



Regulatory Fit After Priming Regulatory Focus: Physiological State of Challenge or Threat

Lauren Campise, Cheryl L. Kondrak, Mark D. Seery

University at Buffalo, The State University of New York

Introduction

Background

- According to regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 1997, 2000), people can pursue the same goal with different orientations
 - A person's goal orientation can be:
 - Promotion focused** – heightened concern with positive outcomes, accomplishments, and ideals
 - Prevention focused** – heightened concern with negative outcomes, obligations, and oughts
- Fit occurs when:
 1. A promotion focus is paired with a goal that places importance on gains, rewards, and accomplishments
 2. A prevention focus is paired with a goal that places importance on losses, consequences, and responsibilities
- Previous research has shown that greater fit leads to potential benefits such as improved performance and increased motivation; fit is thought to result in a feeling of overall “rightness” (Higgins, 1997, 2000; Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998)
 - However, research has relied on self-report measures and performance differences to assess the effects of regulatory fit, which have several limitations:
 1. Self-report questionnaires are administered *after* completion of a task and do not necessarily reflect how a person feels *during* the task
 2. Many factors affect performance differences, and having performed well as an end result does not directly speak to what a person experiences *during* the task
 3. Fit-derived “rightness” may not be something that a person can consciously identify, and thus it may not be possible to directly reflect and report on it

Purpose

- Examines how individuals are affected psychologically *while* they are actually experiencing a regulatory fit situation versus not
- To assess responses *during* regulatory fit (and lack thereof), we applied the biopsychosocial model of challenge and threat (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1996) and measured cardiovascular responses
 - The model holds that cardiovascular responses reveal psychological evaluations of personal resources versus situational demands (i.e., confidence)

Biopsychosocial Model of Challenge and Threat

- Positive motivational states (challenge) and negative motivational states (threat) are determined by the ratio of evaluated resources and demands in a situation where a person is working toward an important goal
- Challenge** occurs when personal resources are high and situational demands are low
 - Increase in heart rate (HR) from resting baseline - heart beats faster
 - Increase in ventricular contractility (VC) - heart beats harder
 - Low total peripheral resistance (TPR) - arteries dilate
 - High cardiac output (CO) - heart pumps more blood

- Threat** occurs when situational demands are high and personal resources are low
 - Like during challenge: increase in HR and VC
 - Unlike during challenge:
 - High TPR
 - Low CO

Method

Participants

- 120 University at Buffalo undergraduates (61 women)

Procedure

- Completed reaction time task (Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997) to determine dominant orientation (promotion vs. prevention focus)
 - Reactions times (RTs) were measured while participants:
 - Listed 4 separate attributes they felt they ought to possess
 - Faster RTs = greater prevention focus
 - Listed 4 separate attributes they felt they ideally wanted to possess
 - Faster RTs = greater promotion focus
 - A discrepancy score was calculated to determine dominant orientation by subtracting mean RT to ought words from ideal words (higher values indicated greater prevention focus)
 - Sat for a 5-minute resting baseline after physiological sensors were attached
 - Experienced one of two conditions:
 - Accomplishment prime**: told to think about their upcoming weekend and what goals they wished to accomplish in order to acquire desirable outcomes (consistent with promotion)
 - Obligation prime**: told to think about their upcoming weekend and what responsibilities they needed to complete in order to avoid potentially undesirable outcomes (consistent with prevention)
 - Presented a 2-minute speech about their plans for the weekend while their physiological responses were measured

Hypotheses

Accomplishment Prime Condition

- Exhibit **challenge** when dominantly promotion focused
 - Fit will provide high resources
- Exhibit **threat** when dominantly prevention focused
 - Lack of fit will create low resources

Obligation Prime Condition

- Exhibit **threat** when dominantly promotion focused
 - Lack of fit will create low resources
- Exhibit **challenge** when dominantly prevention focused
 - Fit will provide high resources

Results

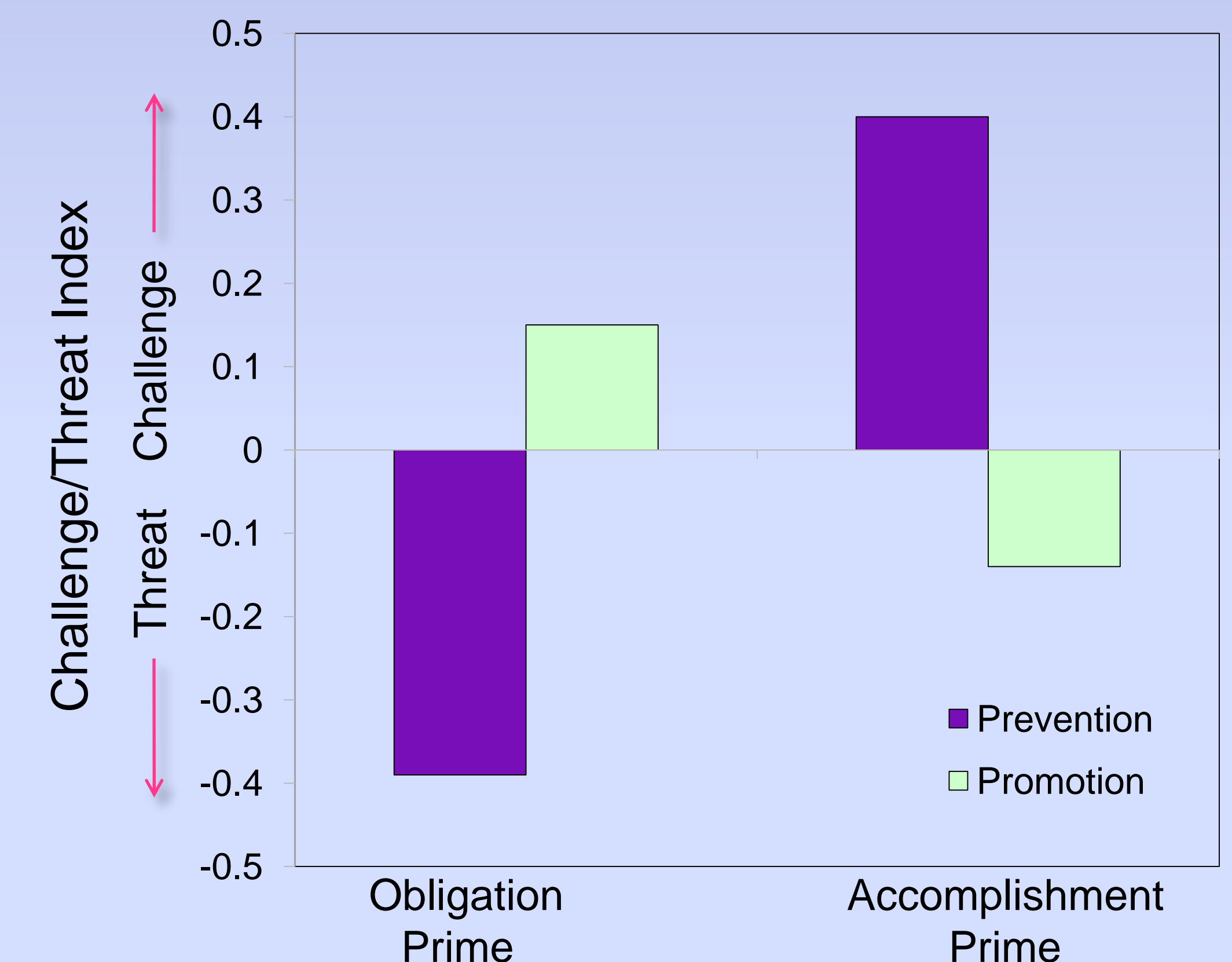
Analytical Strategy

- Regression analyses were conducted using RT discrepancy scores as a continuous variable and speech prime as a dichotomous variable, predicting cardiovascular markers of challenge/threat

- TPR and CO values were combined to create a standardized index score of challenge/threat (higher values indicated greater challenge)

Challenge/Threat

- Statistical analyses are ongoing
- Preliminary analyses revealed a significant interaction ($B = .54$, $p < .01$)
 - Contrary to predictions, those in the obligation prime condition exhibited significantly greater threat when they were prevention focused (fit) compared to when they were promotion focused (lack of fit; $B = -.27$, $p < .05$), whereas the opposite pattern emerged for those in the accomplishment prime condition ($B = .27$, $p < .05$)
 - Furthermore, prevention-focused individuals exhibited significantly greater threat when they spoke about obligations compared to when they spoke about accomplishments ($B = .80$, $p < .01$), whereas promotion-focused individuals did not significantly differ across conditions ($p = .25$)



Conclusion

- Despite prior research on the positive motivational effects of regulatory fit, the results of this investigation suggest that people with a dominant prevention focus may not necessarily experience a more positive psychological state while pursuing a goal that places importance on obligations
 - It is possible that people who are habitually concerned with potential losses may feel a heightened sense of obligation when in a situation that fits their orientation
 - In other words, fit may be motivating for prevention-focused individuals due to a heightened perception of obligation instead of a feeling of “rightness”
- It is thus unclear whether or not feelings of rightness permeate throughout all occurrences of regulatory fit
- These findings also suggest that prevention-focused individuals were more reactive to prime condition than promotion-focused individuals
 - Further research should investigate whether or not prevention-focused people acquire an overall heightened sensitivity to situational characteristics