

# Implications of regulatory focus for parental cognitions

Selin Kesebir

LIFE Fellow 2006 - 2008

Advisors: Wendi Gardner, David Uttal

## ABSTRACT

Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998) differentiates between promotion and prevention orientations. Promotion orientation is concerned with gains and prevention orientation with losses. We manipulated participants' regulatory focus and asked them questions about what qualities they would like their children to have and what strategies they would employ to implant some qualities. When primed with a promotion focus, participants listed more qualities that they hoped their children would have. They also listed strategies that emphasized fun and encouragement. In contrast, participants primed with a prevention focus listed strategies that highlighted duties and vigilance. The findings may contribute to our understanding of the academic achievement gap between Asian and European Americans.

## BACKGROUND

### Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1998)

Promotion Focus	Prevention Focus
• growth and advancement needs	• safety and security needs
• focus on gains and missed opportunities	• focus on threats and non-losses
• concern with aspirations, hopes, ideals ("Wants")	• concern with duties and obligations ("Oughts")
• eager strategies	• vigilant strategies

- Research has demonstrated that regulatory focus is a relevant construct in explaining decision-making, emotion, motivation, goal pursuit, and valence judgments. Because all these processes are present in the domain of parenting, regulatory focus can also shed light on our understanding of parenting.

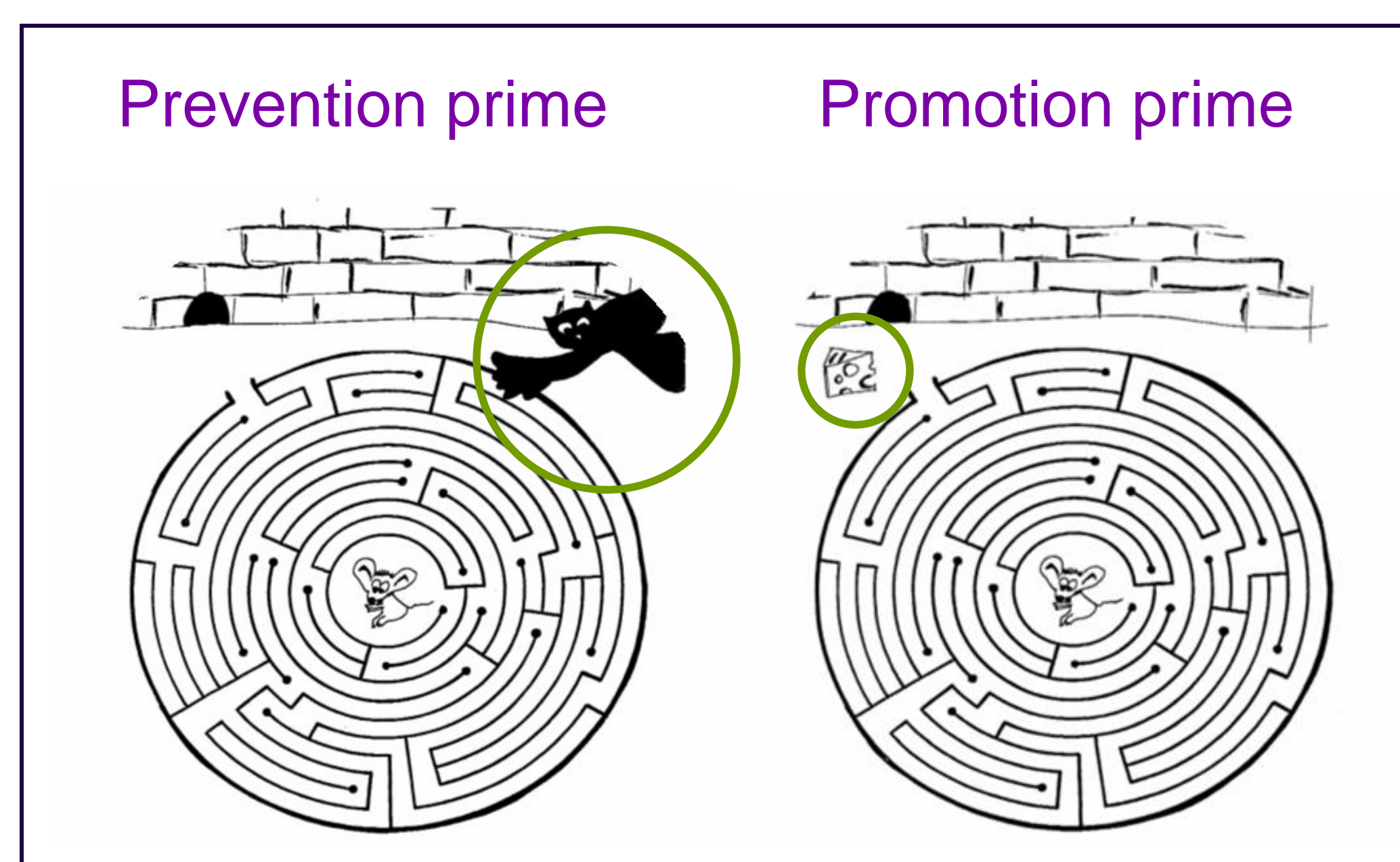
- Our study explores how regulatory focus is manifested in parental cognitions, particularly in the domain of academics. The long-term goal of this line of research is to understand how cultural differences in regulatory focus may be related to superior educational outcomes for Asian Americans.

## THE STUDY

### PARTICIPANTS:

- 51 undergrads (28 males, 23 females)

### REGULATORY FOCUS MANIPULATION:



Participants completed a maze task (Friedman & Forster, 2001).

The mouse in the maze was trying to achieve a positive outcome (get the cheese) in the promotions condition and to avoid a negative outcome (being prey to the owl) in the prevention condition.

### DEPENDENT MEASURES:

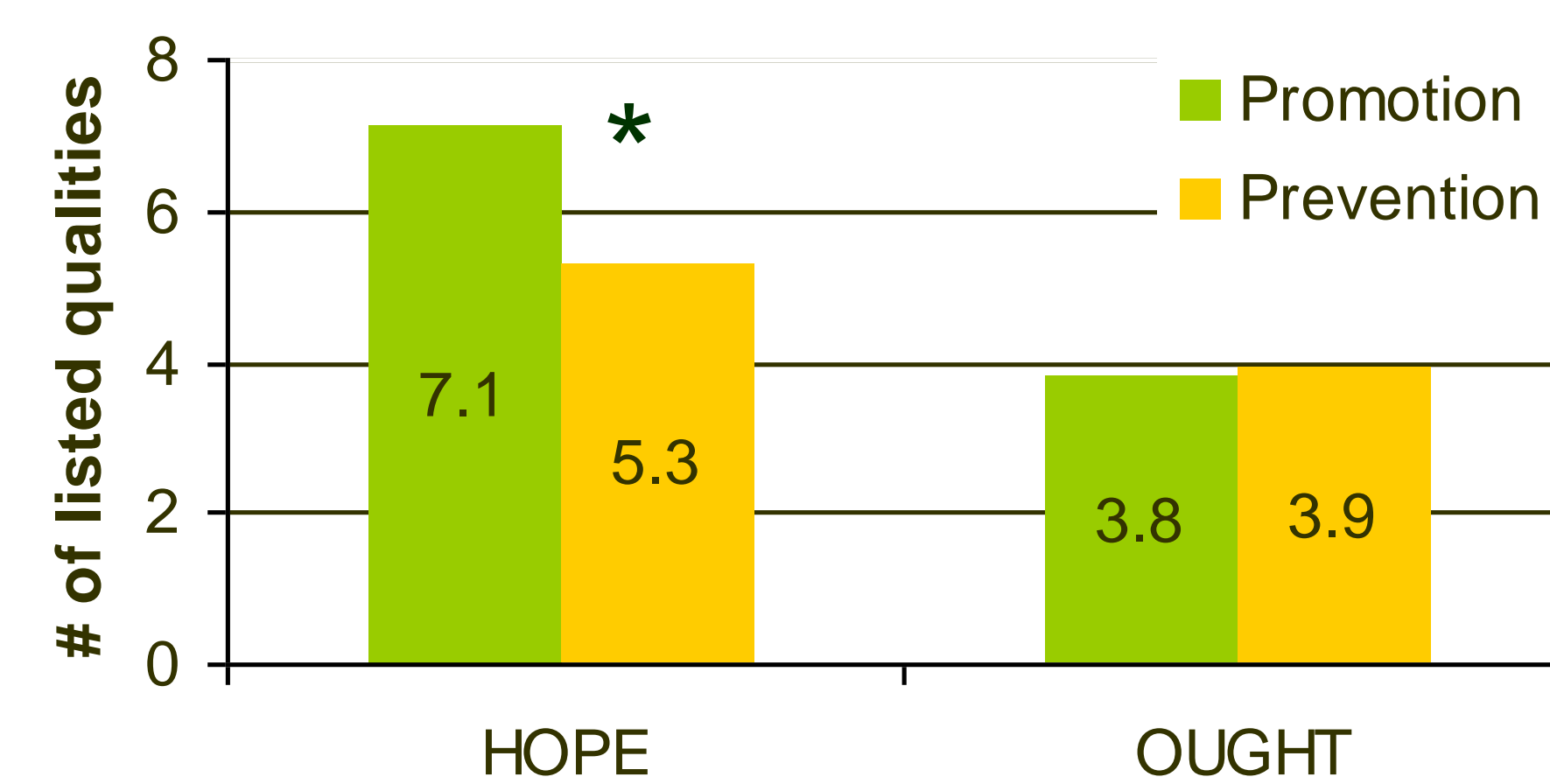
- **PARENTAL IDEALS/UGHTS:** In a free-response task, participants were asked to list what qualities they HOPE their children would have and which qualities their children OUGHT to have. **We hypothesized** that participants would list more HOPE qualities when primed with promotion and more OUGHT qualities when primed with prevention.

- **PARENTAL STRATEGIES:** We asked participants: "Imagine you have a child and your goal is to raise your child as a good student. What sort of things would you do? Please tell us two strategies you would use." **We hypothesized** that participants would list more eager strategies that stress fun and encouragement when primed with promotion and more vigilant strategies that stress duties and discipline when primed with prevention.

## RESULTS

### PARENTAL IDEALS / OUGHTS:

Mean number of listed HOPE and OUGHT qualities by regulatory focus



- When primed with promotion, participants listed significantly more qualities under the HOPE column ( $N = 51, p < .05$ )

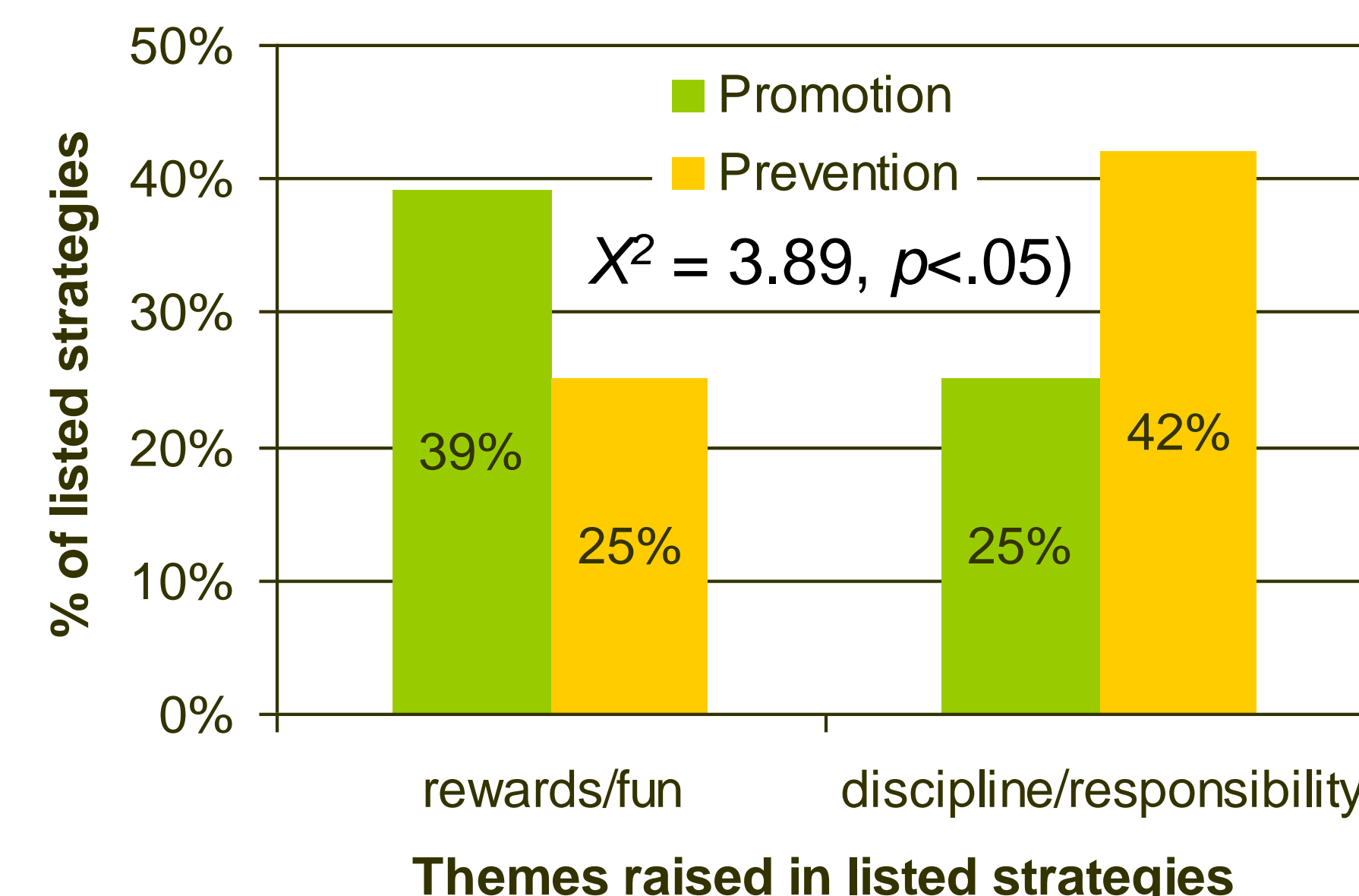
- The qualities listed under the OUGHT column were not significantly different in the Promotion and Prevention conditions.

### PARENTAL STRATEGIES:

- Participants primed with a promotion focus endorsed creativity, independence and imagination to a greater degree. They listed ideas encouraging the use of rewards, or making learning fun such as "make studying pleasant and reward good grades"

- In contrast, participants primed with a prevention focus raised themes of discipline and responsibility more often. They emphasized vigilant strategies such as "make sure my child is disciplined well to accomplish tasks".

Percentages of endorsed fun and discipline themes by regulatory focus



## DISCUSSION

- We were able to manipulate parental cognitions by subtle cues. This suggests that at least some parental cognitions are highly context-sensitive. Immediate context may act to shape child-rearing practices by evoking different parental cognitions. Extrapolating this idea to understanding socialization across cultures, parental practices may be culturally mediated, not by culturally shared static parental mind-sets but by contexts that are presumably more stable within a culture than across cultures.

- Regulatory focus is a relevant construct in understanding parental cognitions, specifically in the domain of academics. We believe that it can also be instrumental in understanding the well-documented achievement gap between Asian and European Americans. It has been shown that East Asians generally maintain a prevention orientation whereas North Americans generally maintain a promotion orientation (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000). To the extent that a prevention focus is associated with stronger educational outcomes, the Asian advantage in education can be partly attributed to the prevalence of the prevention orientation.

- However, our study suggests that simple interventions can be employed to induce optimal regulatory orientations in all educational settings.

## REFERENCES

- Friedman, R. S., & Forster, J. (2001). The effects of promotion and prevention cues on creativity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81*(6), 1001-1013.
- Higgins, E. T. (1998). Promotion and prevention: Regulatory focus as a motivational principle. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 30*, 30, 1-46.
- Lee, A. Y., Aaker, J. L., & Gardner, W. L. (2000). The pleasures and pains of distinct self-construals: The role of interdependence in regulatory focus. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78*(6), 1122-1134.