

Does Interpersonal Regulatory Fit Affect Intergenerational Communication? Elder Advice and Younger Gratitude

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Old people have considerable experience and wisdom to share with young people; however, young people do not always listen to old people with gratitude. We conducted two studies to examine the effect of regulatory fit on young people's gratitude toward old advisers. As predicted, young people felt more grateful to old advisers whose advice did not "fit" the advisees' self-regulatory orientation, whereas young people felt more grateful to young advisers whose advice fit the advisees' self-regulatory orientation (Web survey in Study 1, lab experiment in Study 2). Using these results, we propose an idea that may promote smoother intergenerational interaction in transmitting experience and wisdom from older to younger generations.

Keywords

gratitude, intergenerational communication, regulatory fit, regulatory focus

Introduction

This study examined the effect of regulatory fit on young people's gratitude toward old advisers, based on the advisers' experience, knowledge, and wisdom. Old people's knowledge, wisdom, and advice promote younger generations' welfare and ability to maintain society. For example, elderly females' assistance and advising of younger generations in nurturing children may significantly promote the continued existence of human societies (i.e. the "grandmother hypothesis" suggested by Hawkes, O'Connell, Blurton Jones, Alvarez, & Charnov, 1998). Additionally, elderly males' passing of knowledge and skills to following generations may contribute to "constructing a better world" (development of "generativity"; suggested by Erikson, 1963). Previous studies have found that young people's expressions of gratitude or negative and ungrateful reactions to elderly people promote and inhibit continuous altruistic behavior in elderly people, respectively (e.g. Tabuchi & Miura,

2015). These findings accord with adaptive evolutionary perspectives that propose that gratitude induces altruistic behaviors involving the sacrifice of one's own resources for others (e.g. Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). Intergenerational communication in transmitting wisdom from elder to younger people is not always smooth, however. "Misplaced kindness" from old people may easily elicit negative reactions from young people, which may then inhibit old adults' motivation to give advice and assistance to young people. To prevent such a vicious cycle, and to facilitate and promote the intergenerational transmission of wisdom between old and young people, old people need to appreciate what types of advice young people are likely to receive with gratitude.

To develop hypotheses, we focused on regulatory focus theory as suggested by Higgins (1997). Regulatory focus theory distinguishes two self-regulatory orientations—promotion and prevention focus—that create sensitivities to different end-states and preferences for distinct strategic means (e.g. Higgins & Spiegel, 2004). Hamstra, Van Yperen, Wisse, and Sassenberg (2013) examined regulatory focus as a factor affecting interpersonal evaluation. They found that when individuals' current or anticipated modes of goal pursuit fit the behavioral strategy of a familiar person (regulatory fit), those individuals evaluated the familiar person more positively than when the regulatory focus did not fit. They also found that regulatory non-fit, rather than fit, led to more familiar and more positive evaluations when participants evaluated an unfamiliar person. We applied these findings to formulate our hypotheses: if advisers are of the same generation as young advisees, regulatory fit, relative to non-fit, increases advisee gratitude (Hypothesis 1); by contrast, if advisers are of an older generation, regulatory non-fit, relative to fit, will increase advisee gratitude (Hypothesis 2). As young advisees will perceive old advisers as unfamiliar due to varying generational characteristics, regulatory non-fit, compared to regulatory fit, will make the provided advice more persuasive and increase advisee gratitude.

Study 1

In Study 1, we tested whether young advisees' chronic regulatory focus predicted their gratitude to advisers of the same or older generations with promotion-focused versus prevention-focused advice letters.

Method

Participants and design

Participants were 108 students (76.85% female) in Japan. Participants were aged 20–21 years ($M = 20.24$, $SD = 0.45$). The experimental design was a 2 (adviser's generation: old vs. young) \times 2 (letters' regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects design. Sample size was determined using a planned sample size that would provide

at least 80% power based on a medium effect size of 0.15.

Procedure

On classroom arrival, participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In the first part of the experiment, participants read “a letter from your senior” using a Web form, describing the senior’s personal undergraduate experience and conveying the senior’s life advice. In the old generation condition, the adviser who wrote the letter was 72 years old, whereas in the young condition, the adviser was 24 years old. In the second part, participants were asked to complete questionnaires examining gratitude to the senior adviser and participants’ chronic regulatory focus.

Materials

We designed four “letters from your senior” varying the advice orientation (promotion vs. prevention) and the advisers’ generation (old vs. young). The advisers were all males. First, we interviewed four alumni (old: ages 69 and 73; young: 23 and 24) about their undergraduate education experiences and life advice. We then designed the letters based on their interview responses, preserving the theme and contents, but varying promotion versus prevention expressions. The scenarios’ expressions varied by condition as follows (prevention condition expressions in parentheses):

...My advice for you as a senior is “make your dream a reality (fulfill your duty).” In order to do this, it’s important to acquire broader knowledge and understanding. I advise you to participate in many kinds of classes at the university and learn a lot. That’s the key to a successful life (avoiding failure in your life).

Measure

Regulatory focus was assessed using the 16-item Japanese version of the Prevention/Promotion Focus Scale (PPFS; Lockwood, Jordan, & Kunda, 2002; Ozaki & Karasawa, 2011). Responses used a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 7 = very much). Individuals’ predominant focus ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 11.15$) was computed by subtracting mean prevention scores ($\alpha = .86$) from mean promotion scores ($\alpha = .84$).

Gratitude to advisers was assessed using six items from the Japanese version of the Affection of Gratitude scale (Kuranaga & Higuchi, 2011; $\alpha = .65$). Responses used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = very much).

Results

We completed regression analyses, regressing gratitude to advisers on adviser generation (coding: 1 = young; 2 = old), letter regulatory focus (coding: 1 = promotion; 2 = prevention), participants’ regulatory focus (centered), and first- and second-order interactions. No main effect was statistically significant. The second-order interaction was significant ($B = 0.45$, $SE = 0.14$, 95% CI : [.01–.63], $t(100) = 2.45$, $p = .01$, $R^2 = .09$), indicating that the two slopes differed significantly from each other (Figure 1). In the old adviser condition, promotion-focused participants felt more grateful to advisers who wrote the prevention-focused letter ($B = 0.33$, $SE = 1.48$, $t(100) = 1.76$, $p = .08$). Among prevention-focused participants, no significant difference was observed in gratitude levels between promotion-

and prevention-focused letters. By contrast, in the young adviser condition, as expected, prevention-focused participants felt more grateful to advisers who wrote the prevention-focused letter ($B = 0.35$, $SE = 1.59$, $t(100) = 1.74$, $p = .08$). Among promotion-focused participants, no significant difference was observed in gratitude levels between promotion- and prevention-focused letters. We also tested the difference of gratitude between participants’ regulatory foci in either promotion-focused or prevention-focused advice. In the old adviser condition, promotion-focused participants felt less grateful to promotion-focused advisers than prevention-focused participants did ($B = 0.37$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(100) = 1.78$, $p = .08$). In the young adviser condition, prevention-focused participants felt less grateful to promotion-focused advisers than promotion-focused participants did ($B = 0.32$, $SE = 0.06$, $t(100) = 1.86$, $p = .07$).

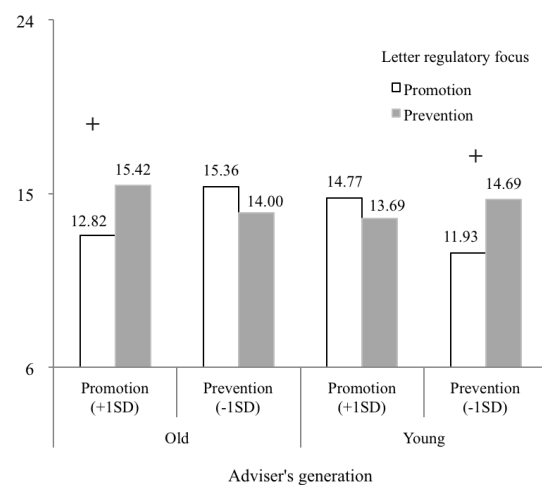


Figure 1. Gratitude to advisers in each experimental condition in Study 1 (+: $p < .10$).

Study 2

In study 2, we manipulated participants’ regulatory focus to confirm the validity of Study 1. We created an actual face-to-face situation and controlled participants’ regulatory focus using a priming task.

Methods

Participants and design

Participants were 51 male students in Japan. Participants were aged 18–23 years ($M = 20.06$, $SD = 1.63$), and were recruited on campus or via a website. The experimental design was a 2 (adviser’s generation: old vs. young) \times 2 (adviser’s regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) \times 2 (participants’ regulatory focus: promotion vs. prevention) between-subjects design. Sample size was determined using the end of the semester as a stopping point.

Procedure

Participants completed demographics and regulatory focus questionnaires on the website before arriving at the laboratory. Upon arrival at the laboratory, participants were randomly assigned to one of eight conditions. In the

first part of the experiment, all participants completed two types of tasks that manipulated participants' regulatory focus: word choice and writing. In the second part of the experiment, participants listened to advisers talk about their experiences and give life advice. In the old condition, the adviser was an old adult (one of two males aged 69 and 73 years); in the young condition, the adviser was of the same generation as the participants (one of two males aged 23 and 24 years). In both conditions, the adviser sat on a chair in front of the participant and read a prepared promotion- or prevention-focused scenario as a senior who had graduated from the same university. The adviser's talk took around 20 minutes. After the adviser's talk, the adviser left the room and participants were asked to complete a questionnaire examining their gratitude to the adviser.

Materials

Regulatory focus was manipulated with two kinds of experimental task, using the following procedures. In the word choice task, participants were required to identify 26 meaningful words in a 48-word list. Fourteen of the 26 meaningful words were related to regulatory focus (e.g. promotion: hope, ideal; prevention: duty, responsibility), the other 12 meaningful words were unrelated to regulatory focus. In the writing task, participants wrote a short essay about life ideals in the promotion condition, and about life duties in the prevention condition.

We designed the advisers' scenarios varying the advice orientation (promotion vs. prevention) and the advisers' generation (old vs. young). The scenario's contents were very similar to the letters in study 1, but slightly longer. As in study 1, we designed the advisers' scenarios, preserving their theme and contents, but varying the expressions used (promotion vs. prevention).

Measure

Gratitude was assessed using the same six items ($\alpha = .73$) as in study 1.

Results

To test the effect of regulatory fit on gratitude in the young and old adviser conditions, we analyzed gratitude using a 2 (adviser's generation) \times 2 (adviser's regulatory focus) \times 2 (participants' regulatory focus) ANCOVA, controlling individual regulatory focus as a covariate. The main effect of adviser's regulatory focus was marginally significant ($F(1, 43) = 4.20, p = .05, \eta^2 = .09, 95\% CI [.00-.24]$) and second-order interaction ($F(1, 43) = 8.21, p = .01, \eta^2 = .16, 95\% CI [.01-.32]$; Figure 2) was significant (Figure 2). In the old adviser condition, participants felt significantly more grateful to the adviser when the participants' regulatory focus was promotion and the adviser's regulatory focus was prevention ($F(1, 43) = 8.25, p = .01, \eta^2 = .41, 95\% CI [.01-.32]$). By contrast, in the young adviser condition, participants felt significantly more grateful when the participants' and the adviser's regulatory focus were both prevention ($F(1, 43) = 4.51, p = .04, \eta^2 = .31, 95\% CI [.00-.25]$). We tested the difference of gratitude between participants' regulatory focus in either promotion-focused or prevention-focused advice. Only in the young adviser condition, prevention-focused

participants felt more grateful to prevention-focused advisers than promotion-focused participants ($F(1, 43) = 3.22, p = .08, \eta^2 = .24, 95\% CI [.00-.22]$).

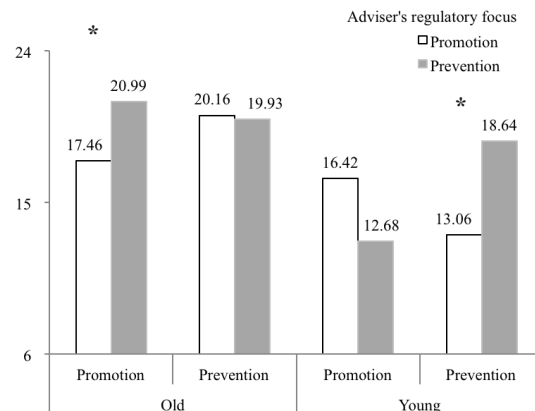


Figure 2. Gratitude to advisers in each experimental condition in study 2 (*: $p < .05$)

Discussion

These two studies' results substantially support the hypothesis that interpersonal regulatory fit affects gratitude to advisers in the opposite direction of the difference of advisers' generation.

When advisers were of the same generation as advisees, young prevention-focused advisees felt more grateful to young prevention-focused advisers. These results substantially support Hypothesis 1, and corroborate extant research. Differences in sensitivity to the homogeneity of in-group members between promotion and prevention focus may explain why regulatory fit affected only young prevention-focused advisees' gratitude to young advisers. Prevention focus is based on safety and loss avoidance by avoiding those who endanger the individual's existence (Higgins, 2000); prevention-focused individuals may thus expect homogeneity and safety from in-group (same-generation) members and be more sensitive to non-fit, as non-fitting ideas from in-group members might be perceived as threatening the group's existence.

In both studies, when the advisers were of the older generation, young promotion-focused advisees felt more grateful to old advisers whose advice was prevention-focused. These results substantially support Hypothesis 2, which was that advisees feel more grateful to advisers giving advice of the opposite self-regulatory orientation (i.e. regulatory non-fit) when the adviser is of an old generation. Differences in sensitivity to diversity among out-group members (old advisers) between promotion- or prevention-focused individuals may explain why regulatory non-fit affected only young promotion-focused advisees' gratitude to old advisers. Young people generally recognize the elderly as unfamiliar people whose backgrounds differ from their own, and who have experienced numerous events that occurred before the young people were born (Tabata et al., 1996). Because promotion focus is concerned with promoting advancement by trying new things, young promotion-focused

individuals may expect that old people are able to share a large amount of novel advice. This would suggest that promotion-focused advisees' gratitude to old promotion-focused advisers was weaker because the advisees felt that the advice and the adviser were predictable and not novel. By contrast, young prevention-focused advisees may not expect novel ideas from unfamiliar out-group members.

Using these results, we suggest that intergenerational transmission of experience and wisdom may be facilitated by promoting non-fit between the advisers and advisees' regulatory focus, particularly regarding promotion-focused advisees. Future research should examine the effect of regulatory fit on young people's application of wisdom received from elder advisers. This research only examined young people's gratitude to elder advisers. Additionally, sex differences require examination, as this research examined only male advisers. This research's results indicate the need for the further examination of the mechanisms that enable smoother intergenerational transmission of wisdom, which positively affects both generations.

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