

Value From Regulatory Fit

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ABSTRACT—*Where does value come from? I propose a new answer to this classic question. People experience regulatory fit when the manner of their engagement in an activity sustains their goal orientation or interests regarding that activity. When there is fit, people engage more strongly in what they are doing and “feel right” about it. Fit influences the strength of value experiences—how good or how bad one feels about something—independently of the pleasure and pain experiences that are associated with outcomes. It uniquely contributes to people’s experience of the value of things. Fit is shown to influence judgments and decision making, attitude and behavior change, and task performance.*

KEYWORDS—*value; evaluation; activity engagement; decision making; attitude change; performance*

What makes people value something? A classic answer is that values are socialized shared beliefs about ideal objectives and allowable procedures for attaining them (e.g., Merton, 1957). A second answer relates value to usefulness and emphasizes need satisfaction rather than beliefs. For example, Adam Smith’s (1994/1776) prime example of an object with high value was water. From the time of the Ancient Greeks, a third answer has emphasized value as experience, especially hedonic experiences of pleasure and pain. In this paper, I present evidence for a type of value experience separate from hedonic experiences: the *regulatory fit* that people experience when the manner of their engagement in an activity sustains their goal orientation or interests regarding that activity. I propose that all value is an experience of the attraction toward or repulsion from something whose intensity is a function of the strength of two factors—the strength of hedonic pleasure or pain and the strength of engagement (see Higgins, 2005). Regulatory fit contributes to value through increasing strength of engagement. It makes people “feel right” about whatever they are doing, and thus has a broad influence on judgments and decision making, attitude and behavior change, and task performance.

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REGULATORY FIT

When people pursue a goal, they begin with some motivational orientation, some concerns or interests that direct the goal pursuit. They pursue the goal in some manner, some method or way of executing the goal pursuit. Finally, they experience or anticipate experiencing some desirable or undesirable outcomes of successful or unsuccessful goal pursuit. In traditional motivational models, the means or manner in which a goal is pursued can be valued because, as a way to attain the desired outcomes, it is either socially prescribed (e.g., having value from fulfilling social norms of fairness), effective (i.e., having instrumental value), or efficient (i.e., having low costs). What is valued about the means per se is their contribution to attaining desirable outcomes (high benefits and low costs). This value of the manner of goal pursuit as a function of its influence on outcomes has received substantial attention in the literature. In contrast, the value of the manner of goal pursuit as a function of its influence on the motivational orientation of the actor has received relatively little attention.

In an earlier paper (Higgins, 2000), I proposed that people experience regulatory fit when the manner of their engagement in an activity sustains (rather than disrupts) their current motivational orientation or interests. Fit makes people engage more strongly in what they are doing and feel right about it. Individuals, for example, can pursue the same goal with different orientations and in different ways. Consider, for instance, students in the same course who are working to attain an *A*. Some students have a promotion-focus orientation toward an *A*; that is, the goal is experienced as a hope and an ideal, as something that satisfies the need for accomplishment. Others have a prevention-focus orientation toward an *A*; the goal in this case is experienced as a responsibility or an “ought,” as something that satisfies the need for security. To pursue their goal, some students read material beyond the assigned readings—an eager way to attain an *A*—whereas others are careful to fulfill all course requirements—a vigilant way to attain an *A*. Previous studies have found that an eager manner fits a promotion focus better than it fits a prevention focus, whereas the reverse is true for a vigilant manner (Higgins, 2000).

For all students, receiving an *A* in a course has certain outcome benefits regardless of the orientation and manner in which

they pursue their goal. Independent of this outcome value, however, there is an additional experience from regulatory fit. Specifically, when people pursue a goal in a manner that fits their orientation (e.g., eagerly if they have a promotion focus; vigilantly if they have a prevention focus), they experience their engagement in that goal pursuit more strongly than they do when pursuing the goal in a way that is at odds with their orientation (e.g., pursuing a goal eagerly if their orientation is more preventative). When the manner of their goal pursuit fits their orientation they also experience a stronger evaluative reaction to the activity (Higgins, 2000). Regulatory fit makes them feel right about both their positive reactions to things and their negative reactions to things, such as feeling right about one's positive response to some advertisement or feeling right about one's negative response to some other advertisement (see Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2004).

In one set of studies, for example, my colleagues and I (Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003) first measured participants' chronic or habitual orientations to pursuing goals (i.e., promotion or prevention). Participants were then told that, over and above their usual payment for participating, they could choose between a coffee mug and a pen as a gift. (Pretesting indicated that people liked both objects but the mug was clearly preferred.) The means of making the decision was manipulated through framing: Half of the participants were told to think about what they would gain by choosing the mug or the pen (an eager strategy), and the other half were told to think about what they would lose by not choosing the mug or the pen (a vigilant strategy). As expected, almost all participants chose the coffee mug. These participants were then asked either to assess the price of the chosen mug or to offer a price to buy it. Participants whose habitual orientations fit the way they were encouraged to make the decision (promotion–eager; prevention–vigilant) gave a 40 to 60% higher price for the mug than participants in the non-fit conditions (promotion–vigilant; prevention–eager). Consistent with the proposal that fit strengthens evaluative reactions to something independent of hedonic experiences per se, the fit effect was found to be independent of the participants' reports of how positive or negative they felt when making their decision. The effect was also independent of participants' perception of the efficiency (ease) and effectiveness (instrumentality) of the means they used to make their choice.

Fit effects can be found for other orientations as well. For example, we (Avnet and Higgins, 2003) experimentally induced either a locomotion orientation, which is concerned with movement from state to state, or an assessment orientation, which is concerned with making comparisons. The participants chose one book light from a set of book lights using either a progressive-elimination strategy (i.e., eliminate the worst alternative at each phase until only one alternative remains, which fits a locomotion orientation) or a full-evaluation strategy (i.e., make comparisons among all of the alternatives for all of the attributes and then choose the one with the best attributes

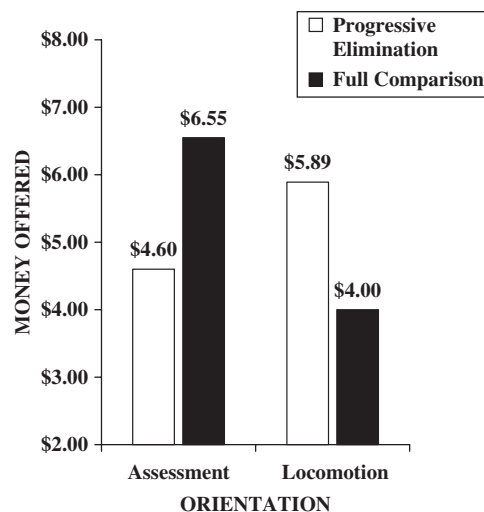


Fig. 1. Amount of money offered to buy a book light as a function of participants' regulatory mode orientation (assessment or locomotion) and the type of strategy (progressive elimination or full comparison) used to decide which light to purchase. After Avnet & Higgins, 2003.

overall, which fits an assessment orientation). As shown in Figure 1, the participants offered more of their own money to buy the same chosen book light in the fit conditions (assessment–full evaluation; locomotion–progressive elimination) than in the non-fit conditions. In addition, this fit effect was independent of the participants' positive or negative feelings at the time that they offered to buy the book light.

JUDGMENT AND DECISION MAKING

How does fit create value? When fit makes people feel right about what they are doing—such as feeling right while choosing between the mug and the pen—this experience may transfer to feeling right about something else they do later, such as feeling right when positively evaluating the monetary worth of the chosen mug. The feeling-right experience from an earlier source would be mistakenly transferred to a later evaluative response. If so, then drawing attention to the true source of the feeling-right experience before making the later evaluation should reduce or eliminate the fit effect. In another mug study (see Higgins et al., 2003), participants were reminded of the strategy they had used to choose the mug and were told that sometimes using certain strategies to pursue goals can make people feel right about their goal pursuit. They were asked, “How much do you ‘feel right’ about your goal pursuit?”; then they priced the mug. As predicted, the fit effect was eliminated (see also Cesario et al., 2004).

There is evidence that regulatory fit influences past (retrospective) or future (prospective) evaluations as well. Camacho, Higgins, and Luger (2003), for example, had participants think back to a time in their lives when they had a conflict with an authority figure (e.g., a parent) and it was that authority figure

who determined the manner of conflict resolution. The participants were asked to recall different kinds of resolution. Some participants recalled a resolution where the authority figure encouraged them to succeed (the pleasant–eager condition), whereas other participants remembered a resolution where the authority figure safeguarded them against anything that might go wrong (the pleasant–vigilant condition). Independent of whether the manner of resolution was itself pleasant or painful, and independent of their own pleasant or painful mood while making their judgments, participants judged the resolution to be more morally “right” in the fit conditions (promotion participants–eager conflict resolution; prevention participants–vigilant conflict resolution).

In making decisions, people imagine the pleasure or pain of the outcomes that particular choices will produce. Imagining making a desirable choice has higher fit for people in a promotion focus than it does for those in a prevention focus (because success maintains eagerness but reduces vigilance); the opposite is true for imagining making an undesirable choice (because failure maintains vigilance but reduces eagerness). In a study by Idson, Liberman, and Higgins (2004), participants were asked to imagine how “good” or “bad” they would feel either paying in cash or with a credit card to buy a book for school where the book costs less if you pay in cash. As shown in Figure 2, participants felt better when they imagined paying less for the book. In addition, when imagining paying less they felt even better if they were in a promotion focus than if they were in a prevention focus; and when imagining paying more, they felt even worse if they were in a prevention focus than if they were in a promotion focus.

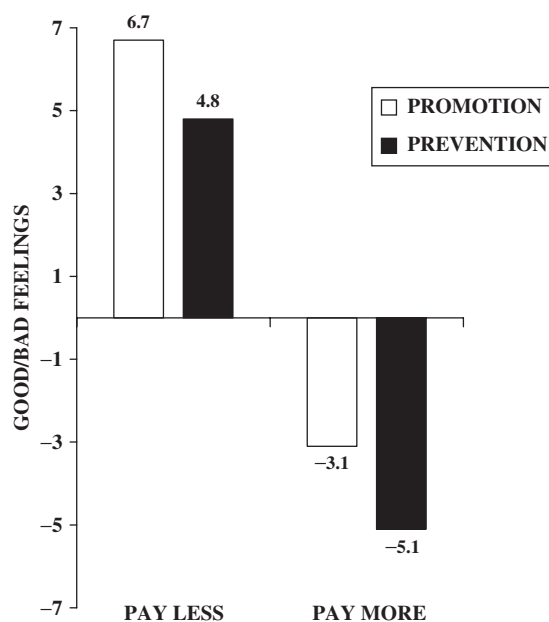


Fig. 2. Good/bad feelings about a textbook purchase as a function of participants’ regulatory focus (promotion or prevention) and the valence of prospective outcome (paying less or more for the book). After Idson, Liberman, and Higgins (2004).

ATTITUDE AND BEHAVIOR CHANGE

A standard method to change people’s attitudes and behavior is to provide information about the positive outcomes or benefits of such a change. Regulatory fit permits another method for change. If people respond positively to a message, creating fit should make them feel right about their response and increase message effectiveness. Spiegel, Grant-Pillow, and Higgins (2004), for example, had participants read either a promotion-framed or prevention-framed health message that contained the same information urging them to eat more fruits and vegetables. The consequences were framed as either the benefits of complying or the costs of not complying. Participants in the fit conditions (promotion–benefits; prevention–costs) ate about 20% more fruits and vegetables over the following week than those in the non-fit conditions. In a study by Cesario et al. (2003), the fit experience was induced separately from the message itself so that all participants could be given exactly the same message. The participants were told that they were performing two unrelated tasks. In the first task, fit or non-fit was induced by having participants list either eager or vigilant strategies to attain either promotion or prevention goals. In the second task, all of the participants were given exactly the same persuasive policy message. Cesario et al. (2003) found that fit induced in the first task increased persuasion in the second task for participants who had positive thoughts about the message but decreased persuasion for participants who had negative thoughts (see Fig. 3). Thus, when fit makes people feel right about their response to an object or event, this increases the strength of that response, whether the response is positive or negative.

TASK PERFORMANCE

According to the theory of regulatory fit (Higgins, 2000), regulatory fit increases strength of engagement. Consistent with this

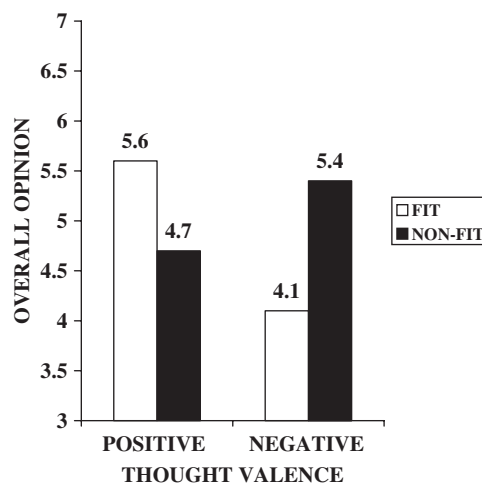


Fig. 3. Overall opinion of an advocated policy (higher numbers indicate higher agreement) as a function of positive vs. negative thoughts about the policy message and fit versus non-fit in a prior, unrelated task. After Cesario et al., 2003.

prediction, Förster, Higgins, and Idson (1998) found that engagement, as measured by either persistence on an anagram task or arm-pressure intensity while doing the task, was stronger in the fit conditions (promotion–eager; prevention–vigilant) whether the regulatory focus of the participants varied chronically or had been induced experimentally. If regulatory fit strengthens engagement, then it has the potential to improve performance. Indeed, Förster et al. (1998) found that fit enhanced task performance (see also Bianco, Higgins, and Klem, 2003).

Spiegel et al. (2004) also found that fit helps to bridge the gap between intentions and action. Participants were asked to write a report on how they were going to spend their upcoming Saturday and to turn it in by a certain deadline to receive an extra payment for participating in the study. The participants were also asked to imagine how they were going to write the report, and were asked to make either eager plans or vigilant plans for writing the report. Performance was measured by whether or not the report was handed in on time. Promotion participants performed better when they prepared eager plans of when, where, and how to do the report rather than vigilant plans. The reverse was true for prevention participants. Indeed, participants in the fit conditions (promotion–eager steps; prevention–vigilant steps) were almost 50% more likely to turn in their reports than participants in the non-fit conditions.

CONCLUSION

This article describes a source of value that has received little prior attention: regulatory fit. When people make decisions or pursue goals, they experience the value of actual or anticipated outcomes that they find attractive or repulsive, but this is not the only way that value is created. Making decisions and pursuing goals are themselves activities and, as with any activity, people can be more or less engaged in the activity. When engagement is strong it intensifies people's feelings about an activity, whether those feelings are positive or negative. Regulatory fit creates value by increasing strength of engagement. People experience regulatory fit when the manner in which they engage in an activity sustains their current orientation. The increased strength of engagement produced by fit is experienced as feeling right about what one is doing, including feeling right about one's evaluative reactions to objects and events in the world. Fit makes people feel right about both their positive responses to things and their negative responses to things. Moreover, it does this not only for the activity that itself produced the fit, but also for later, separate activities. My colleagues and I (Higgins et al., 2003), for example, first had participants think about strategies for pursuing their personal goals that either fit or did not fit their goal orientation. A few minutes later we had participants rate nice-looking, photographed dogs. Participants in the prior fit conditions rated the dogs as more “good-natured” overall than those in the prior non-fit conditions did. These results suggest that fit

induced in the first phase of the study made participants feel right about their later positive reactions to the dogs, thereby increasing the intensity of their positive reactions.

Fit influences the strength of value experiences, how good or how bad one feels about something, independent of the pleasure and pain experiences that are associated with outcomes. Other process properties, such as the efficiency, effectiveness, or the hedonic quality of a process, can have value beyond goal outcomes, but fit has been shown to have effects on value that are independent of these other process properties. It is precisely because fit affects value through increasing strength of engagement rather than producing pleasure or pain itself that its effects are likely to go unnoticed. Failure to recognize its effects could be problematic when fit from one source is unknowingly transferred to the monetary value of something else or, even worse, to the ethical value of something else, such as a public policy program that is judged to be morally right simply because how it is executed “feels” right.

Fit has significant implications for improving quality of life. In interpersonal and intergroup conflicts, for example, it is well recognized that the negotiation process needs to be fair, just, and equitable. But fit also needs to be considered. By ensuring that all parties experience fit in how they carry out a negotiation, satisfaction with and commitment to the agreement will increase, independent of outcomes. That is the good news. The bad news is that other parties not directly involved in the negotiation, who miss the fit experience, are unlikely to value the agreement as much and might not support it. It is also important for parents and teachers to allow children their own fit experiences in goal pursuit and decision making and not simply provide them with answers and positive outcomes. More generally, for people to value their lives fully they need to go beyond pleasant outcomes and feel right about what they are doing.

Recommended Reading

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