

Seeking the Best or Seeking Alternatives: Using Regulatory Focus and Mode to Reconceptualize Maximization

Jeffrey Hughes & Abigail A. Scholer, University of Waterloo

Introduction

Conceptual Issues:

- Maximizing was originally defined as the tendency to evaluate all options closely and select the *best* one (Schwarz et al., 2002)
- Three components of maximizing have been identified: high standards (HS), alternative search (AS), and decision difficulty (DD; Nenkov et al., 2008)
- However, researchers have not agreed on which of these components best conceptualize what maximizing really is (e.g., Diab, Gillespie, & Highhouse, 2008; Rim et al., 2011)
- We propose that these “components” are best conceptualized as the following:
 - High Standards (HS): The *goal* of maximizers, i.e. what maximizing *is*
 - Alternative Search (AS): One *strategy* that maximizers may use
 - Decision Difficulty: (DD) One possible *outcome* that maximizers may experience
- We also propose that examining motivational factors such as regulatory focus (Higgins, 1997) and regulatory mode (Higgins, Kruglanski, & Pierro, 2003) will provide motivational profiles that delineate adaptive or maladaptive forms of maximization

Regulatory focus and regulatory mode:

- Regulatory focus theory proposes two complementary motivational systems: promotion and prevention focus

Promotion focus	Concerned with advancement goals, sensitive to presence and absence of gains
Prevention focus	Concerned with security/safety goals, sensitive to presence and absence of losses

- Regulatory mode theory distinguishes between locomotion and assessment as two basic components of self-regulation

Locomotion	Concerned with (psychological) movement from end state to end state
Assessment	Concerned with evaluating and comparing entities, such as goals or means

- Promotion focus' concern with gains and advancement suggests that they should have high standards to achieve; however, their success at self-regulating should lead to low decision difficulty and frustration
- Assessment's concern with evaluation and comparison seems very close to the original conceptualization of maximizing, with high standards and evaluation of alternatives leading to difficulty with decision-making

Hypotheses

- Individuals high in assessment mode should report high DD, as well as high frustration on an actual decision task
- Individuals high in promotion focus should report high HS, but low DD, and low frustration on a decision task
- Prevention focus and locomotion mode should not be associated with any components of maximizing, and should lead to low frustration on a decision task

Study 1

Participants:

- 336 participants from Mechanical Turk (147 women, 44%)
- Age: range 18 to 72, $M = 33.70$, $SD = 12.09$
- Race: 64% White, 7% Black, 29% Other

Method:

- Participants completed four scales:
 - Regulatory Focus Questionnaire ($\alpha = .74$; Higgins et al., 2001)
 - Regulatory Mode Questionnaire ($\alpha = .81$; Kruglanski et al., 2000)
 - Maximization Scale (MS; $\alpha = .66$; Schwartz et al., 2002)
 - Maximizing Tendency Scale (MTS; $\alpha = .86$; Diab et al., 2008)

Results:

Table 1. Regression coefficients of motivational processes predicting maximizing components

(β)	MS-HS	MS-AS	MS-DD	MTS
Promotion	.34	-.12	-.31	.29
Prevention	-.01	-.21	-.07	.01
Locomotion	.48	< .01	-.30	.46
Assessment	.20	.34	.24	.26

- Promotion focus, locomotion, and assessment were positively associated with high standards (and MTS)
- Only assessment was positively correlated with alternative search, whereas promotion and prevention focus were negatively correlated with alternative search
- Only assessment was positively correlated with decision difficulty, whereas promotion focus and locomotion were negatively correlated with decision difficulty
- In summary:* Promotion, locomotion, and assessment all show indications of having high standards; however, only people high in assessment seem to experience negative effects (DD) from their maximizing tendencies

Study 2

Participants:

- 108 online participants from University of Waterloo (70 women, 65%)
- Age: range 18 to 45, $M = 21.38$, $SD = 3.94$
- Race: 45% Asian, 26% White, 29% Other

Method:

- Participants completed same four scales as in Study 1 ($\alpha = .65$ to .85)
- Engaged in product choice task, selecting one car they wished to purchase from a table displaying several characteristics of each car
- Afterward, were asked how much frustration they experienced as a result of the decision

Results:

- High AS was associated with high DD, $\beta = .50$, $p < .001$; whereas HS was not associated with DD, $\beta = -.10$, $p = .24$
- Similarly, high AS was associated with high frustration on the task, $\beta = .28$, $p = .01$; whereas HS was not associated with frustration, $\beta = -.13$, $p = .19$
- Promotion focus was associated with *lower* frustration on the task, $\beta = -.28$, $p = .01$; while assessment mode was associated with *higher* frustration, $\beta = .22$, $p = .03$
- Prevention focus and locomotion mode were not associated with frustration ($ps > .23$)

- Bootstrapping analysis with 5000 samples was used to estimate indirect effects of each motivational process through HS and AS (see Figure 1 and Table 2)

Figure 1. Path diagram for mediational analyses

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graph LR; MP[Motivational process] --> HS[High Standards]; MP --> AS[Alternative Search]; MP --> F[Frustration]; HS --> F; AS --> F
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Table 2. Indirect effects of motivational processes on frustration, with maximizing components as mediators

(β)	MS-HS	MS-AS
Promotion	-.06	-.14
Prevention	< .01	-.14
Locomotion	-.15	.01
Assessment	-.06	.19

Conclusions

- Promotion focus and locomotion mode were positively associated with some form of maximizing (HS), but they did not also experience negative outcomes such as decision difficulty or frustration on a choice task
- Assessment mode was positively associated with all three components of maximizing, and was the only motivational process to be associated with higher frustration on the choice task
- The negative association of promotion focus and positive association of assessment mode on frustration were mediated by alternative search strategies, suggesting that alternative search may be particularly detrimental as a maximizing strategy

Implications

- This research speaks to the importance of examining motivational antecedents of maximization, as a way of explaining why some individuals maximize whereas others satisfice
- This also may help to resolve the conceptual issues surrounding maximization as a construct; if different motivational profiles reveal adaptive and maladaptive forms of maximization, it may clarify how these “components” of maximizing fit together
- Conceptualizing alternative search as one possible strategy maximizers may use opens the door for further research on other potential strategies, some of which may be more adaptive than others

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