



## Competitive mindsets, creativity, and the role of regulatory focus



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### ABSTRACT

We examined how regulatory focus and intentions to compete rather than cooperate with group members relate to creativity. Study 1 showed that a promotion focus (i.e., a focus on ideals) activated a cooperative mindset, whereas a prevention focus (i.e., a focus on responsibilities) activated a competitive mindset. Whereas mindsets had no direct effect on creativity, a prevention focus was found to diminish subsequent creativity. Study 2 showed that a cooperative mindset activated a promotion focus, whereas a competitive mindset activated a prevention focus. Prevention focus carried the indirect negative effect of competitive mindsets on creativity. In addition, we tested whether global versus local information processing may explain these effects.

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, much research has investigated the influence of cooperative versus competitive behavior on subsequent performance. An extensive line of research has found a positive effect of cooperative behavior on achievement (Johnson, Maruyama, Johnson, Skon, & Nelson, 1981; Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008). However, studies that have examined creativity have reported both positive and negative effects of cooperation (overview see Amabile, 1996). To date, the conditions under which cooperation enhances or diminishes creativity remain unclear. It has recently been argued that cooperative group work may help students develop critical thinking skills (Chen & Tjosvold, 2002; Fung & Howe, 2012). Cooperative group settings may lend themselves to teaching of thinking skills and creativity. However, are group settings also beneficial if students are competing with one another? Under which conditions does competition in groups enhance or diminish creative performance?

The present research closely examined the cognitive and motivational processes that may induce cooperative or competitive mindsets and, thus, change subsequent creativity. This research question is relevant for educational and organizational settings in which creative ideas are often developed in groups. Individuals may not necessarily be willing to use cooperative strategies toward group members, but may choose competitive strategies when working in a group (Johnson, Johnson, & Maruyama, 1983; Simmons, Wehner, Tucker, & King, 1988). Typically, individuals with cooperative mindsets strive for the success of the group and, therefore, show positive attitudes toward successful group outcomes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Simmons et al., 1988). On the other hand, individuals with competitive mindsets strive for their personal benefit and seek success by outperforming other group members (Deutsch, 1949; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, & Wilke, 2001).

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Moreover, if individuals have the perception that individual goal attainment is negatively correlated with others' goal attainment they may perceive competitive settings to be threatening (Deutsch, 1949).

The present research was based on the rationale that the activation of a competitive mindset results in the willingness to choose competitive strategies toward group members (Carnevale & Probst, 1998; Simmons et al., 1988). We expected a bidirectional link between competitive mindsets and motivational factors, such as regulatory focus. Moreover, cognitive and motivational processes were expected to enhance or diminish subsequent creative performance (Förster, 2012). In the first experiment, we investigated whether motivational states (i.e., a prevention focus) activate competitive mindsets and diminish creative performance. In the second experiment, we examined whether competitive mindsets diminish creativity in situations that activate a prevention focus. Comparing the results from these two studies we aimed to get insight into underlying processes that may lead to increased or diminished creativity.

### 1.1. Regulatory focus in social settings

Regulatory focus is a motivational concept that distinguishes between promotion goals and prevention goals (Higgins, 1997, 1998). A promotion focus entails striving to achieve an "ideal self". That is, promotion-focused individuals pursue gains and strive for success and growth. A prevention focus entails striving to achieve an "ought self". That is, prevention-focused individuals aim to avoid losses and failure (Higgins, 1997, 1998). Moreover, a focus on ideals has been associated with an increased sensitivity for positive outcomes, whereas a focus on oughts and responsibilities has been associated with increased sensitivity for negative outcomes (Higgins & Tykocinski, 1992).

In social settings, differences in regulatory focus were shown to extend to choices of tactics and strategies (Higgins, Roney, Crowe, & Hymes, 1994, Study 3). For example, when choosing between alternative strategies for friendship, people with a promotion focus chose strategies geared toward promoting positive outcomes, whereas people with a prevention focus chose strategies geared toward preventing negative outcomes. In addition, it has been demonstrated that regulatory focus affects emotions and behavior toward the in- and outgroup. Shah, Brazy, and Higgins (2004, Study 1) found that participants' approach reactions toward the ingroup were positively related to their motivation for interpersonal stimulation, whereas avoidance of an outgroup was positively related to participants' motivation for interpersonal security. These differences had behavioral consequences in that promotion strength predicted how close a participant would choose to sit to a group member, whereas prevention strength predicted how close a participant would choose to sit to a competitor from the outgroup (Shah et al., 2004, Study 2). These results suggest that a promotion focus is related to the need for nurturance, whereas a prevention focus is related to the need for security and that these needs may lead to significantly different behaviors in group settings.

With regard to the consequences of regulatory focus in social settings, research has associated a prevention focus with higher scores on aggressiveness and cynical hostility (Keller, Hurst, & Uskul, 2008). Another study integrated trait regulatory focus with cooperation in social dilemmas and confirmed a negative association between a trait prevention focus and cooperative behavior in social dilemma situations (Keller & Pfattheicher, 2011).

The aim of the present research was to examine the association between a state prevention focus and cooperation versus competition and to shed light on the positive and negative influences of both constructs on creativity. In addition, we examined global versus local information processing as a possible factor connecting these concepts. In prior research, a promotion focus on advancement was associated with global (i.e., holistic) processing, whereas a prevention focus on security was associated with local (i.e., detail-oriented) processing (Förster & Higgins, 2005).

With regard to creativity, regulatory focus was found to affect creativity in that a promotion focus resulted in higher levels of creativity than a prevention focus (Friedman & Förster, 2001). A recent meta-analysis confirmed the relation between a promotion focus and high creativity and between a prevention focus and low creativity (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2008). By contrast, some studies identified conditions in which a prevention focus may lead to similar levels of creativity as a promotion focus, such as situations in which people reflect on prevention goals that have not yet been fulfilled (Baas, De Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011).

The present research extends this reasoning by investigating the influence of regulatory focus on the willingness to choose cooperative or competitive strategies toward group members. If a promotion focus increases positive behavior toward the ingroup (Shah et al., 2004) and leads to global information processing (Förster & Higgins, 2005), it may increase an individual's willingness to choose cooperative strategies. On the other hand, a prevention focus may lead to fear of failure and local information processing (Förster & Higgins, 2005) and, thus, may increase an individual's willingness to choose competitive strategies. We conducted two studies to test these hypotheses. Furthermore, we examined the simultaneous effects of regulatory focus and competitive mindsets on subsequent creativity. In two experiments, we aimed to investigate whether regulatory focus or mindsets have a stronger effect on creativity. This would allow us to draw conclusions about mediational processes.

### 1.2. Competition and creativity

Prior research indicated that the activation of cooperation and conflict primes subsequent cognition and, thus, has an effect on creativity (Carnevale & Probst, 1998). Cooperation and social conflict were shown to lead to differing mental sets that influenced how people processed and categorized information in memory. Participants who expected cooperation had

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