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This article considers the notion of regulatory fit from a goal-systemic perspective. It is suggested that regulatory fit, as Avnet and Higgins (2006) define it, corresponds to a match between a person's activity and his or her (background) process goal of pursuing an (focal) attainment goal in a desired manner. The author considers prior regulatory fit data from this perspective and raises additional issues for further research and theoretical elucidation.

The Nature of Fit and the Origins of "Feeling Right": A Goal-Systemic Perspective

Avnet and Higgins's (2006) article offers a comprehensive summary of one of the most interesting and innovative research ideas in the field of self-regulation, located in the triple interface domain of motivation/emotion and judgment. It suggests that "how a person plays the game," not just "whether the person wins or loses," is important to his or her affective experience. This research program represents the latest step in E. Tory Higgins's conceptual journey that began with self-discrepancy theory, grew into regulatory focus theory, and branched out to regulatory fit theory, which is the emphasis of the current work and constitutes an exciting and new conceptual and experimental focus in Higgins's laboratory.

In an important sense, the notion of fit grows out of Higgins's prior theorizing. It constitutes a common thread running through his various formulations in which fitlike terms, such as "matches" and "mismatches," and the key construct of discrepancy itself play pivotal roles. Admittedly, fit or lack of fit in self-discrepancy theory is distinct from regulatory fit. The former is a fit between an outcome (the actual self) and a goal (the desired "ideal" or the "ought" self), and the latter is a fit between a process (the way an activity is pursued) and a general orientation (e.g., promotion/prevention or locomotion/assessment). Despite this apparent difference, the two types of fit might have some common characteristics at a deeper level of analysis. I discuss this further subsequently.

The rich experimental program derived from the new theory is also characteristic of Higgins's scientific style. The research that Avnet and Higgins (2006) review demonstrates how regulatory fit affects people's evaluation of objects and their readiness to "put their money where their mouth is" in procuring the objects in question. It shows how

fit effects are mediated by the "feeling-right" experience and how this lends confidence to people's reactions to a social stimulus, whether these reactions are positive or negative. It suggests how fit effects differ from mood effects, how they differ from residual arousal effects, and how the theory generalizes to domains in which the activities performed have little surface resemblance to the goal orientations regarding which fit is assessed. Numerous additional research possibilities that attest to the considerable generative potential of the regulatory fit framework are outlined.

Avnet and Higgins (2006, p. 8) note that regulatory fit theory "is still in the stage of generating new ideas and new discoveries." A major way to generate such new possibilities is by confronting the theory with alternative concepts and explanations. Indeed, the research that Avnet and Higgins review has often grown out of such confrontations. Therefore, in the remainder of this article, I consider another broad interpretation of regulatory fit findings that is implied in goal systems theory (Kruglanski et al. 2002). Admittedly, Avnet and Higgins distinguish regulatory fit theory from goal-systemic notions, noting (p. 2) that "regulatory fit is not concerned with the relationship between a goal and the means to that goal. Instead, it is concerned with the relationship between a person's current goal orientation and whether the means of goal pursuit sustain or disrupt that orientation." However, a different way of thinking about this is possible: Goal orientation can be considered simply another desirable state of affairs (i.e., a desirable way of doing things) and, thus, a kind of goal in itself. In other words, goal orientation may be considered a kind of process goal, a way of doing things that is compatible with a person's inclination or values. According to this interpretation, people may vary in their "process goals." Some people may want to do things simply or complexly, sophisticatedly or plainly, aesthetically or functionally, emotionally or dispassionately, and so forth.

If it is accepted that such process goals exist and that the degree to which people subscribe to them varies across people and situations, it is possible to think of regulatory fit

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conditions as those for which the manner of goal pursuit matches the process goal involved and to think of lack of fit conditions as those for which it does not. In short, in the pursuit of a given objective, people may have attainment goals and process goals that they desire to match. Attainment goals are those whose desired procurement motivates activity engagement in the first place. There may be numerous activities that are equally instrumental to the goal, and the attainment goal justifies any activity in this set. Process goals exercise a constraint on the selection of the specific activity from the set, such that only some activities that lead to the attainment goal may satisfy the process goal as well.

GOAL ORIENTATION AS A PROCESS OBJECTIVE

What implications follow from considering goal orientation a process goal? One implication is that fit, which consists of that goal being matched, should give a person a positive sense of satisfaction. Indeed, the key notion of the regulatory fit formulation is that fit fosters the experience of feeling right, which sounds like a satisfying state of affairs. If that is the case, regulatory fit and attainment of the activity's objective (i.e., the attainment goal) should be additive in their effects on satisfaction. A match with both (e.g., attaining the desired object and doing so in the desired manner) should engender greater feelings of satisfaction than a match with neither, and a match with one but not the other should occupy an intermediate position.

In general, the pursuit of multiple goals (e.g., an attainment goal and a process goal, multiple attainment goals or process goals) by means of a single activity is referred to as multifinality (Kruglanski et al. 2002). In what follows, I discuss this concept in some detail.

MULTIFINALITY EFFECTS IN SELF-REGULATION

According to goal systems theory, in general, multifinal means that serve several objectives are preferred over unifinal means, which serve only a single objective. The former gives "more bang" for the regulatory "buck" and thus obeys the subjective rationality of outcome maximization. What makes multifinality effects interesting is that they may occur outside peoples' conscious awareness. Kruglanski and colleagues (2002) apply the multifinality concept to explain the enigmatic position effect that Nisbett and Wilson (1977) report in their well-known research. In Nisbett and Wilson's study, passersby at a department store were asked to choose the product of best quality among several different nightgowns or several different pairs of nylon stockings. Unbeknownst to the participants, all items were of equal quality. A pronounced position effect was obtained in that the objects to the right of the array were heavily overchosen. According to Kruglanski and colleagues, this could have occurred for reasons of multifinality. Specifically, participants in Nisbett and Wilson's research may have had two goals that they were trying to pursue in the situation the experimenter created for them. One was a "focal" goal, which the experimenter assigned to them. This goal was undoubtedly conscious and explicit, constituting what the participants were instructed to do and involving a choice of the highest quality item among those presented. The other was a "background" goal that operated outside the participants' awareness. This may have been the desire to reach closure, that is, to be done with the task and get on

with their original purpose for being in the department store (probably shopping).

Assuming that the research participants inspected the object array from left to right, as most English-speaking participants do when reading in general, the right-most object in the array would have fulfilled both previously discussed objectives. It was of as good a quality as any of its alternatives, and being the last one in the initial sweep through the array, it was the foremost to provide a quick closure. To test this interpretation, Chun and colleagues (2005) manipulated the background goal of cognitive closure. To enhance its magnitude, they put the participants under time pressure (Kruglanski and Freund 1983), and to reduce it, they introduced an accountability manipulation (Tetlock 1992). Consistent with the multifinality interpretation, participants in the need-for-closure condition strongly replicated Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) position effect. In contrast, participants in the accountability condition, who were assumed to feel a reduced need for closure, exhibited a nonsignificant reversal of the effect, such that the left-most items were selected more frequently than the right-most options. Chun and colleagues (2005) conducted several conceptual replications of these findings with different goals and different choice items, and all yielded the same results: Without conscious awareness of their actions, participants selected objects whose qualities afforded the satisfaction of both the focal (the explicit) and the background (the implicit) goals over unifinal objects whose qualities afforded the attainment of only the focal goal. Of additional interest, when the focal and the background goals were pitted against each other, participants preferred the activity that promised to fulfill the focal goal over that which promised to fulfill the background goal.

MULTIFINALITY INTERPRETATION OF REGULATORY FIT EFFECTS

Consider in these terms the regulatory fit effects that Avnet and Higgins (2006) describe. From the multifinality perspective, the kind of psychological situation typically created in the research that Avnet and Higgins review contains a focal goal assigned by the experimenter (e.g., the exercise of a choice between an attractive mug and a less attractive pen) and a background goal (satisfaction of the regulatory focus process goal or another type of process goal). Note that the only thing that varies in these studies is the presence or absence of fit. The attainment goal involved is always advanced (e.g., all participants are able to obtain their coveted mug). Being able to satisfy both goals (in the fit condition) makes the choice multifinal. Thus, from the multifinality perspective, such choice may well feel right and give participants a sense that things are going well.

In contrast, a situation in which participants are prevented from pursuing their background goal (a situation absent regulatory fit) is unifinal in the present terminology. It affords the attainment of one's conscious goal without fulfillment of the process-related background goal. It could be said that a lack of fit, insofar as it has been typically operationalized, involves an anathema from the process perspective. That is, not only is the desired process goal not matched by the activity, but a negative goal that a person loathes is. For prevention types of people, this may be self-regulation toward a goal in a manner that is eager and

“throws caution to the wind.” For promotion types of people, this may be self-regulation toward a goal in a careful and vigilant manner, possibly experienced as excessively cerebral and dispassionate by such people. It is not surprising, then, that such a unifinal situation feels less right than the multifinal alternative.

As already noted, the attainment goal that a person is pursuing represents a focal or explicit objective. It is the conscious reason for pursuing the activity and a “legitimate” cause of feeling satisfied or dissatisfied with progress toward that goal. In contrast, the process goal may be implicit and reside in the background. In that sense, it may lack legitimacy in the actors’ eyes as a cause of their activity or the source of their feelings. Arguably, this may be the reason that “[w]hen participants were reminded of their choice strategy and told that using certain strategies to pursue goals can sometimes make people feel right about their goal pursuit, the effect of fit was eliminated” (Avnet and Higgins 2006, p. 3). In other words, because as a background goal a fitting strategy was not recognized as a legitimate source of feelings, research participants might have corrected for that possibility, thus reducing the effect. This hypothesis could be investigated through the use of alternative background goals unrelated to process or goal orientation. Raising the possibility that a person’s experience is derived from such goals should consequently eliminate the experience, but it should not do so for focal goals.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF FEELING RIGHT

It also seems plausible that the feeling-right experience would give a person a sense of self-assurance and self-worth. The sense that things are “going smoothly” and that all of the person’s goals and preferences are being matched might increase his or her sense of self-assurance and thus contribute to self-ascribed epistemic authority in various domains (Kruglanski et al. 2005). In turn, this might enhance the person’s confidence in the validity of his or her own reactions to various stimuli, regardless of whether these are positive or negative.

Consider Cesario, Grant, and Higgins’s (2004) clever study, in which participants with a prevention or a promotion orientation were asked to list corresponding or noncorresponding strategies they expected to produce a state of fit or a lack of fit, respectively, and then evaluate the same persuasive message. Participants whose reaction to the message was generally positive were more persuaded by the message in the fit than in the nonfit condition. In contrast, participants whose reaction to the message was generally negative were less persuaded by the message in the fit than in the nonfit condition. According to the present interpretation, these findings might have been mediated by the enhanced self-ascribed epistemic authority in the former condition occasioned by the sense (created by the multifinal fit experience) that things are going well and that they are successful, worthy people whose initial reactions, whether positive or negative, should carry considerable weight.

Similarly, in the dogs study paradigm (Higgins et al. 2003), if the dog appeared rather fierce, participants with a successful multifinal experience of advancing toward their outcome and their process goals (and, as a result, feeling confident about their opinions) should rate the dogs as

rather nasty and, thus, as less “good-natured” than participants who did not experience multifinality.

REGULATORY FIT AND MULTIFINALITY ACCOUNTS: COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Both the regulatory fit and the multifinality accounts assume that feeling right (if the term is construed to mean a boost to a person’s sense of self-worth based on a positive emotional experience) is central to the augmentation of confidence in a person’s reactions, as documented in research that Avnet and Higgins (2006) review. The main point of difference, however, is in the origin of the feeling-right effect. The regulatory fit approach assumes that this is uniquely related to a person’s general goal orientation represented, for example, by a person’s regulatory focus (prevention versus promotion distinction) or regulatory mode (locomotion versus assessment). This is what fit is all about—namely, a correspondence between a person’s process of goal pursuit and a general goal orientation. In this sense, the regulatory fit approach draws a sharp distinction between goal pursuit and fit. It is assumed that goal pursuit is related to the outcomes a person wishes to attain, whereas fit pertains to the process, and it is assumed that the two have completely different consequences.

In contrast, the multifinality approach raises the possibility that the fit experience represents a sense of success or progress toward any type of goal. This implies that as far as the feeling-right experience is concerned, successful pursuit of the attainment and the process goals should be functionally equivalent. In other words, feeling successful in pursuit of an attainment goal should contribute to the feeling-right experience in the same manner as the ability to pursue a process goal in a desired manner (representing fit).

In other words, the current analysis regards the feeling-right experience as additive. It follows that even though a person might have a regulatory fit, his or her sense of feeling right might be partially undermined if he or she fails in the attainment goal (e.g., if, for some reason, the person was prevented from attaining the preferred object). Similarly, success (versus failure) at an attainment goal should augment the feeling-right experience, even if regulatory fit is missing.

The notion that attainment and process goals are functionally equivalent in their ability to create the feeling-right experience suggests that in a “separate experiments” paradigm, attainment of a given goal (e.g., procuring a desired mug) in an early miniexperiment should enhance a person’s sense of confidence and thus amplify his or her reactions to a subsequent stimulus (e.g., a positively or negatively evaluated message) in the same way as regulatory fit did in prior studies.

THE PROBLEM OF MOOD

The goal-systemic perspective on regulatory fit phenomena has an implication that seems to be incompatible with extant regulatory fit findings. The latter suggests that the fit experience does not affect mood and that the fit effects remain after mood is controlled for (Cesario, Grant, and Higgins 2004), whereas the goal-systemic effects suggest that mood should be part and parcel of the feeling-right experience. After all, progress toward a goal or fit repre-

sents a positive event, and as such, it should result in a more positive mood than a lack of progress or an absence of fit. The findings that it does not are admittedly puzzling from a goal-systemic perspective. However, they seem somewhat puzzling from the regulatory fit perspective as well. Specifically, the latter perspective suggests that regulatory fit gives rise to the experience of feeling right. On the surface, this is a positive experience, or at least more positive than its opposite (i.e., not feeling right). If this is the case and if the positivity of an experience is related to a person's mood, the fit experience should be related to mood as well. Thus, the reason regulatory fit theory assumes an independence between the feeling-right experience and mood requires further conceptual elaboration.

In summary, the goal-systemic perspective poses a challenge to regulatory fit theory. This could lead to exciting new research designed to ascertain whether the intriguing fit phenomena that Avnet and Higgins (2006) describe are as unique as they claim or whether the phenomena represent a sense of progress toward important objectives that are responsible for the feeling-right experience and its consequences.

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