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Regulatory focus in relationships and conflict resolution strategies.

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### **Abstract**

Motives for security (prevention focus) and advancement (promotion focus) influence goal pursuit, but less is known about how such motives operate in the relationship domain.

Regulatory focus in relationships (RFR) is a dispositional trait specific to relationship motives, whereby relationship promotion facilitates effective conflict resolution strategies, and relationship prevention leads to conflict avoidance. This research sought to examine if RFR operates in conjunction with commitment, a relationship motive, to facilitate outcomes during relationship conflict. A correlational survey of 701 romantically involved heterosexuals in Portugal and Croatia revealed an interaction between RFR and commitment on conflict resolution strategies. Results showed that relationship promotion (vs. prevention) was associated with more constructive resolution strategies (e.g., constructive accommodation, greater mutual negotiation and less mutual blame), but this effect was greater for highly (vs. less) committed individuals. High commitment also facilitated individuals predominantly focused on relationship prevention to engage in more mutual expression of feelings and negotiation. No interaction emerged for destructive accommodation. These patterns were similar across the two countries. Findings suggest the need to consider the interplay of RFR and commitment on different relationship outcomes.

Keywords: Regulatory focus in relationships; commitment; accommodation; conflict resolution

## Regulatory Focus in Relationships and Conflict Resolution Strategies

### 1. Introduction

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) postulates that people can be motivated by desire for advancement and growth when pursuing a goal (promotion focus) or by security and safety concerns (prevention focus). Individuals who are dispositionally high on promotion are motivated to reach their ideals and hopes, and work to ensure gains (positive outcomes) while avoiding non-gains (missed opportunities). On the other hand, prevention focused individuals are motivated to fulfill their duties and obligations, and work to avoid losses (negative outcomes) even if that means missing new opportunities. Research on interpersonal relationships has shown that regulatory focus plays a role in relationship outcomes, with promotion focus especially important for early relationship development and growth (Molden & Winterheld, 2013) and support for prevention-focused goals important for established marital relationships (Molden, Lucas, Finkel, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2009). Winterheld and Simpson (2011, 2016) proposed the regulatory focus in relationships (RFR) construct to capture differences in motivations for growth vs stability in romantic relationships. Although they found some differences in pro-relationship motives and behaviors between relationship promotion and prevention, more research is needed to uncover how RFR affects relational processes. In particular, given that previous research has found that general regulatory focus, a personal motive, operates in conjunction with a relationship motive like commitment to influence pro-relationship behaviors (e.g., Rodrigues, Lopes, & Kumashiro, 2017), it is unclear how RFR and commitment affect pro-relationship behaviors. The current paper sought to extend Winterheld and Simpson's (2011, 2016) work by investigating how RFR is associated with communication strategies during conflict in dating relationships. As part of a larger research project about romantic relationships in

Portugal and Croatia, we present findings from a cross-sectional study that examined the role of RFR and commitment on accommodation and communication strategies during conflict.

### **1.1 Regulatory Focus and Relationship Outcomes**

Promotion and prevention concerns are both potentially beneficial for relationship outcomes, but they shape relationship processes differently. Having a predominant focus on promotion is beneficial for relationship goal pursuit, especially when both partners are promotion oriented (Righetti, Finkenauer, & Rusbult, 2011). For example, promotion focused individuals are more likely to seek partner support (Righetti & Kumashiro, 2012) and experience greater relationship well-being when they have more opportunities to engage in growth-related activities with their partner (Cortes, Scholer, Kohler, & Cavallo, 2018). In contrast, having a predominant focus on prevention is beneficial for relationship security, with prevention focused individuals preferring to be in a relationship characterized by stability (Cortes et al., 2018).

Most studies to date have examined the effects of general regulatory focus, considered a personal motive, on relationship outcomes. However, this may not always be appropriate, given that personal motives and relationship motives sometimes conflict with each other. For example, a promotion focused individual may have a difficult time having to choose between accepting a new job abroad that provides opportunities for both career advancement and personal development, if that means moving away from the partner and putting the relationship at risk.

The Investment Model (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) highlights the importance of relationship motives for relational well-being and maintenance. Research framed by this model has shown that when faced with potential threats to the relationship, relationship motives such as commitment can induce a transformation of motivation, whereby individuals keep their self-oriented motives in check after considering long-term relationship goals

(Rusbult, Agnew, & Arriaga, 2012). For example, highly committed individuals were more likely to forego desire for revenge and instead forgive their partner after a transgression (Finkel, Rusbult, Kumashiro, & Hannon, 2002). They were also more likely to accommodate and more willing to make sacrifices for their partner (Etcheverry & Le, 2005). High commitment also led individuals with a greater disposition to have casual sex to feel less attracted to an attractive person (Rodrigues & Lopes, 2017) and to report having had fewer extradyadic sex during their current relationship (Rodrigues, Lopes, & Smith, 2017).

Such relationship motives can interact with personal motives to facilitate the activation of pro-relationship strategies. Specifically examining regulatory focus and commitment, Molden and Finkel (2010) showed that commitment, but not trust, helped prevention focused individuals, who are motivated by security concerns, to forgive their partner after a transgression. Presumably, commitment reminded prevention focused individuals that their relationship could be harmed or even end, whereas trust is based on relationship advancement and growth. More recently, Rodrigues, Lopes and Kumashiro (2017) induced romantically involved individuals into a promotion or a prevention focus, and asked them to list either relationship goals (high commitment prime), or individual goals (low commitment prime) that they had for the future. Individuals focused on promotion reported feeling less attracted to an attractive alternative when they had previously described relationship goals. In contrast, promotion focused individuals who described individual goals reported more attraction, showing a pattern similar to that of single individuals and in line with their desire for personal advancement (see also Finkel, Molden, Johnson, & Eastwick, 2009).

### **1.1 Regulatory Focus in Relationships**

Using general regulatory focus, which emphasizes goal pursuit strategies for personal goals, to examine relationship outcomes may have other shortcomings. This construct is typically measured with items such as “How often have you accomplished things that got you

“psyched” to work even harder?” (Higgins et al., 2001). Winterheld and Simpson (2011) conceptualized a relationship level regulatory focus to differentiate between growth and security concerns in close relationships. Individuals focused on relationship promotion strive to enhance and grow their relationship, seek positive experiences (e.g., affection, happiness), and work toward achieving their ideal relationship. In contrast, individuals focused on relationship prevention strive to protect and stabilize their relationship, are concerned about its future and often feel anxious about falling short and not accomplishing relationship goals.

Across several studies, Winterheld & Simpson (2011, 2016) showed how the two types of regulatory focus influence relationship maintenance. Individuals focused on relationship promotion used more pro-relationship strategies, such as creating positive relationship outcomes (e.g., resolved conflicts using positive and creative strategies) and approaching their partners during conflict. They also perceived their partner to be more supportive and less distancing during such situations, discussed important and pressing aspirations with their partners more often, and perceived and received greater partner support for the attainment of their personal goals. On the other hand, those focused on relationship prevention worked to prevent negative outcomes (e.g., avoided conflict escalation by removing themselves from the situation) and focused on details of the conflict instead of engaging in conflict resolution strategies. They also perceived their partners to be less supportive and more distancing during conflict (which was associated with lower relationship satisfaction), refrained from discussing their personal goals with their partners (especially when these oppose relationship goals), and tried to preserve the current status of the relationship.

These two studies (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011, 2016) are the only available evidence so far that RFR may play a crucial role in understanding motives and behaviors in relationships. However, given that past findings revealed an interactive effects of general levels of regulatory focus with commitment on pro-relationship strategies (e.g., Molden &

Finkel, 2010; Rodrigues, Lopes, & Kumashiro, 2017), it is not clear if RFR also operates in conjunction with relationship motives such as commitment to affect various relationship outcomes.

### **1.3 The Present Study**

The current research sought to investigate the interplay of RFR and commitment on pro-relationship behaviors, as evidence regarding the impact of RFR on different pro-relationship strategies is still limited to two studies (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011, 2016) with US samples, to certain conflict resolution strategies, and to partner support during conflict. We investigated three main goals using a cross-sectional study from a larger project examining different aspects of romantic relationships in Portugal and Croatia. First, we aimed to extend the previous work by Winterheld and Simpson (2011; 2016) to examine if RFR is associated with other conflict resolution strategies, such as constructive and destructive accommodation (Rusbult, Verette, Whitney, Slovik, & Lipkus, 1991) and patterns of communication with partners during conflict. Second, to the extent that relationship motives interact with general regulatory focus to activate pro-relationship strategies (e.g., Rodrigues, Lopes, & Kumashiro, 2017), we aimed to examine whether the associations between RFR and conflict resolution strategies were independent of, or interacted with, commitment. Third, given that European countries like Italy have a similar percentage of predominantly promotion focused individuals as the USA (Higgins, 2008), we aimed to extend the RFR construct to two European countries, Portugal and Croatia, in order to be able to generalize to different countries.

We expected individuals with a predominant promotion (vs. prevention) RFR to report using more constructive and less destructive accommodation (H1a) and more positive communication strategies during conflict (i.e., more mutual expression and negotiation, and less mutual blame) (H1b). Similarly, we expected that highly committed individuals,

compared to less committed ones, would report using more constructive and less destructive accommodation (H2a) and more positive communication strategies during conflict (H2b). We also expected an interaction between RFR and commitment in the use of conflict resolution strategies and behaviors. Specifically, we expected the positive association between commitment and the activations of constructive accommodation and positive communication to be especially high among individuals with a promotion RFR (H3). Finally, we did not expect any *a priori* differences between the two countries of Portugal and Croatia.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

A sample of 701 Portuguese and Croatian heterosexual individuals (526 women) with ages ranging from 18 to 50 years ( $M = 24.89$ ,  $SD = 6.06$ ) voluntarily took part in this study. Most participants had at least 12 years of education (64.5%), were students (58.6%) or active workers (35.8%). Participants were in a romantic relationship for approximately 4 years ( $M = 3.73$  years,  $SD = 4.26$ ), with only around a quarter (27.4%) permanently cohabitating with their partner.

### 2.2 Measures

With the exception of commitment measure (Portuguese validation by Rodrigues & Lopes, 2013), all scales were translated and reverse-translated to Portuguese and Croatian by the research team.

**2.2.1 Regulatory Focus in Relationships.** We assessed dispositional promotion and prevention motives in romantic relationship. Using Winterheld and Simpson's (2011) scale, participants indicated their agreement (1 = *Not at all true of me*, 7 = *Very true of me*) to 15 items reflecting either a prevention focus (seven items,  $\alpha = .68$ ; e.g., "I often think about what I fear might happen to my romantic relationships in the future") or a promotion focus (eight items,  $\alpha = .82$ ; e.g., "I am typically striving to fulfill the hopes and dreams I have for my

relationships”). Consistent with previous research and for ease of interpretation of results (e.g., Higgins et al., 2001; Rodrigues, Lopes, & Kumashiro, 2017), we computed an index or RFR by subtracting prevention from promotion scores. Higher scores reflected a predominant promotion RFR.

**2.2.2 Commitment.** We assessed commitment using Rusbult et al.’s (1998) scale that measures long-term orientation, intention to persist in the relationship, and feelings of psychological involvement with the partner. Participants indicated their agreement (1 = *Do not agree at all*, 7 = *Agree completely*) to seven items ( $\alpha = .90$ ; e.g., “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner”). We computed a mean score by averaging responses to each item. Higher scores reflected greater commitment.

**2.2.3 Accommodation.** We assessed the tendency for accommodative behavior using Rusbult et al.’s (1991) scale. Participants indicated how often (1 = *Never do this*, 7 = *Constantly do this*) they respond to relationship problems using constructive and destructive strategies. Constructive strategies (eight items,  $\alpha = .72$ ) were defined by voice (four items; e.g., “When my partner is rude to me, I try to resolve the situation and improve conditions”) and loyalty responses (four items; e.g., “When my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner, I forgive my partner and forget about it”). Destructive strategies (eight items,  $\alpha = .75$ ) were defined by exit (four items; e.g., “When my partner behaves in an unpleasant manner, I do something equally unpleasant in return”) and neglect responses (four items; e.g., “When my partner does something thoughtless, I avoid dealing with the situation”). We computed a mean score for constructive and destructive strategies by averaging responses to each item. Higher scores reflected greater use of each strategy.

**2.2.4 Couple communication strategies.** We assessed communication strategies during relationship conflicts (Futris, Campbell, Nielsen, & Burwell, 2010). Participants indicated how likely (1 = *Very unlikely*, 7 = *Very likely*) it was for both partners to mutually

express their feelings (“Both partners express their feelings to each other”), mutually blame one another (“Both partners blame, accuse, or criticize each other”), and engage in mutual negotiation (“Both partners suggest possible solutions and compromises”). Items were examined separately to have a more detailed understanding of different couple communication strategies.

### **2.3 Procedure**

This study was in accordance with the Ethics Guidelines issued by research institutions in Portugal and Croatia. Romantically involved heterosexual adults were invited to participate in an online survey about personal relationships, through mailing lists and posts on social network websites (e.g., students contacts; Facebook). Individuals were informed about their rights (e.g., confidentiality) and could only proceed to the study after giving informed consent. Participants provided demographic information (e.g., gender, age) and were presented with the main measures. Participants were warned of missing responses before proceeding to a new page, but they were allowed to continue (missing responses: 1.05%). Upon completion, participants were thanked and fully debriefed.

### **2.4 Data Analyses**

We first examined overall descriptive statistics and correlations between measures. We then examined the interaction between RFR and commitment in the strategies used during conflict, by computing five bootstrapped regression models with 10,000 samples using PROCESS (Hayes, 2017). RFR, commitment, and the respective interaction were the predictor variables. Products were mean centered. Country was included as a covariate. Outcome variables were constructive accommodation (Model 1), destructive accommodation (Model 2), mutual expression (Model 3), mutual blame (Model 4) and mutual negotiation (Model 5).

## **3. Results**

### 3.1 Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations are presented in Table 1. Predominant relationship promotion was positively correlated with commitment, constructive accommodation, mutual expression, and mutual negotiation, all  $ps < .001$ , while negatively associated with destructive accommodation, and mutual blame, all  $ps < .002$ . A similar pattern was found for commitment, all  $ps < .001$ .

-- table 1 --

Table 1

*Descriptive statistics and correlations*

Measures	<i>M (SD)</i>	Correlations					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RFRI	1.64 (1.22)	-					
2. Commitment	6.31 (1.03)	.28***	-				
3. Constructive accommodation	4.13 (0.97)	.21***	.17***	-			
4. Destructive accommodation	2.45 (1.00)	-.38***	-.32***	-.21***	-		
5. Mutual expression	5.43 (1.43)	.21***	.23***	.19***	-.27***	-	
6. Mutual blame	3.30 (1.78)	-.13***	-.15***	-.13***	.42***	-.08*	-
7. Mutual negotiation	5.27 (1.43)	.23***	.21***	.19***	-.28***	.50***	-.26***

RFRI = RFR index (higher scores indicate relationship promotion). \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ . \*  $p \leq .050$ .

### 3.2 Regression Models

Results for each regression model are presented in Table 2. Overall results were similar controlling for individual variables (e.g., age, education), relationship variables (cohabitation, relationship length) and all other outcome variables. For sake of parsimony, we present results without these covariates.

-- table 2 --

Table 2

*Regression models for conflict resolution strategies<sup>1</sup>*

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
	Constructive accommodation	Destructive accommodation	Mutual expression	Mutual blame	Mutual negotiation
Model	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )
Constant	4.14*** (.11)	2.39*** (.11)	6.48*** (.16)	2.42*** (.21)	5.78*** (.17)
RFRI	0.14*** (.03)	-0.26*** (.03)	0.26*** (.05)	-0.21*** (.06)	0.25*** (.05)
Commitment	0.15*** (.04)	-0.22*** (.04)	0.22*** (.05)	-0.24*** (.07)	0.26*** (.06)
RFRI x Commitment <sup>2</sup>	0.08** (.03)	0.01 (.07)	-0.08* (.04)	-0.11* (.05)	0.08* (.04)
Country (cov)	-0.03 (.07)	0.04 (.07)	-0.70*** (.11)	0.63*** (.14)	-0.37*** (.11)

RFRI = RFR index (higher scores indicate relationship promotion). Country: 0 = Croatia, 1 = Portugal; cov = covariate. \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ . \*\*  $p \leq .010$ . \*  $p \leq .050$ .

**3.2.1 Constructive accommodation.** RFR and commitment were positively associated with constructive accommodation, both  $ps < .001$ . There was also a significant interaction between both factors,  $p = .007$ , such that greater commitment was associated with more constructive accommodation for individuals with a predominant promotion RFR,  $b = 0.24$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not for those with a predominant prevention RFR,  $b = 0.05$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .220$  (Figure 1).

-- figure 1 --

<sup>1</sup> Croatian (vs. Portuguese) individuals reported more mutual expression,  $p < .001$ , less mutual blame,  $p < .001$ , and more mutual negotiation,  $p = .001$ . Using country as an additional moderator, there was only one significant interaction between commitment and country,  $p = .008$ , such that the negative association between commitment and the use of destructive accommodation was steeper for Portuguese,  $b = -0.31$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $p < .001$ , compared to Croatians,  $b = -0.17$ ,  $SE = .04$ ,  $p = .001$ . There was no significant interaction between RFR and country and no 3-way interactions.

<sup>2</sup> Interactions should be considered significant with reservations if we adjust the significance threshold to account for the test of five models ( $p = .050/5 = .010$ ; see Benjamini & Hochberg, 1995).

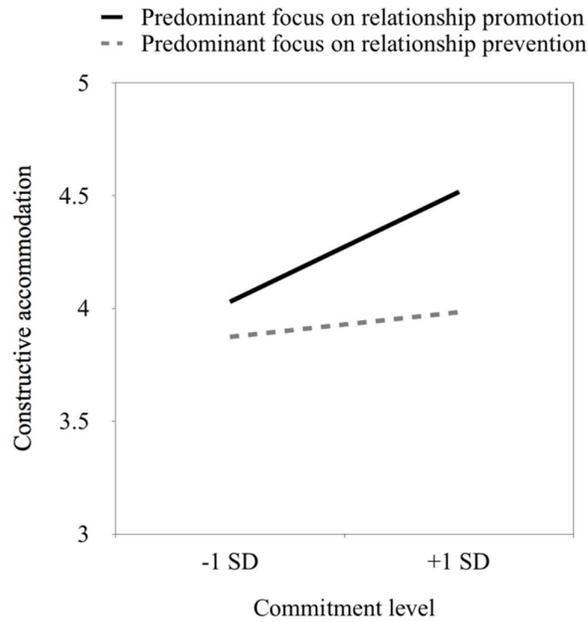


Figure 1. Interaction between RFR and commitment for constructive accommodation during conflict.

**3.2.2 Destructive accommodation.** Individuals with a predominant promotion RFR,  $p < .001$ , and those more committed,  $p < .001$ , reported less destructive accommodation. The interaction between both factors was non-significant,  $p = .589$  (Figure 2).

-- figure 2 --

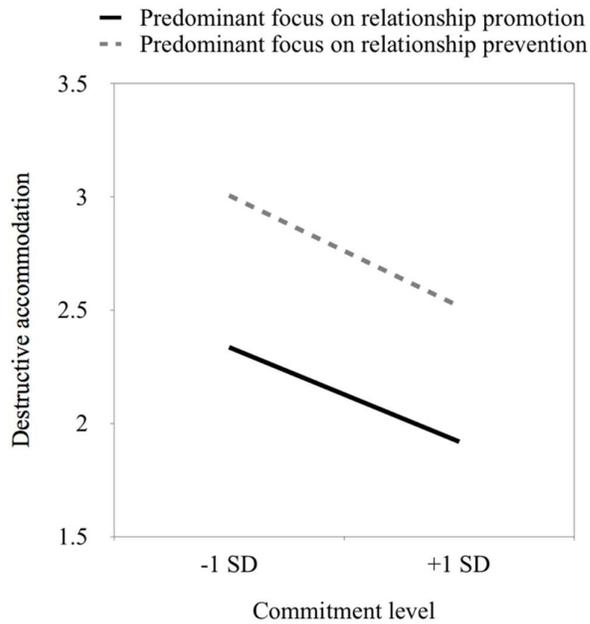


Figure 2. Interaction between RFR and commitment for destructive accommodation during conflict.

**3.2.3 Mutual expression of feelings.** Both RFR and commitment were positively associated with mutual expression of feelings, both  $ps < .001$ . Both factors also interacted,  $p = .041$ , such that greater commitment was associated with more mutual expression for individuals with a predominant prevention RFR,  $b = 0.33$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not for those with a predominant promotion RFR,  $b = 0.12$ ,  $SE = .08$ ,  $p = .137$  (Figure 3).

-- figure 3 --

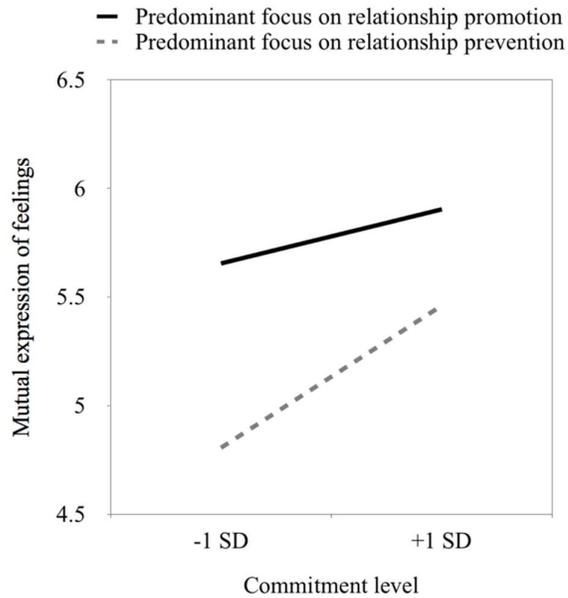


Figure 3. Interaction between RFR and commitment for mutual expression of feelings during conflict.

**3.2.4 Mutual blame.** Both RFR and commitment were negatively associated with mutual blaming, both  $ps < .001$ . Again, the interaction between both factors was significant,  $p = .032$ . Greater commitment was associated with less mutual blaming for individuals with a predominant promotion RFR,  $b = -0.38$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $p < .001$ , but not for those with a predominant prevention RFR,  $b = -0.11$ ,  $SE = 0.08$ ,  $p = .181$  (Figure 4).

-- figure 4 --

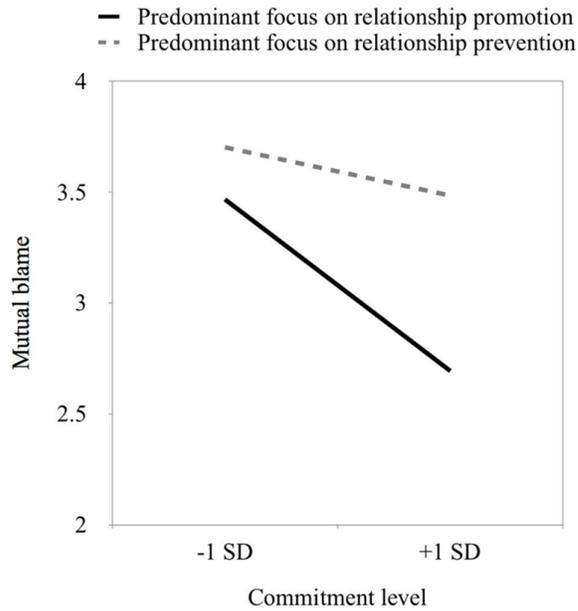


Figure 4. Interaction between RFR and commitment for mutual blame during conflict.

**3.2.5 Mutual negotiation.** Both RFR and commitment were positively associated with mutual negotiation, both  $ps < .001$ . The interaction between both factors was also significant,  $p = .050$ . Greater commitment was associated with more mutual negotiation for individuals with a prevention RFR,  $b = 0.16$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $p = .013$ , but even more so for those with a predominant promotion RFR,  $b = 0.36$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$  (Figure 5).

-- figure 5 --

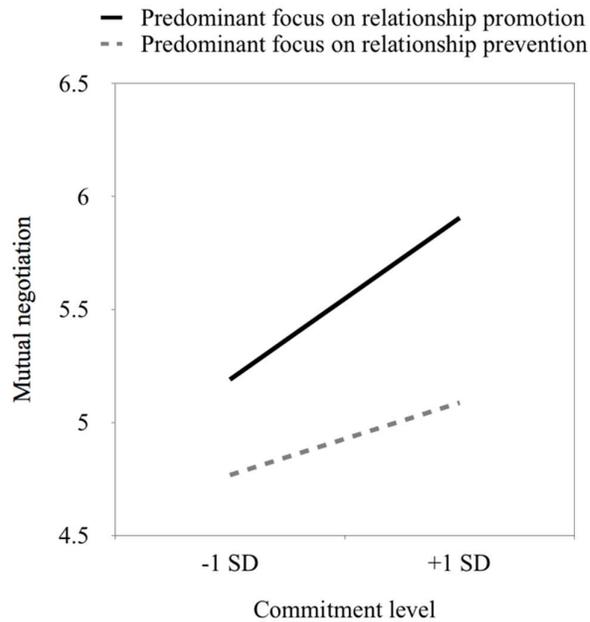


Figure 5. Interaction between RFR and commitment for mutual negotiation during conflict.

#### 4. Discussion

Regulatory focus theory has shown that being promotion or prevention oriented can reliably influence goal pursuit (Higgins, 1997). There is some evidence that regulatory focus also apply influence romantic relationships, often working in conjunction with relationship motives like commitment (Rodrigues, Lopes, & Kumashiro, 2017). Although regulatory focus was recently extended to the relationship domain, with the exception of findings from Winterheld and Simpson (2011, 2016) not much is known about how RFR shape perceptions and behavior in relationships (see also Molden & Winterheld, 2013). We examined the associations between RFR and the use of accommodation and communication strategies during relationship conflict, and if such associations occurred independently from, or in interaction with, commitment. We also explored whether findings were consistent across two European countries.

As expected, results showed that individuals predominantly focused on relationship promotion reported using more constructive, and less destructive, accommodation strategies during conflicts. They also reported using more mutual expression and negotiation, and less

mutual blame. A similar pattern was found for more (vs. less) committed individuals, who used more constructive accommodation and communication strategies and less destructive and negative ones.

Our results make novel contributions by revealing that RFR and commitment interact differently, depending on the conflict resolution strategy. For participants predominantly focused on relationship promotion, commitment was positively associated with the use of more constructive accommodation (voice and loyalty behaviors), greater levels of mutual negotiation, while commitment was negatively associated with mutual blame. For participants predominantly focused on relationship prevention, commitment was positively associated with mutual expression of feelings and mutual negotiation during conflict. Consistent with the findings that relationship promotion leads to more open and creative resolution strategies (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011, 2016), we showed its association with constructive behaviors and less accusatory communication strategies during conflict with the partner, but only when individuals are more committed to their relationship. In contrast, relationship prevention leads to the preservation of relationship stability, which sometimes means stepping out of a conflict (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011, 2016). Our findings showed that a predominant focus on relationship prevention, combined with high commitment, is associated with an active pursuit of resolution strategies, namely expression of feelings and mutual negotiation. In contrast, RFR did not interact with commitment when examining destructive accommodation, defined by exit and neglect responses. Instead, individuals predominantly focused on relationship promotion and those highly committed reported using these responses to a lesser extent.

These results extend past research by validating the RFR construct and generalizing it to different countries, while also contributing to the theoretical discussion differentiating regulatory focus and approach/avoidance motives (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011). Similar to

approach motives, RFR promotion was associated with actively using positive strategies, and actively refraining from using negative ones, in order to solve conflicts. However, unlike avoidance motives, committed individuals with a predominant focus on relationship prevention also used active strategies aimed at preventing conflict escalation, instead of simply adopting avoidance behaviors to assure relationship stability (see also Scholer, Zou, Fujita, Stroessner, & Higgins, 2010).

This study has some limitations. Our findings rely on cross-sectional data and therefore we cannot establish causality. Likewise, our findings do not inform if RFR is similar to general regulatory focus orientation or develops independently of general regulatory motives and more in line with other relationship processes (e.g., commitment, trust). Future studies should seek to replicate our findings using other methods, such as experimental and longitudinal methods, to examine the interactions between these variables. These studies should also extend its analysis to include other relationship processes, such as trust, and other pro-relationship strategies, such as forgiveness. Another limitation involves the measurement of communication strategies. We asked participants to indicate their RFR and then to what extent both partners use a given communication pattern during conflict. These are retrospective judgments that may confound how the individual typically behaves and how both partners typically behave during conflict. Hence, it is unclear if mutual conflict resolution strategies occur by just having one highly committed partner with a relationship promotion or prevention focus, or if both partners need to have a similar RFR and commitment level. To have a more accurate analysis of how both partners behave during conflict, future studies should have dyadic measurements of RFR, commitment and conflict resolution strategies, and consider the dyadic interdependence of these relationship processes.

#### **4.1 Conclusion**

This study contributed to the growing literature in relationship processes by showing that, for highly committed individuals, relationship promotion was associated with more constructive accommodation and less mutual blame, whereas relationship prevention was associated with more mutual expression of feelings and negotiation. By having multinational samples, this study has ecological validity and opens the possibility of creating intervention strategies for couple intervention and conflict resolution in different countries.

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