



11-1-2011

# Promotion, Prevention or Both: Regulatory Focus and Culture Revisited

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## Recommended Citation

Kurman, J., & Hui, C. (2011). Promotion, Prevention or Both: Regulatory Focus and Culture Revisited. *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, 5(3). <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1109>

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## Abstract

Regulatory focus theory (e.g., Higgins, 1997) presented a differentiation between promotion orientation, focused on growth and advancement, and prevention orientation, focused on safety and security. Cross-culture differences in these systems generally show that that collectivist, Eastern cultures (mostly East-Asian cultures) are considered as prevention oriented whereas Western cultures are considered as promotion oriented. Two main claims that contribute to the refinement of the relations between culture and regulatory foci will be presented. The first refinement pertains to the relations between individualism-collectivism and regulatory foci on base of the vertical-horizontal distinction, showing that vertical collectivism is especially relevant to regulatory foci. The second claim challenges the traditional notion of uni-dimensional mapping of cultures on the prevention-promotion continuum. Cultural groups from Hong Kong and Israel were compared in their typical levels of regulatory foci and in reaction to different incentive framing (gain/non-gain vs non-loss/loss). The findings revealed a culture (Hong Kong) that is oriented to both, prevention and promotion, at least regarding achievement.

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## Introduction

Regulatory focus theory (e.g., Higgins, 1997, 1998) refers to a distinction between two broad systems of regulatory focus. One system, *promotion orientation*, focuses primarily on growth and advancement. The other, *prevention orientation*, focuses primarily on safety and security. The distinct motivations for advancement and security originate in different fundamental needs (Bowlby, 1969; Higgins et al., 2001; Maslow, 1955). Most importantly, the two motivational systems foster different modes of goal-pursuit, so that individuals motivated by promotion versus by prevention employ different strategies to pursue their goals. Because promotion-focused individuals primarily concern about the presence versus the absence of positive outcomes (i.e., gains versus non-gains), they tend to eagerly insure hits and insure against error of omission. On the contrary, prevention-focused individuals primarily concern about the absence versus the presence of negative outcome (i.e., non-losses versus losses), they tend to vigilantly insure correct rejection and insure against errors of commission.

Regulatory focus has been demonstrated to predict a large array of outcomes through the difference in their strategic preferences (for a review, see Molden, Lee, & Higgins, 2008). For instance, to insure against errors of omission versus commission, promotion-focused individuals tend to consider weaker alternatives more than prevention-focused individuals, many times positively (e.g., Friedman & Förster, 2001; Liberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001) and prefer to forgo initial options and courses of action to honor new opportunities (Liberman, Idson, Camacho, & Higgins, 1999; Molden & Hui, 2011). Other examples of outcomes that were found as related to regulatory foci are information processing (Hamamura, Meijer, Heine, Kamaya, & Hori, 2009; Zhang & Mittal, 2007), response biases (Lalwani Shrum, & Chiu, 2009), differential sensitivity to valence of feedback (van Dijk & Kluger, 2004) or model (Lockwood, Marshall, & Sadler, 2005), creativity (Lam & Chui, 2002), attributional function (Liberman et al., 2001), task preferences (van Dijk & Kluger, in press) and risk taking (Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2010). In this chapter we will consider the relations between culture and these two motivational orientations. Given the large array of outcomes of regulatory focus, understanding their relations with culture may help explain cultural differences in psychological outcomes.

## Regulatory Focus as a Cultural Product

Culture plays an important role in shaping its members' prevention and promotion motivations (Heine, 2010; Higgins, 2008). Given that cultures differ in their main values (e.g., Schwartz, 2009) and socialization practices and beliefs (e.g., Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003), it is reasonable that the levels of promotion and prevention motivations vary across different cultures. It is therefore important to reach a better understanding of culture and regulatory foci.

To this date, there have been several studies that examined cultural variations in regulatory focus. Most of the studies so far have tied regulatory focus to the familiar

construct of individualism and collectivism. Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, and Sheldon (2001), for example, asked people to describe goals that they strive for in their daily life, and judged whether the goals were approach goals (e.g., having friends) or avoidance goals (e.g., not losing friends). They then created an index of the ratio between the avoidance and approach goals and mapped the studied cultural groups. Their findings, coming from three independent samples, showed that collectivist cultures in South Korea and Russia exhibit higher avoidance than Americans according to their index. Another multi-cultural study conducted by Higgins, Pierro and Kruglanski (2008) also pertained to the gap between dispositional promotion and prevention orientations, as measure by a regulatory focus questionnaire (Higgins et al., 2001). They showed that this gap was the lowest in the traditionally collectivist cultures of Japan, India, and China, and the highest in the US and Italy. Other bicultural studies supported the trend that collectivistic, traditional, and hierarchical cultures tend to be more prevention-oriented than individualistic, liberal and egalitarian cultures, that tend to be more promotion-oriented (e.g., Lalwani et al., 2009; Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000; Zhang & Mittal, 2007).

A somewhat different approach than comparing cultural groups is to look at the causal relations between individualism-collectivism tendencies and regulatory foci through experiments. In those studies, Lee et al. (2000) showed that temporarily induced collectivist mindsets can create prevention focus, whereas temporarily induced individualistic mindsets can create promotion focus. Another study of these scholars (Aaker & Lee, 2001) showed that priming the self as independent enhanced persuasion of promotion qualities (e.g., "enhancing energy level") whereas priming of the self as related to others enhanced persuasion of prevention qualities (e.g., "reducing risk of heart disease"), showing again that a collectivist orientation makes prevention considerations more salient and that an individualist orientation encourages promotion considerations.

Although the results are compelling (see also Lee & Semin, 2009), it is premature to conclude a clear-cut one-on-one mapping between individualism-collectivism and promotion-prevention. The present paper presents two important refinements within the culture-regulatory focus relations, pointing to the need to avoid schematic perception of them. The first refinement pertains to the relevance of the vertical-horizontal distinction to the culture-regulatory focus relations, and the second refinement challenges the traditional notion of uni-dimensional mapping of cultures on the prevention-promotion continuum.

### **Mapping Individualism-Collectivism and Regulatory Foci**

Despite the reported straightforward relations between individualism-collectivism and regulatory foci, some findings points to possible complexities. First, individualism and collectivism at the individual level (also known as independent and interdependent self-construals) were found to be unrelated in self-reported measures (e.g., Singelis, 1994). Moreover, there are findings that some cultures, especially cultures in transition, are high on both, individualism and collectivism (e.g., Oyserman, 1993, regarding Israeli Arabs, and Friedlmeier, Schäfermeier, Vasconcellos, & Trommsdorff, 2008, regarding Brazilians). Moreover, given that individualism-collectivism are multifaceted (Oyserman, Coon, &

Kemmelmeier, 2002; Triandis, 1995), it is important to refine our understanding about which specific aspects of individualism-collectivism are connected to regulatory focus.

To our knowledge, only two published works tested how individual differences in dispositional, self-reported individualism-collectivism tendencies were related to regulatory focus. Elliot et al. (2001, Study 1) tested the correlations between the ratio of avoidance to approach goals and self-construal scales (Singelis, 1994). They revealed that the ratio was correlated positively with the interdependent self-construal and negatively with the independent self-construal. Lockwood et al. (2005) administered the same self-construal scales and a regulatory focus questionnaire (Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002) to both Euro-Canadians and Asian-Canadians. They neatly found that the independent self-construal was related to promotion and the interdependent self-construal was related to prevention. Interestingly, a direct path between culture and prevention was evident as well, such that Asian-Canadians are more prevention-focused than Euro-Canadians.

We will try to better understand these relations, and relate to the vertical-horizontal distinction of individualism-collectivism introduced by Triandis (1995), which refers to the level of equality (vs. hierarchy) prevailing in a culture. We suggest that the vertical-horizontal distinction can increase the explained variance of prevention tendencies by collectivism, and also, but to a lesser extent, of promotion by individualism, and thus contribute to the understanding of the relations between regulatory focus and culture.

The vertical-horizontal dimension crosses over the individualism-collectivism dimensions, resulting in four distinct themes (Singelis, Triandis, Bhawuk, & Gelfand, 1995). *Horizontal collectivism* is characterized by strong identification with and strong caring for the in-group, whereas *vertical collectivism* emphasizes the need to sacrifice self needs in favor of group needs. *Horizontal individualism* stresses development of unique self-identity, whereas *vertical individualism* emphasizes competition. Kurman (2001; Kurman & Sriram, 2002) claimed that the horizontal themes express the essence of individualism and collectivism, and therefore exist in the vertical patterns as well. Vertical collectivist cultures do exhibit strong identification with the in-group, and vertical individualist cultures do emphasize development of a unique self-identity. However, the priorities of these themes decrease, as additional concerns are included in the vertical patterns: sacrificing self needs for the group and keeping the social hierarchy is essential in vertical collectivism, and competition is an essential part in vertical individualism.

How does this distinction of individualism-collectivism connect to regulatory focus? Vertical collectivism includes the need to conform to group demands and rules and to comply with social roles and obligations, even at the expense of self-desires and self-needs (Triandis, 1995). This description fits the prevention focus and incongruent with the promotion focus, as both vertical collectivism and prevention orientation include an emphasis on importance of cultural norms and demands of others on the expense of personal agency and unique development. The low emphasis of development of unique self-characteristics, that is part of vertical collectivism, contradicts the promotion orientation. Horizontal collectivism, that refers to the interdependence with others in general and to strong group identification is less relevant to regulatory foci. Thus, vertical

collectivism is expected to relate to regulatory foci (positively with prevention and negatively with promotion) more than horizontal collectivism.

Horizontal individualism reflects self-sufficiency and autonomy, and high encouragement to promote unique self-goals. Those components are inherent to promotion, that is basically related to strong ideal-self guide (e.g., Higgins, 1997). Positive relations are therefore expected between the two. Vertical individualism differs from horizontal individualism in the component of competitiveness. Is competitiveness part of promotion? It could be claimed that competitive people strive for achievement and advancement is important for them, so that vertical individualism would be positively related to promotion. Nevertheless, these relations are not as straightforward as they seem to be, since competitiveness includes additional elements that are not inherent to promotion. High competitiveness is sometimes oriented toward a facade of success relative to other people rather than to real personal advancement and growth (Midgely, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). A distinction between competitiveness to excel and to win was introduced lately (Hibbard & Buhrmester, 2010). While striving to excel is congruent and even inherent to promotion, the effort to win, that was found to relate to negative outcome (e.g., Gilbert et al., 2009), may not fit promotion.

Theoretically vertical-individualism may include the two kinds of competitiveness. Yet the common scales that measure the construct (Triandis & Gelfand, 1998; Singelis et al., 1995) relate to the effort to outperform others more than to the effort to really advance oneself. The two components of competitiveness embedded in vertical individualism can create weak, inconsistent relations with the promotion orientation. Thus, horizontal individualism is expected to relate to regulatory foci (positively to promotion and negatively to prevention) more than vertical individualism.

Kurman and Liem (submitted) tested those predictions empirically. They examined Israeli-Arabs and Israeli-Jews in one study, and German-Swiss, Mexican and Indonesian-Chinese samples in another study. Consistent relations emerged between individualism–collectivism facets and regulatory foci across the two examinations. In congruence with the rationale presented above, the vertical collectivism was positively related to prevention,  $r_{\text{study 1}}(253) = .37$  and  $r_{\text{study 2}}(486) = .33$ , and negatively to promotion,  $r_{\text{study 1}}(253) = -.35$  and  $r_{\text{study 2}}(486) = -.20$ , and Horizontal individualism was positively related to promotion,  $r_{\text{study 1}}(253) = .34$  and  $r_{\text{study 2}}(486) = .17$ , and negatively to prevention,  $r_{\text{study 1}}(253) = -.25$  and  $r_{\text{study 2}}(486) = -.21$ . [All reported correlations are significant at  $p < .0001$  level]. In contradiction to the traditional expectation – but according to the above rationale –, horizontal collectivism was not related to both regulatory scales in the Jewish-Arab Israeli samples, and was negatively related to prevention in the Swiss-Mexico-Indonesia sample. Similarly, inconsistent, mixed results were found between vertical individualism and regulatory foci. A general conclusion here is that vertical collectivism and horizontal individualism are especially relevant to regulatory foci.

The previously cited findings showed that priming self independence increases promotion whereas priming interdependence (and not hierarchy) increases prevention (Aaker & Lee, 2001; Lee et al, 2000). These findings support the above conclusion regarding individualism but challenge the one regarding collectivism. Nevertheless, the

contribution of these studies to the suggested distinction between the vertical and horizontal facets of individualism–collectivism is limited, as there was no attempt to differentially prime the vertical and horizontal facets. It could be that the employed priming of interdependence indirectly primed the hierarchy component as well. Future studies should be designed to measure differential effects of the vertical-horizontal facets on temporal orientations of prevention and promotion to further strengthen the suggested refinements, presenting particularly meaningful relations between prevention and vertical collectivism and between promotion and horizontal individualism.

The reported findings show that not all types of collectivism are related to prevention and not all types of individualism are related to promotion. This situation contributes to the possibility of co-existence of both regulatory foci in one culture, as outlined below.

### **Dominant Regulatory Foci in Cultures**

The existing findings regarding regulatory foci point to a trend that cultures are mapped along a prevention-promotion continuum (e.g., Elliot et al., 2001; Higgins et al., 2008), based on index of a mixture of the two separately measured constructs of prevention and of promotion. This approach acknowledges the fact that the two dimensions are measured independently, but prefer to combine them into one index. Though parsimony is achieved by the combined index, a price of losing important information is paid: low levels and high levels of both promotion and prevention tendencies result in the same difference, though their psychological and behavioral meaning may differ tremendously.

We suggest that the two regulatory foci should be treated as independent on the conceptual, not only the measurement level. Measurement wise, the independence of promotion and prevention was showed many times. In fact, all existing scales were found to be either uncorrelated (Higgins et al., 2001; Ouschan, Boldero, Kashima, Wakimoto, & Kashima, 2007) or even reveal weak positive correlations (Haws, Dholakia, & Bearden, 2010; Lockwood et al., 2002). It is therefore possible that cultures can be characterized as low or high on both regulatory foci.

Empirical support would be presented now for this claim based on two types of findings. The first is a simple cross-cultural comparison of reported level of prevention and promotion. The second is based on the regulatory fit idea, and show the same sensitivity to both promotion and prevention framings in a culture. All reported data are based on three cultural groups, Israeli-Jews, a promotion oriented group; Israeli-Arabs, a prevention-oriented group; and Hong Kong Chinese, who turned to be oriented toward both – prevention, but also promotion (for detailed cultural descriptions of the groups see Kurman and Hui (submitted, <http://psy.haifa.ac.il/~jennyk/Kurman-Hui.pdf>).

### **Reported levels of promotion and prevention in Hong-Kong and in Israel.**

The above groups (i.e., Israeli-Jews, Israeli-Arabs, and Hong Kong Chinese) were compared in several measures of prevention and promotion. One was the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire, RFQ (Higgins et al., 2001), that pertains to subjective histories of

success in promotion and prevention goals. The basic logic of the scales is that a subjective history of success with promotion-related eagerness (*promotion pride*) orients individuals toward using eagerness means to achieve a new task goal, whereas a subjective history of success with prevention-related vigilance (*prevention pride*) orients individuals toward using vigilance means to achieve a new task goal. A statistical comparison of the two scales between university students of three cultures, Israeli-Jews, Israeli Arabs, and Hong Kong Chinese ( $N = 287$ ) revealed significant differences in the two scales. Prevention pride ( $\eta_p^2 = .07$ ) yielded the traditional findings, with Israeli Jews significantly lower than the other two groups. In promotion pride ( $\eta_p^2 = .11$ ), the Israeli-Arab group was the lowest, but the Hong Kong group was significantly higher than Israeli-Jews. Another measure of regulatory focus (Ouschan et al., 2007) pertains to the way tasks are approached (for example: “Taking risks is essential for success” for promotion, and “To achieve something, one must be cautious” for prevention). A statistical comparisons of different samples of the same cultural groups ( $N = 418$ ) yielded almost the same pattern of cross-cultural differences. A significant effect of prevention ( $\eta_p^2 = .10$ ) emerged of the Israeli-Jews being lower in prevention than the other two groups that were statistically equal, whereas a significant effect of promotion ( $\eta_p^2 = .23$ ) emerged of the Israeli-Arab group being lower than the other two. With this measure Hong Kong was not higher than the Israeli-Jews but it was not lower than them, supporting the notion that Hong-Kong students are doubled focused in their orientation. It could be claimed that both Hong Kong and Israeli-Jews are not high on promotion. The findings of Higgins et al. (2008) showed that Israeli-Jewish students are not statistically different from US students in levels of prevention, promotion and differences between the two, supporting the conclusion that Hong Kong Chinese reveal high promotion.

Some other findings support the possibility that prevention and promotion can be both high in specific groups. The above mentioned survey by Higgins et al. (2008) studied seven cultural groups and showed that the ranking on promotion is not a mirror picture of the cultural ranking promotion. For example, China was ranked as the most prevention-oriented culture, yet it was ranked quite high on promotion (higher than Australia, not statistically different from Italy and Israel). Though most of the findings of that survey (especially the ranking of the promotion-prevention gap) support the traditional view, the highlighted ones point out to possible complications. Ouschan et al. (2007) present supporting findings as well. Using their scales they showed that Asian-Australians were higher than Euro-Australian in prevention, as expected, but unexpectedly the same direction was evident for promotion. This was true for a purely Asian born sample as well. (When Euro-Australians were compared to Japanese the traditional findings were obtained, Japanese were more prevention and less promotion oriented than Euro-Australians).

Taken together, the findings support the notion of the possibility that cultures can be characterized by double regulatory foci. The next section describes an extension of the self-regulation theory, namely regulatory fit, and uses the construct to further support the possibility of a co-existence of promotion and prevention in one culture – Hong Kong.



### **Cultural Regulatory Fit**

Regulatory fit theory (Higgins, 2000, 2005) maintains that the task nature or the framing of a situation encourage eager versus vigilant strategy, that corresponds to promotion versus prevention orientations. A match between the regulatory focus and the type of task / framing enhances performance due to three different mechanisms. First, regulatory focus increases people's spontaneous inclination to matched versus mismatched strategies, such that promotion-focused individuals are more inclined to use matched eager rather than mismatched vigilant strategies, whereas prevention-focused individuals are more inclined to use matched vigilant versus mismatched eager strategies. Second, motivational strength during goal pursuit (as reflected in performance, effort, and enjoyment) increases when there is a match versus a mismatch between regulatory focus and the strategy used. Finally, phenomenal experience of "feeling right" increases when there is a match versus mismatch between regulatory focus and strategy used. Given that cultures differ widely in terms of their predominant regulatory foci (e.g., Higgins, 2008), regulatory fit may explain cultural variations in behaviors and mental states through various forms of cultural regulatory fit.

For example, Fulmer et al. (2010) investigated 28 cultural groups, and showed that a match between the person's individual characteristics, among them regulatory foci, and culture prevailing characteristics increases well-being and self-esteem. Uskul and Oyserman (2010) showed that when health messages are framed in a culturally matched way, that is focused on the personal self for European Americans, and on relational obligations for Asian Americans, they were more effective: matched messages were perceived as persuasive, and induced more message-congruent behavior. These positive effects were found only if individualism or collectivism were primed in the relevant culture. Recently, some marketing studies showed implementations of regulatory fit (Aaker & Lee, 2006), pertaining to hedonic versus secure aspects of the product in planning advertisement (Florack & Scarabis, 2006; Kees, Burton, & Tangari, 2010), message concreteness (Lee, Keller, & Sternthal, 2010), service pricing schemas (Daryanto, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2010), consumer choices (Avnet & Higgins, 2006), and buying behavior (Fransen, Reinders, Bartels & Maassen, 2010). Another variation of cultural regulatory fit is between cultural prevalent regulatory focus and the incentive framing of the situation. This framing can encourage prevention (emphasizing non-loss vs. loss) or promotion (emphasizing gain vs. non-gain). Previous research on regulatory focus showed that people's motivational strength increases when the chronic regulatory foci matches incentive frames (e.g., Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998). Building upon this finding, we predict that people from different cultures, who have different predominant chronic regulatory foci, would respond differently to different types of incentive framing and show better performance to the framing that fits the prevalent regulatory foci in the culture because of the motivational boost.

Here we present findings regarding the ability to consider multiple action options following failures as the dependent variable (Kurman, Hui & Dan, in press). The manipulation was created by framing the task as gain or loss oriented. Both framings used

course credit, which could be either gained or lost (“You will receive one/*two* course credit for participation in the experiment. However if your performance on the task is above/*below* the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile, you will gain/*lose* an extra/*one* credit in this experiment”). Control groups conducted the task as well. In general, the findings revealed the expected cultural fit. Among Israeli-Jews, a promotion oriented culture, performance in the promotion condition was significantly higher than the control situation, whereas the prevention condition did not differ from the control. Among Israeli-Arabs, a prevention-oriented group, performance in the prevention condition was higher than in the other two conditions. Among Hong Kong Chinese, both promotion and prevention framing conditions were higher than the control and did not differ from each other, supporting the notion of double focus prevailing in Hong Kong (see Figure 1). These findings suggest the utility of contrasting promotion and prevention conditions to a control condition to identify whether a cultural group is both promotion- and prevention-oriented. Future studies are encouraged to use this approach to document the same trends in other cultures.

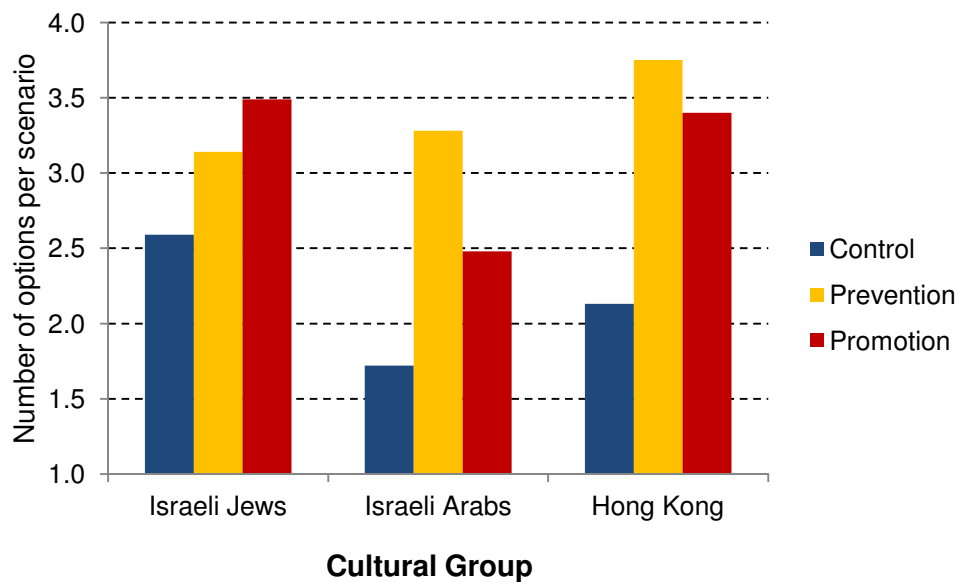


Figure 1. Consideration of multiple options as a function of culture and type of framing

One explanation of the existence of double foci is extended exposure to two types of messages. Note that Hong Kong was formerly a British colony, so that Hong Kong Chinese receive influences of both the promotion-focused Western culture and the traditional prevention-focused Chinese culture. Accordingly, it is highly likely that they endorse the two types of motivations (Chiu & Hong, 2007). The same is true for Asian origin people living in Australia: they are exposed to socialization that encourages prevention within their culture of origin, but are exposed to promotion expectations in the context of their host culture (Ouschan et al., 2007).

An even less conservative explanation is that the strive for self-improvement, that is a guiding value in Japan (Heine, Lehman, Markus & Kitayama, 1999; Heine et al., 2001; Heine, Takata, & Lehman, 2000) and maybe in other East-Asian cultures (Kurman et al., in press), includes promotion tendencies in it, at least in the achievement domain. Aspiration for self-improvement, initially developed to prevent future failures, can easily turn into an aspiration for future success and excellence, especially in the achievement domain. High achievements of East Asian cultures in international tests support this notion. For example, the TIMSS ranking in Math achievements for the 8<sup>th</sup> grade (Mulin et al., 2008) show that 5 top countries in Math tests in 2007 were East-Asian (China (Tai-pe), Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Japan). It was shown before (Oyserman & Markus, 1990) that having both – positive and negative possible selves – was related to higher level of functioning. It can be that the existence of double focus enables a unique combination of self-advancement in cautious ways that contribute to high performance (for a description of a possible specific relevant mechanism, control via self-improvement, see Kurman et al., in press).

The independence of promotion and prevention have both applied and theoretical implications. First, a better understanding of cultures in terms of self-regulation processes is expected, as cultures can be divided into four, instead of two, groups. Thus, cultures that are high on both, prevention and promotion, may differ from cultures that are high only on promotion or only on prevention. On the applied side, a better understanding of the dominant regulatory focus may help behavior prediction, and more specifically, it may guide the types of incentives that could be effective in a culture. The refined relations with the four facets of individualism collectivism can contribute to our understanding of the cultural antecedents of self-regulation, and come up with better relevant predictions in both theoretical and applied domains.

In conclusion, the issue of regulatory foci and culture has not yet been fully understood. Along the more traditional notions regarding the associations between Western, individualist culture and promotion, and between collectivist culture and prevention, other refinements are needed; two were presented above. Additional research should further support these points and lead to new ideas that would disentangle the important issue of culture and regulatory focus.

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### Discussion Questions

1. What are the socialization processes that may foster a promotion or a prevention orientation?
2. Based on regulatory focus theory, can you identify any other cultural differences in cognition, emotion, and behavior?
3. When people can be both promotion and prevention oriented, how may they switch between these orientations?
4. Which implementations of cultural differences in regulatory focus can you think of?