



Regulatory focus and the Michelangelo Phenomenon: How close partners promote one another's ideal selves[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the consequences of regulatory focus in the context of the Michelangelo phenomenon, a process whereby interaction partners shape one another's goal pursuits. We advanced predictions regarding the intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of target and partner promotion orientation using the concepts of target-goal congruence, partner-goal congruence, and interpersonal match. We used data from four complementary measurement methods—self-report questionnaires, daily diary records, partners' ratings of ideal-relevant interaction behaviors, and coders' ratings of interaction behaviors—and using both target- and partner-reports of model criteria. Consistent with predictions, (a) target promotion orientation is associated with the elicitation of partner affirmation, (b) partner promotion orientation is associated with the display of partner affirmation, and (c) partner affirmation partially mediates the associations of target and partner promotion orientation with target movement toward the ideal self. We also examine the motivational, cognitive, and behavioral mechanisms that account for these associations.

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People have hopes, dreams, and aspirations, or mental representations of the skills and traits that they would ideally like to acquire. Ideal self representations shape cognition, emotion, and motivation, such that people dedicate considerable effort to the goal of bringing the actual self into closer alignment with the ideal self (Higgins, 1987). Success at goal pursuit rests on diverse individual-level attributes, including insight, ability, and motivation. But such *intrapersonal* processes do not tell the whole story, in that people do not pursue goals in social isolation. Goal pursuit also rests on *interpersonal* processes, the most prominent theory of which is the Michelangelo phenomenon, a model of the process whereby interaction partners shape one another's ideal goal pursuits (Rusbult, Kumashiro, Stocker, & Wolf, 2005).

To date, we know a good deal about individual-level elements of goal pursuit. The sizeable *intrapersonal* literature has examined such phenomena as the nonconscious activation of goals, goal attainment and emotional experiences, and the association of strategic inclinations with decision making and creativity (e.g., Bargh, Gollwitzer, Lee-Chai, Barndollar, & Trötschel, 2001; Friedman & Förster, 2001; Higgins, Shah, & Friedman, 1997). In this tradition, regulatory focus theory highlights the distinction between promotion and prevention orientation—

whether people are attuned to that which they ideally wish to become versus that which they believe they ought to become (Higgins, 1998).

Unfortunately, we know far less about the *interpersonal* elements of goal pursuit. The handful of extant studies has examined nonconscious mimicry, the association of significant other representations with goals and goal pursuits, and how close partners may promote versus inhibit core elements of one another's ideals (e.g., Chartrand & Bargh, 1999; Drigotas, Rusbult, Wieselquist, & Whitton, 1999; Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003; Shah, 2003). However, the existing literature overlooks interpersonal effects involving promotion and prevention orientation. The present work examines the intrapersonal and interpersonal consequences of promotion orientation in the context of the Michelangelo model (Rusbult et al., 2005).

The Michelangelo Phenomenon

Michelangelo Buonarroti described sculpting as a process whereby the artist releases an ideal figure from the block of stone in which it slumbers (cf. Gombrich, 1995). The artist's task is simply to chip away at the stone, allowing the ideal form to emerge. Humans, too, possess ideal forms. The human equivalent of the ideal form is the *ideal self*—the internal representation of the attributes that an individual would ideally like to possess (hopes, dreams, aspirations). For example, one element of Mary's ideal self may be to publish innovative and important research. Mary may to some extent reduce the discrepancy between her actual self and her ideal self through her own actions—for example, by regularly asking herself “what makes this work important?” or by reading thought-provoking works of fiction and nonfiction.

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However, Mary's pursuit of the ideal self is also shaped by interpersonal experience. The Michelangelo phenomenon describes a process whereby interaction partners sculpt one another in such a manner as to move each person closer to (vs. further from) each person's ideal self (Drigotas et al., 1999; Rusbult et al., 2005). This process is likely to be particularly powerful in close relationships, in that interdependence creates a basis for powerful reciprocal influence across diverse behavioral domains. As such, close partners shape one another over the course of extended interaction—over time, the behaviors that begin as interaction-specific adaptations become embodied in relatively stable skills, traits, and behavioral tendencies (Kelley, 1983).

Partner affirmation describes the extent to which a partner elicits key elements of the target's ideal self. For example, John may affirm Mary's ideal self by rewarding specific ideal-relevant behaviors (e.g., praising her most original ideas), by creating situations that elicit ideal congruent behaviors (e.g., suggesting a sabbatical in an inspirational locale), or by enacting ideal-congruent behaviors that Mary may imitate (e.g., carrying out creative work, earning an innovation grant). In turn, partner affirmation yields *target movement toward the ideal self*: As a result of adjusting to John's behavior, Mary increasingly achieves key aspects of her ideal self. To the extent that this process is successful—that is, John affirms Mary and Mary moves toward her ideal self—personal well-being and couple well-being are enhanced (Rusbult et al., 2005).

Targets differ in the extent to which they elicit partner affirmation and achieve movement toward the ideal self, and partners differ in the extent to which they affirm the target's ideals. For example, targets with greater locomotion focus are easier to sculpt, and partners with greater locomotion focus exhibit superior affirmation-relevant insight, ability, and motivation (Kumashiro, Rusbult, Finkenauer, & Stocker, 2007). Also, partners are more affirming to the extent that they are more strongly committed to the target, possess key elements of the target's ideal self, and sculpt toward the target's ideals rather than their own ideals (Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009; Rusbult et al., 2005; Rusbult, Reis, & Kumashiro, in preparation).

Regulatory Orientations and Regulatory Congruence

How might concepts from the intrapersonal literature regarding goal pursuit illuminate our understanding of the Michelangelo process? Self-discrepancy theory distinguishes between two types of desired end state (Higgins, 1987). As noted earlier, the *ideal self* is the internal representation of the attributes that an individual would ideally like to possess (hopes, dreams, aspirations). In contrast, the *ought self* is the representation of the attributes that an individual believes that he or she ought to

possess (duties, obligations, responsibilities). Two types of self-regulatory system are associated with these self representations (Higgins, 1998). *Promotion orientation* relates to dreams and aspirations, and entails concern with the presence versus absence of positive outcomes. *Prevention orientation* relates to duties and responsibilities, and entails concern with the presence versus absence of negative outcomes. The accessibility of a given self-regulatory system may vary chronically (e.g., some people are routinely more promotion oriented) or momentarily (e.g., some situational cues activate promotion orientation).

Promotion orientation focuses attention on positive outcomes, and should therefore enhance ideal self goals; prevention orientation focuses attention on negative outcomes, and should therefore enhance ought self goals. When people experience congruence between their predominant regulatory orientation and their self-goals, their goal pursuit should be facilitated. For example, if Mary is promotion oriented, she will experience congruence when she pursues aspects of her ideal self, such as engaging in innovative scientific activities—she will be highly motivated about what she is doing, she will enjoy goal-pursuit activities, and she will be more likely to succeed. We define *goal regulatory congruence* as the match between people's regulatory orientation and the correspondent self-goals. This concept is similar to the one of regulatory fit, which is experienced when there is a match between people's regulatory orientation and the manner, or strategy, with which they pursue a goal (Higgins, 2000). Research has shown that when people experience regulatory fit, they experience stronger engagement and motivation in goal pursuit (Förster, Higgins, & Idson, 1998), they perform better (Shah, Higgins, & Friedman, 1998), they enjoy the goal pursuit more (Freitas & Higgins, 2002), and they value their goals more (Higgins, Idson, Freitas, Spiegel, & Molden, 2003). Extending these findings, we predict that goal regulatory congruence should lead to similar motivational benefits for people's goal pursuit (e.g., increased motivation).

Promotion Orientation and the Michelangelo Phenomenon

According to the person–situation interaction literature, individual differences interact with the social environment in several ways. Individual dispositions influence the type of situations individuals seek, they cause people to (unintentionally) elicit certain responses from the social environment, and they lead people to consciously manipulate situations (Buss, 1987). Our model of goal pursuit combines principles from the *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal* literatures, identifying four ways in which people's dispositional promotion orientation may affect an interpersonal situation, such as the Michelangelo phenomenon. Fig. 1 displays key elements of our model. We also

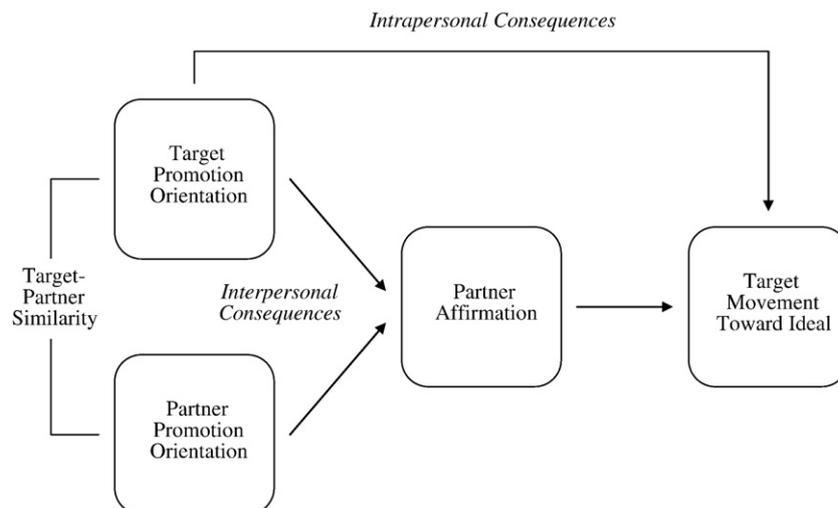


Fig. 1. Target and partner regulatory orientation, partner affirmation, and target movement toward the ideal self.

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