new way of conceptualizing the effects of different regulatory foci (i.e., an optimal mix of promotion and prevention orientations) and investigates its relation to criteria of constructive conflict processes. It builds on prior research in the area, but extends this research by examining the combined effects of prevention and promotion orientations on experiences of conflict. In Study 2, we additionally introduce an innovative method to the study the promotion and prevention foci over time as individuals reflect on a conflict. The results suggest that a combination of promotion and prevention is optimal when the outcomes of the conflict are concerned, whereas a promotion-only focus is optimal when the relationship is central.

These results were found in a scenario-based experiment with a hypothetical low-intensity conflict (Study 1) as well as in a laboratory study that involved participants reflecting on personal high-intensity conflicts (Study 2). The results of Study 1 were somewhat surprising, as we had initially hypothesized that a combined focus of prevention and promotion would be optimal for all aspects of the conflict.

However, the different pattern of results obtained for goal/outcome-related versus relationship/process-related aspects is reminiscent of the distinction between task- and social/emotional orientations in research on group dynamics (Parsons, 1951). When faced with conflict, an individual's attention can be more oriented toward goals external to the relationships' involved (task-oriented) and/or towards goals intrinsic to the relationship (relationally-oriented; Blake & Mouton, 1968; Deutsch, 1985). These findings are therefore relevant to the distinction between task and relationship conflict (e.g., DeDreu & Weingart, 2003; DeWit et al., 2012). Future research is warranted to explore whether emphasis on promotion versus prevention is differentially beneficial for conflicts that vary in their task versus relationship salience.

The present findings also highlight the importance of better understanding optimality in psychological processes more generally. The construct of optimality has been investigated recently in terms of decision making (e.g., Davis-Stober, Dana, & Budescu, 2010; Nelson, 2009; Pollock, 2006), personality (Sheldon, 2007), and emotions (Gottman, Swanson, & Swanson, 2002; Kristjánsson, 2009; Losada & Heaphy, 2004), but rarely in the context of motivation or conflict management (see Callanan, Benzing, & Perri, 2006; Van de Vliert, Euwema & Huismans, 1995). Rather than claiming that one tendency (e.g., promotion, cooperativeness, high self-esteem, open-mindedness, sensitivity) is always better – which is implicit in many theories and empirical studies – we suggest that a mix between opposing tendencies may often be more functional (i.e., there is a downside to a one-sided orientation). The task for future research is to identify the optimal balance between tendencies as a function of various factors.

There are also practical implications associated with these findings. When interacting with others in a conflict situation where the interpersonal relationship matters the most, emphasizing the potential for opportunity for relational enhancement, while downplaying the possibility of loss, may be the optimal perspective to take, whereas acknowledging the potential

for both loss and gain may be the most effective approach when attempting to balance the task and social outcomes of a conflict. Managers can also encourage employees to manage conflicts differently depending on whether interpersonal relationships or other outcomes matter more in any given situation. Similarly, mediators and other conflict resolution practitioners who engage in conflict management trainings can also empower others to more effectively handle conflicts with these insights by sharing the different effects of these distinct motives and frames.

One of the limitations of the current research is that it cannot identify and define what exactly the optimal balance (or rather ratio) between promotion and prevention is in order to reach the best outcomes possible in a conflict. Future research is asked to define optimality in terms of a ration between a promotion and prevention focus in conflicts. Moreover, our research does not capture how the balance between promotion and prevention change over time. Beyond underscoring the often-overlooked fact that psychological and social processes unfold in accordance with different dynamic patterns (cf. Vallacher et al., 2015), research in this vein might generate a useful taxonomy of dynamic patterns for understanding different types of conflict.

Furthermore, the ideas established in this line of research must be extended to, and tested in real-world contexts of interpersonal and intergroup conflict. The approach employed in the present studies is necessary for purposes of internal validity and experimental control, but one can question its capacity to induce a sense of mundane realism (Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982). Indeed, such work might expand on the notion of “fit” (cf. Higgins, 2000) from a focus on one orientation or the other to incorporate the idea that there is an optimal mix between promotion and prevention, and changes over time.

In sum, the results of the present research offer new insight into how fundamental motives operate in tandem to affect the experience and resolution of conflict. The emphasis on optimality in the mix between promotion and prevention, and the implications of different

patterns, provides a framework for understanding how basic motives may combine to impact conflict dynamics. This agenda is enhanced by the introduction of a paradigm for tracking the dynamics of psychological process. As such, this line of research returns us to the original insights on the flow of conflict and motivation in human experience suggested by early social psychological theorists, while moving us forward in terms of theory and method.

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Table 1

Summary of items and factor loadings from exploratory factor analysis (Study 1)

	Factors				Communi- alities
	1	2	3	4	
<i>Satisfaction with the relationship</i>					
I would like to work with the other party again sometime in the future.	.98	-.01	-.19	-.02	.75
To what extent did you feel you could trust the other party in the conflict?	.79	-.02	.09	-.06	.68
To what extent did you feel a sense of affection for the other party in the conflict?	.75	.01	.04	-.07	.56
How satisfied were you with the relationship with the other party?	.71	-.08	.16	-.04	.62
<i>Perception of mutuality</i>					
I can imagine that we (the other party and I) could work well together in future.	.78	.02	-.13	.13	.60
Even though we (both parties) were in conflict, we still worked together well as team.	.64	.09	.09	.09	.62
I felt we (both parties) had the same overall goal in this conflict and we could only achieve it by working together.	.57	.02	.04	.02	.36
<i>Goal attainment</i>					
To what extent do you think you would have attained what you were aiming for in this situation?	.02	.96	.10	-.10	.90
To what extent do you think you would have gotten what you wanted in this situation?	-.00	.82	-.01	.12	.78
To what extent do you think you would have achieved your goals in this situation?	-.02	.81	-.06	-.04	.61
<i>Satisfaction with interpersonal process</i>					
How fair was the conflict?	-.02	-.04	.83	.05	.71
How productive was this conflict?	-.13	.09	.69	.04	.45
How respectful was the conflict?	.26	-.07	.62	-.05	.58
How friendly was the conflict?	.24	.01	.50	.03	.48
<i>Satisfaction with the approach</i>					
Generally I would have felt comfortable with how this situation went.	-.15	-.01	.08	.89	.76
Generally I would have felt comfortable with how this situation was approached.	.07	-.07	.01	.74	.56
Generally I would have felt comfortable with the process of the conflict.	.18	.08	-.03	.63	.57
Eigenvalue	6.99	2.54	1.39	1.05	
% of explained variance	41.14	14.96	8.20	6.16	

Note. Boldface indicates factor loadings $>.5$.

Table 2

Correlations among the variables included in Study 1

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Trait measure for prevention	4.45	1.28	(.86)					
2 Trait measure for promotion	5.58	1.00	.15	(.88)				
3 Satisfaction with relationship quality	2.87	1.31	-.01	-.02	(.90)			
4 Satisfaction with goal attainment	4.91	1.47	-.05	.25**	-.19*	(.88)		
5 Satisfaction with interpersonal process	3.47	1.32	-.09	.03	.60**	.23*	(.81)	
6 Satisfaction with conflict approach	3.71	1.46	-.18*	.10	.45**	.44**	.50**	(.83)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. $N = 127$. Cronbach's α for the respective scale is included in parentheses. Scales were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = low levels of the respective concept; 7 = high levels of the respective concept)

Table 3

Results of a Regression analysis for Study 1

	Dependent Variables							
	Satisfaction with relationship quality		Satisfaction with interpersonal process		Satisfaction with goal attainment		Satisfaction with conflict approach	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Trait Prevention	-.01	.03	-.09	-.05	-.09	-.13	-.19*	-.19
Trait Promotion	-.01	-.06	.05	.02	.25**	.20	.12	.04
Conditions with contrasts: -1=prevention -1=promotion 2=combined	-.01		-.02		.24**		.18*	
Conditions with contrasts: -1=prevention 0=combined 1=promotion		.22*		.29**		-.01		.16
F	0.01	1.53	0.41	2.48	5.88**	1.27	3.45*	1.82
R ²	.00	.05	.01	.08	.13	.05	.08	.06

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. $N = 127$. Standardized regression-weights (β) are shown.

Table 4

Summary of items and factor loadings from exploratory factor analysis (Study 2)

	Factor				Commun- alities
	1	2	3	4	
<i>Satisfaction with the process</i> ^a					
Would you characterize the conflict process as fair?	.85	-.02	.05	-.28	.54
Are your counterpart(s) considering your wishes, opinions, or needs?	.84	.09	-.10	.03	.75
How satisfied are you with the ease (or difficulty) of reaching an agreement or solution?	.81	-.24	.02	.10	.68
Do you feel your counterpart(s) listen(s) to your concerns?	.79	.15	.07	-.22	.58
<i>Satisfaction with the relationship to the other party</i> ^a					
What kind of "overall" impression do your counterpart(s) make on you?	.86	.08	.01	-.10	.70
How satisfied are you with your relationship with your counterpart(s) in this conflict?	.79	-.12	.09	.07	.69
Does the negotiation make you trust your counterpart(s)?	.79	.00	-.04	.17	.78
Does the conflict build a good foundation for a future relationship with your counterpart(s)?	.60	.16	-.09	.26	.66
<i>Felt responsibility to change the conflict</i> ^b					
I feel obligated to try to introduce a way to resolve the conflict.	-.01	.90	.07	-.08	.82
It's up to me to bring about improvement in this conflict.	.13	.87	-.08	-.01	.76
I feel a personal sense of responsibility to bring about change in this conflict.	-.21	.71	.20	.06	.67
Resolving this conflict is not really my responsibility. (R)	-.16	-.46	.08	-.13	.32
<i>Intentions to resolve the conflict with the other party</i>					
How committed are you to working this out peacefully with the other side?	-.01	-.04	.96	-.06	.82
I am willing to approach the other disputant and work things out.	.18	-.01	.66	.14	.68
I am planning to initiate a resolution to this conflict (e.g. by talking to the other party(ies); by negotiating with the other party(ies); by suggesting a mediation etc.)	.16	.03	.64	.02	.53
I would like to resolve this conflict as soon as possible.	-.19	.16	.58	.08	.47
<i>Seeing a solution for the conflict</i>					
There is a way out of this conflict.	-.20	-.01	.02	.83	.55
I am optimistic about finding an agreement/resolution to this conflict.	.17	.04	.01	.72	.73
It is possible to locate a mutually acceptable agreement/resolution to this conflict.	.02	-.00	.15	.62	.53
Eigenvalues	7.94	3.21	1.49	1.01	
% of explained variance	41.76	16.89	7.82	5.31	

Note. ^aadapted from Curhan, Elfenbein, & Xu, 2006. ^badapted from Morrison & Phelps, 1999. (R) = reverse coded. Principal axis analysis with promax rotation was used. Factor loadings >.40 are boldface.

Table 5

Correlations among variables in Study 2

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Trait Promotion	4.08	0.66	(.87)								
2 Trait Prevention	3.17	0.68	.28*	(.78)							
3 Level of escalation	4.78	1.10	.10	.12	(.81)						
4 Prevention focus during stream-of-conscious	34.85	0.22	-.05	-.04	-.16						
5 Promotion focus during stream-of-conscious	26.63	0.21	.14	-.16	-.17	.40**					
6 Satisfaction with relationship and process	3.25	1.42	-.15	-.06	-.75**	.13	.28*	(.93)			
7 Felt responsibility to change the conflict	4.93	1.52	.13	.03	-.29**	.17	.36**	.35**	(.85)		
8 Intentions to resolve the conflict	4.76	1.53	.04	-.14	-.40**	.17	.40**	.36**	.57**	(.85)	
9 Seeing a solution for the conflict	4.43	1.46	-.05	-.10	-.49**	.17	.20	.50**	.43**	.58**	(.81)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. $N=83$. Cronbach's α for the respective scale is included in parentheses. Scales were measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1= low levels of the respective concept; 7= high levels of the respective concept); prevention and promotion focus during the stream-of-thought are indicated in percentages.

Table 6

Results of a response surface analysis: the independent variables are the z-standardized percentages of prevention focus and promotion focus during the stream-of-thought about a difficult conflict

Different estimates of the response surface analysis	Dependent Variables			
	Seeing a solution to the conflict	Intentions to approach the other party in order to resolve the conflict	Felt responsibility to resolve the conflict	Satisfaction with process and relationship
a1: linear additive effect on the line of congruence	.47 (.23)*	.83 (.22) **	.76 (.23)**	-.30 (.22)
a2: curvature on the line of congruence	.00 (.15)	-.14 (.14)	-.13 (.15)	.17 (.14)
a3: ridge shifted away from the line of congruence	-.36 (.32)	-.94 (.31) **	-.74 (.32)*	-.59 (.30) †
a4: general effect of incongruence	-.03 (.25)	.03 (.25)	.11 (.25)	.41 (.24)

Note. N=83. Estimates of response surface analysis are shown (standard errors are in parenthesis). ** p<.01, * p<.05, † p=.05

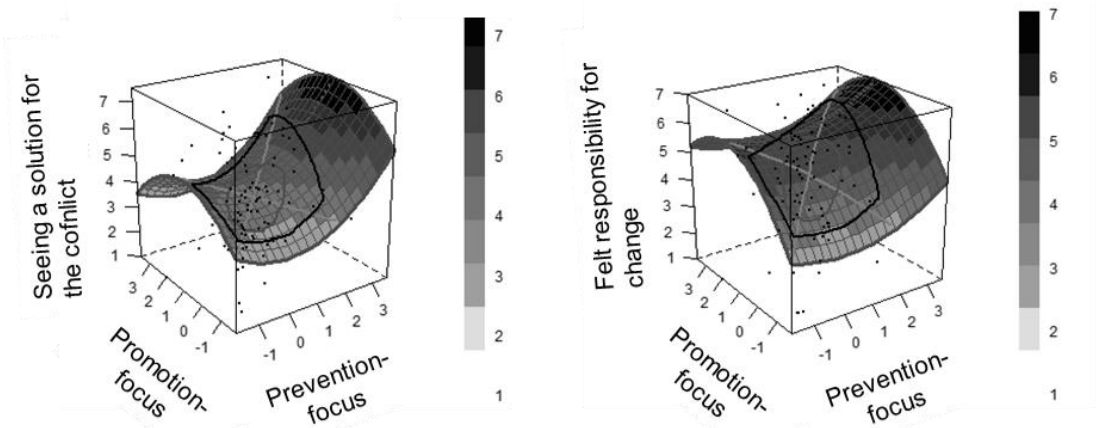


Figure 1. Result of a response surface analysis. The figure shows how prevention-focus and promotion-focus in combination predict the respective outcome variable.