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Motivated to trust? Promotion and prevention focus are distinctly related to the tendency to trust others

Fanny Lalot [a,b], Rainer Greifeneder [a] and Dominic Abrams [b]

[a]Faculty of Psychology, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland; [b]School of Psychology, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

The present work brings together perspectives from trust and the self-regulation literature to investigate how people's regulatory focus, a form of self-regulation and motivational orientation, relates to their generalised trust. Regulatory focus theory distinguishes between two different ways that humans can self-regulate and pursue their goals: a prevention orientation (i.e. greater focus on security, ought goals, and a loss-avoidance mindset) and a promotion orientation (i.e. greater focus on growth, ideal goals, and a gain-approach mindset). People usually show a greater tendency towards one of the two orientations which can be assessed via self-reported questionnaire (often referred to as chronic regulatory focus). A secondary analysis of nine correlational studies, combined in a small-scale meta-analysis ($N = 6422$), revealed a positive relationship between chronic promotion focus and generalised trust, $r = .11$, 95% CI [.083, .131] and a significantly larger negative relationship between chronic prevention focus and generalised trust, $r = -.22$, 95% CI [−.237, −.191]. A second, preregistered study ($N = 478$) replicated these findings on a measure of self-reported generalised trust and on trusting (cooperative) behaviour in a trust game. The present findings further our understanding of the nomological network of generalised trust. They also expand the theoretical boundaries of regulatory focus theory, highlight distinctions between conceptualisations and measures of regulatory focus, and underscore its implications for understanding the social psychological foundations of trust.

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Regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997) proposes two different ways that humans can self-regulate and pursue their goals: a prevention and a promotion orientation. Since its inception, regulatory focus theory has been widely applied in the diverse fields of social (e.g. Baas et al., 2008), organisational (Lanaj et al., 2012), and health psychology (Ludolph & Schulz, 2015), as well as in marketing (Higgins et al., 2020) and other subfields and disciplines. Beyond personal outcomes, regulatory orientations have also been shown to influence interindividual and group-based behaviour (Sassenberg &

CONTACT Fanny Lalot fanny.lalot@unibas.ch Faculty of Psychology, University of Basel, Missionsstrasse 64A, Basel 4055, Switzerland

Woltin, 2008). Interestingly, one crucial aspect of humans' social lives has been largely ignored from regulatory focus research: *trusting others*.

This paper presents two studies that investigate the relationship between regulatory focus and generalised trust, self-reported (Study 1; small-scale meta-analysis of nine individual samples) and measured through cooperation behaviour in a trust game (Study 2). It expands the theoretical boundaries of the influential framework that is regulatory focus theory and underscores its implications for understanding and enhancing social dynamics.

Regulatory focus theory

Regulatory focus theory is a social psychological theory of individual motivation originating from self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy theory distinguishes between three domains of the self: the actual self (representing the attributes the person believes they possess), the ideal self (the attributes they would *ideally* like to possess), and the ought self (the attributes they believe they *ought to* possess). The ideal and ought selves function as self-guides: the individual evaluates and aims to reduce discrepancies between the actual and the ideal/ought self. Importantly, people value some self-guides more than others, so that some people are more driven to reduce discrepancies with their ideal self while others are driven to reduce discrepancies with their ought self (Higgins, 1987, 1989). Such interindividual differences are believed to arise from early-life interactions and the expectations/schemes transmitted to the child by caregivers (e.g. safeguarding and insisting on [absence of] punishment versus bolstering and insisting on [absence of] rewards; Higgins & Silberman, 1998).

Regulatory focus theory offers an integrative model of self-regulation that builds on these original considerations by distinguishing between two independent motivational systems. These are driven by the discrepancies between the actual vis-à-vis the ought self (prevention focus) and ideal self (promotion focus; Higgins, 1997; Scholer et al., 2019). These motivational systems shape why and how people engage in goal pursuit, leading to stable differences in basic needs, valued outcomes, preferred strategies, and emotional reactions.

On the one hand, people oriented towards *prevention* (or those more sensitive to ought-self discrepancies) are primarily motivated to fulfil their duties and obligations. They are driven by a fundamental need for safety and security. They show an increased attention to negative outcomes (or loss), which they are motivated to avoid (Higgins et al., 1997). They are thus more oriented towards goal maintenance than goal advancement (Brodscholl et al., 2007). In order to do so, they favour vigilance-based strategies: a strategic avoidance of mismatches (Higgins et al., 1994) that tolerates potential errors of omission as long as it ensures avoiding errors of commission (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). Prevention focus may thus lead to an avoidance of negative outcomes, though this may mean individuals fail to pursue opportunities for positive outcomes. Unsurprisingly, this 'everything to lose' mindset has been related to risk aversion – at least as long as the non-risky option corresponds to maintaining (vs. advancing) the present state of things (Scholer et al., 2010). Typical emotional reactions are agitation (in reaction to loss) and quiescence (in reaction to non-loss; Higgins et al., 1997; Shah & Higgins, 2001).

On the other hand, people oriented towards promotion (or those more sensitive to ideal-self discrepancies) are primarily motivated to accomplish their hopes and aspirations. They are driven by a fundamental need for growth and nurturance. They show

attention to positive outcomes (or gains), which they are motivated to approach (Higgins et al., 1997). They are thus more oriented towards goal advancement than goal maintenance (Brodscholl et al., 2007). In order to do so, they favour eagerness-based strategies: a strategic approach of matches (Higgins et al., 1994) that tolerates potential errors of commission as long as it ensures avoiding errors of omission (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). This 'everything to gain' mindset has been related to greater risk taking – as long as the person starts from a neutral position and the risky option entails the possibility to make a gain (Zou et al., 2014). Typical emotional reactions are dejection (in reaction to non-gain) and cheerfulness (in reaction to gain; Higgins et al., 1997; Shah & Higgins, 2001).

Although the two foci may appear to be opposite ends of a single continuum, it is important to note that they are conceptually independent; that is, an individual might be oriented towards one focus more strongly than the other but also equally towards both foci (Higgins, 1997).

In sum, regulatory focus provides a rich theoretical framework that integrates different aspects of emotions, cognitions, strategies, goals, and fundamental needs into an overarching model of motivation and self-regulation (Vriend et al., 2023). Regulatory focus theory has primarily been studied with respect to personal outcomes, encompassing preference for, and performance when adopting, certain goal-pursuit strategies, goal maintenance, and reactions to success and failure (Scholer et al., 2019). Regulatory focus also plays an important role in interpersonal relationships and social interactions more broadly (Higgins & May, 2001; Sassenberg & Woltin, 2008). For instance, when engaged in a conflict resolution discussion, prevention-oriented individuals tend to engage in a detail-oriented discussion of the relationship conflict while promotion-oriented individuals focus on creative problem-solving behaviour (Winterheld & Simpson, 2011). Other research demonstrated that prevention-oriented people's heightened sensitivity to negative cues makes them more likely to notice the pain of others and express more compassion in reaction (Keller & Pfattheicher, 2013). Here, we propose and test that regulatory focus has an influence on another factor that is fundamental to social interactions: generalised trust.

Generalised trust

Trust is often defined as 'a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (Rousseau et al., 1998, p. 395). It is a broad construct that encompasses many different subsets, spanning for example different domains, different targets, and different levels of specificity. Against this general background, the present study focuses on *generalised trust*.

In contrast to personalised trust, which focuses on trust in specific situations or towards specific others, generalised trust focuses on people in general, independent of the trustee and the situation (Schilke et al., 2021). As such, generalised trust reflects one's generalised beliefs that others can be trusted (e.g. Van Lange, 2015) and corresponds to a rather wide 'radius of trust' (van Hoorn, 2014, p. 147) or more specifically 'radius of trustees' (Schilke et al., 2021, p. 248). According to a social learning perspective, generalised trust takes its roots in early-life interactions, which work as reinforcement and lead to general expectancy about the behaviour of others (Rotter, 1967). Generalised trust has even been related to some biological origins (Reimann et al., 2017). Nuancing this trait perspective,

other work shows that social interactions at adult age continue to influence generalised trust (e.g. Baer et al., 2018; Cao & Galinsky, 2020; van der Werff, Freeney, et al., 2019).

Models of trust suggest that trust does not express itself in a vacuum but becomes relevant in situations that imply a certain risk or uncertainty (Mayer et al., 1995). Trust should therefore be particularly relevant in social interactions that entail threats and translate into risk taking (Cao & Galinsky, 2020; Schoorman et al., 2007). The relationship between trust and risk taking is made explicit in some work. For example, Wang et al. (2017) found that individuals with a higher social (but not financial) risk-taking tendency exhibited more trusting behaviour in a series of one-shot trust games.

Generalised trust and self-regulation mechanisms

Here we argue that self-regulation mechanisms and more specifically regulatory focus is conceptually related to generalised trust. Our general contention that motivational mechanisms are useful to the study of trust is in line with recent work that calls for research to go beyond the cognitive approach to trust and consider underlying motivations. For instance, van der Werff, Legood, et al. (2019) suggest that trust motivation, that is, the 'intraindividual psychological state that represents a desire to be vulnerable to another in order to build or maintain a trusting relationship' (p. 101), should be considered as an antecedent of trust alongside the trustor's trust propensity and the trustee's trustworthiness. Such a motivation to trust might explain why trustees sometimes exhibit trusting behaviour in situations where a pure cognitive evaluation of the situation would suggest they should not trust (Weber et al., 2004), thus 'open[ing] the black box of "willingness to be vulnerable"' (van der Werff, Legood, et al., 2019, p. 101). Yet, our approach here is slightly different as we do not investigate the existence of *a* motivation to trust but rather explore how *different* forms of motivation might be differentially related to generalised trust. We build our argument on considering the different facets of motivation and self-regulation that are organised into the framework of regulatory focus (as described above): (i) fundamental needs, (ii) cognition/goals, and (iii) strategies.

Specifically, our first hypothesis is that prevention focus is related to lower levels of generalised trust. (i) As described above, prevention focus is defined by a prevalent need for security. We argue that this concern for security might make people warier of social interactions in general, and of those involving a level of vulnerability in particular, which they would perceive as more threatening. (ii) Second, prevention focus implies an increased attentiveness to negative outcomes. We argue this may make the potential negative consequences of a breach of trust more salient. Finally, (iii) prevention focus entails a preference for vigilant strategies and risk avoidance. Therefore, we propose that a prevention focus may lead people to weigh up the risk of a breach of trust as more important than the potential benefits of trust and cooperation. Thus, we posit that, because it is a specific type of motivational orientation that makes people warier of social interactions, more aware of the potential negative consequences of a breach of trust, and more likely to evaluate these negative consequences as important, prevention focus should be associated with decreased trust.

Conversely, our second hypothesis is that promotion focus is related to higher levels of trust. (i) Promotion focus is defined by a prevalent need for growth. Therefore, promotion focus might make people more confident in social interactions because they perceive

them as opportunities for gain and growth. (ii) Relatedly, promotion focus implies an increased attentiveness to positive outcomes, which may make the potential positive consequences of well-placed trust more salient. Finally, (iii) promotion focus entails preference for eager strategies and risk taking, that may lead people to regard the benefits of trust and cooperation as more important than the potential risk of a breach of trust. Thus, we contend that, because it is a specific type of motivational orientation that makes people more likely to see social interactions as opportunity for gain, more likely to focus on the positive consequences of well-placed trust, and more likely to evaluate these positive consequences as important, promotion focus should be associated with increased trust. Further incidental evidence for this relationship comes from personality research showing that promotion focus is positively related to agreeableness, a trait that encompasses the notion of a 'trusting nature' (Lanaj et al., 2012).

In sum, consideration of the different dimensions of self-regulation articulated within regulatory focus theory leads to the hypothesis that prevention (vs. promotion) might be related to lower (vs. higher) generalised trust. Conceptually supporting this hypothesis, Wang et al. (2020) reported a positive relationship between *collective* promotion focus (that is, perceived focus of one's team assessed through 'we' statements) and trust, as well as a negative relationship between collective prevention focus and trust. Moreover, Wirtz and Lwin (2009) provided evidence that trust was related to intentions to engage in promotion-focused behaviours in the workplace. Thus, there is preliminary evidence supporting the idea of cross-relationships between trust and prevention/promotion focus, but more work is required to better understand these dynamics.[1]

To our knowledge, there is just one piece of work that directly tested the hypothesis of a link between *individual* regulatory focus and *generalised* trust. Specifically, in a series of experiments, Keller et al. (2015) utilised a trust game paradigm and found that prevention focus (measured as a chronic disposition or contextually manipulated) was related to lower rates of cooperation. In addition, in one study, chronic prevention focus was related to lower generalised trust (self-reported). These studies found no significant relation between promotion focus and trust, and in fact even a small negative relation. Two explanations may account for the missing relationship between promotion focus and trust in the studies reported by Keller et al. (2015). First, compared to today's standards, the sample sizes were relatively small, potentially impeding the detection of smaller effects. Second, although there is a theoretical rationale for a positive relationship between promotion and trust, it is plausible that interpersonal aspects of self-regulation are less relevant under a promotion than a prevention focus.

Consistent with such an argument, previous work suggests that individuals in a promotion (vs. prevention) focus rely more on internal cues (vs. on observing the behaviour of a peer) to regulate their behaviour (Florack & Scarabis, 2006). People with a prevention focus are also more sensitive to reputational cues (e.g. watching eyes; Keller & Pfattheicher, 2011; Pfattheicher, 2015) and they are more driven by extrinsic motivation than those with a promotion focus (Lalot et al., 2019). If prevention focus implies a greater attention to social cues, then the relationship with trust – a fundamentally social construct – might be smaller with promotion than prevention, potentially explaining why it could not be detected in Keller et al. (2015)'s studies.

The present research

The present paper offers two major additions to the scarce previous research on regulatory focus and trust. First, we report well-powered studies that have the potential to detect meaningful but smaller effects. Second, we consider several different scales to assess chronic regulatory focus.

Indeed, although regulatory focus can be contextually influenced by situational factors such as message framing or task instructions (as in Keller et al., 2015; see also Cesario et al., 2004; Freitas & Higgins, 2002), it is primarily theorised as a stable individual orientation, and many different instruments have been developed to capture this *chronic* regulatory focus. Interestingly, these instruments often do not or only weakly correlate with one another (see Haws et al., 2010; Ouschan et al., 2007). Summerville and Roese (2008) suggest that regulatory focus can be broken down into two distinct theoretical conceptualisations: the self-guide definition (distinguishing ideal vs. ought goals) and the reference-point definition (contrasting advancement / positive outcomes vs. maintenance / negative outcomes), which share a common foundation but could also manifest themselves independently. In a similar vein, Vriend et al. (2023) argue that goals must be distinguished from strategies, which they actually elicit (i.e. goals are a precursor to strategies). That scales often centre on one conceptualisation or one subcomponent of self-regulation (i.e. goals, outcomes, or strategies) would explain the lack of correspondence between them (see also Chen & Bei, 2017).

In the present research across studies we considered the General Regulatory Focus Measure (GRFM; Lockwood et al., 2002), which centres on the reference-point definition; the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ; Higgins et al., 2001), which centres on the self-guide definition; the Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale (RFSS; Ouschan et al., 2007), which focuses on eager vs. vigilant strategies; and the Composite Regulatory Focus Measure (CRFM; Haws et al., 2010), which encompasses both the self-guide and the reference-point definition. Each scale has strengths and weaknesses, such as the GRFM focusing particularly on approach and avoidance (Higgins & Cornwell, 2016; Summerville & Roese, 2008), or the RFQ focusing on early-age experiences and often lacking internal consistency when used outside of the US (Sassenberg et al., 2012). Vriend et al. (2023) further argue that the RFQ tends to confound goals and strategies, that the GRFM neglects non-losses, and that neither adequately addresses advancement versus security goals. Our rationale for relying on and comparing different scales was that the relationship with trust, if any, might be driven by one specific component of the multifaced construct that is regulatory focus; and the comparison may help us understand the effect better.

This paper describes two studies. Study 1 is a secondary analysis of nine cross-sectional studies that included measures of generalised trust and regulatory focus. It allows us to compare the strength of the effects observed with different measures of regulatory focus across samples. Study 2 extends these findings by directly comparing the three main measures of regulatory focus within one large sample, and by assessing cooperation behaviour in a trust game in addition to self-reported generalised trust. The research was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Psychology at the University of Basel. All analyses were conducted on RStudio (version 2023.06.0 + 421), using packages *psych*, *compute.es*, *metafor*, *meta*, and *robust*. Data, code for analysis, codebooks, and all materials are publicly available on the OSF: https://osf.io/qeyjd/.

Study 1: Small-scale meta-analysis of secondary data

Study 1 presents the secondary analysis of nine cross-sectional studies that we analysed in a meta-analytic fashion. Small-scale meta-analysis is one recommended approach to tackle the ongoing replicability crisis (Świątkowski & Dompnier, 2017) and it can increase the overall power of studies that, taken individually, could have been underpowered (Braver et al., 2014). A small-scale meta-analysis also comes with the benefit of integrating findings that were assessed with different assessment methods, thus affording an integrative picture that illuminates the general validity of findings and, potentially, their boundary conditions. We certify the nine studies included in this article and this meta-analysis are the only ones ever conducted by our research team that encompassed measures of trust and regulatory focus (i.e. an empty file-drawer; Vosgerau et al., 2019).

Method

Samples and procedures

We focus here on secondary data, extracted from studies conducted by our research teams over the course of the past few years, and that included measures relevant to our present purpose. Studies are numbered chronologically. Studies 1–4 were large-scale surveys assessing the political views of representative samples from the UK. Studies 5–9 were smaller-scale studies assessing trust-related questions in convenience samples of students or respondents recruited through crowdsourcing platforms such as Prolific. While there have been publications stemming from these studies on other topics, the investigation of the link between trust and regulatory focus has not been conducted nor published before.

The overall dataset comprised $N = 6422$ participants across nine samples. They were 3734 women and 2651 men (27 non-binary/other, and 10 undisclosed) with a mean age of 51.07 ($SD = 12.91$). No observation was excluded from analyses. Demographics of each sample are reported in Table 1. Sample sizes were determined with respect to the larger research objectives of each individual study. A sensitivity power analysis indicates that the overall sample size would allow detection of correlations as small as $r = .04$ with 95% power (two-tailed). The secondary data analysis was not pre-registered.

Measures

Regulatory Focus. Across studies, four different scales assessed participants' chronic regulatory focus. Studies 1 and 9 relied on the 14-item *GRFM* (Lockwood et al., 2002) and Studies 2–4 used a shorter version of the scale (6 to 8 items, see Table 1). Studies 5 and 8 utilised the 14-item *RFSS* (Ouschan et al., 2007). Study 6 included the 11-item *RFQ* (Higgins et al., 2001). Finally, Studies 7 and 9 used the 10-item *CRFM* (Haws et al., 2010), which is a composite of items derived from the GRFM, the RFQ, and the behavioural inhibition and approach system scale. Example items for each scale appear in Table 2 and descriptive statistics are reported in Table 1.

Generalised Trust. Generalised trust was measured in most studies with three items taken from the European Social Survey (ESS; https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org: 'Most people can be trusted', 'You can't be too careful in dealing with people', reverse-coded, and 'I trust people in my community'). Studies 1–4 and 6–7 used these items

Table 1. Overview of the studies, samples, and measures included in the small-scale meta-analysis.

Study	*N*	% of women	Age *M* (*SD*)	Sample	RF scale (items)	α prevention	α promotion	α trust
1	1119	52.3%	52.45 (12.77)	Representative	GRFM (14)	.78	.86	.72
2	1538	51.2%	58.40 (13.37)	Representative	GRFM (8)	.77	.79	.72
3	743	56.7%	55.21 (14.86)	Representative	GRFM (8)	.76	.81	.67
4	1503	50.3%	56.03 (14.78)	Representative	GRFM (6)	.63	.70	.69
5	246	49.6%	40.37 (13.57)	Convenience (online)	RFSS (14)	.84	.70	.80
6	342	98.6%	40.95 (13.91)	Convenience (online)	RFQ (11)	.82	.71	.72
7	300	98.7%	49.26 (10.29)	Convenience (online)	CRFM (8)	.65	.74	.81
8	386	77.7%	19.47 (2.68)	Convenience (students)	RFSS (14)	.83	.81	.67
9	174	64.3%	25.29 (9.47)	Convenience (students)	GRFM (14)	.75	.78	.89
9					CRFM (8)	.59	.64	

Notes: GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure, RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale, RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. CRFM = Composite Regulatory Focus Measure. Studies 6–7 focused on female participants, explaining the high percentage of women in these samples. In Studies 7 and 9, because of low reliability of the CRFM, we had to drop one item for each of the prevention and promotion subscales, reducing the overall number of items from 10 to 8.

only while Studies 5 and 8 also included four additional items (e.g. 'There are only a few people I can trust completely', reverse-coded). Study 9 used a different set of six items measuring trust in one's neighbours (e.g. 'I am cautious when it comes to trusting people in my neighbourhood', reverse-coded). The complete codebook for each study is publicly available on the OSF: https://osf.io/qeyjd/.

Results

Analysis strategy

We first investigated the reliability of the measures of regulatory focus and generalised trust in each sample separately (i.e. two-stage individual participant data meta-analysis; Burke et al., 2017). In two cases, one item had to be dropped to increase the reliability of the prevention and promotion focus measure (see Table 1). We then conducted a multiple linear regression analysis in each sample, regressing generalised trust on promotion and prevention focus. From this analysis, we extracted the (partial) effect size of prevention and promotion focus, which we converted into a partial correlation coefficient *r* for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Finally, we conducted two small-scale meta-analyses to investigate the meta-effect of (1) prevention and (2) promotion on generalised trust,

Table 2. Example items measuring promotion and prevention focus.

Scale	Prevention item	Promotion item
GRFM	In general, I am focused on preventing negative events in my life.	In general, I am focused on achieving positive outcomes in my life.
RFSS	Being cautious is the best policy for success.	To achieve something, you need to be optimistic.
RFQ	How often did you obey rules and regulations that were established by your parents?	How often have you accomplished things that got you 'psyched' to work even harder?
CRFM	I worry about making mistakes.	When I see an opportunity for something I like, I get excited right away.

Note: GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure, RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale, RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. CRFM = Composite Regulatory Focus Measure.

relying on Fisher's *z* transformation. Type of regulatory focus scale (GRFM, RFSS, RFQ or CRFM) was entered as a moderator. We used the Paule-Mandel estimator to estimate between-study variance (Veroniki et al., 2016). Missing data was handled with pairwise deletion. Code for analysis is available in Electronic Supplementary Material (ESM1) on the OSF. As a robustness check, we also conducted the analysis while including demographics as covariates (age and gender). This yielded virtually similar results; and details are reported in ESM2.

Prevention focus and generalised trust

The first analysis revealed a significant *negative* meta-correlation between prevention focus and generalised trust, $r = -.215$, 95% CI [−.237, −.191], z-test = −17.57, $p < .001$ (Figure 1). This corresponds to a medium-size effect for social psychology research (see Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021). There was significant heterogeneity between studies, $Q(9) = 25.69$, $p = .002$, $I^2 = 65.0\%$, 95% CI [31.2, 82.2]. As shown in Table 3, at least some of this heterogeneity was attributable to the regulatory focus scale utilised: heterogeneity between scales was significant, $Q(3) = 14.16$, $p = .003$, while heterogeneity within scales (i.e. between studies relying on the same scale) was not, $Q(6) = 11.53$, $p = .073$. The correlation between prevention and generalised trust was stronger when using the CRFM,

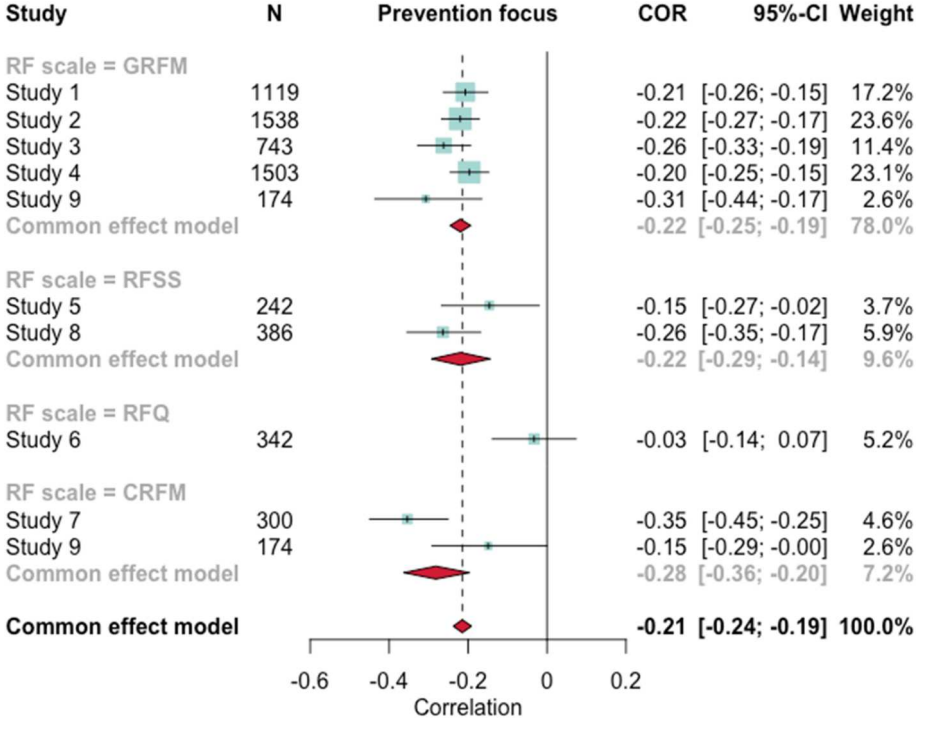

Figure 1. Prevention focus and generalised trust: forest plot. Notes: Individual study effects are reported as squares (black line = 95% CI) and common effects (for each regulatory focus scale and overall) are reported as diamond shapes (stretching of the diamond shape = 95% CI). The size of each square represents the weight given to the study for the total effect size calculation, based on sample size.

Table 3. Prevention focus and generalised trust: results of the small-scale meta-analysis.

	k	*r*	95% CI	*Q*	I^2	τ^2	τ
Overall	10	−.215	[−.237, −.191]	25.69	65.0%	.006	.076
Results for subgroups							
RF scale = GRFM	5	−.220	[−.245, −.193]	4.04	1.1%	< .001	< .001
RF scale = RFSS	2	−.219	[−.292, −.143]	2.24	55.3%	.004	.065
RF scale = RFQ	1	−.033	[−.139, .074]	0.00	–	–	–
RF scale = CRFM	2	−.282	[−.363, −.197]	5.25	80.9%	.020	.140
Decomposing the CRFM							
GRFM	6	−.225	[−.250, −.199]	7.34	31.9%	.001	.029
RFSS	2	−.219	[−.292, −.143]	2.24	55.3%	.004	.065
RFQ	3	.048	[−.020, .116]	3.97	49.7%	.004	.059

Notes: *k* = number of studies. GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure, RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale, RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire, CRFM = Composite Regulatory Focus Measure. τ^2 is estimated with the Paule-Mandel method.

followed by the GRFM and the RFSS. It was much smaller and in fact non-significant when using the RFQ.

To better understand the role of the conceptualisation of regulatory focus underlying the scales, we ran further tests decomposing the composite CRFM score in two indicators: on the one hand, items derived from the GRFM and pertaining to the reference-point definition, and on the other hand items derived from the RFQ and pertaining to the self-guide definition. These analyses confirmed that the subsets of items produced similar results as the original scale from which they had been extracted. In other words, the subset of GRFM items produced similar results as the complete GRFM scale, and the subset of RFQ items produced similar results as the complete RFQ scale (see bottom half of Table 3 and ESM3). This strengthens the possibility that the difference in effect sizes between scales is related to the theoretical conceptualisation of regulatory focus they tap into.

Promotion focus and generalised trust

The second analysis revealed a significant *positive* meta-correlation between promotion focus and generalised trust, $r = .108$, 95% CI [.083, .131], z-test = 8.73, $p < .001$ (Figure 2). This corresponds to a small effect for social psychology research (Lovakov & Agadullina, 2021). There was significant heterogeneity between studies, $Q(9) = 19.33$, $p = .023$, $I^2 = 53.5\%$, 95% CI [4.8, 77.2]. As before, at least some of this heterogeneity was imputable to the regulatory focus scale utilised (Table 4): heterogeneity between scales was significant, $Q(3) = 17.08$, $p < .001$, while heterogeneity within scales was not, $Q(6) = 2.25$, $p = .90$. The correlation between promotion and generalised trust was stronger when using the RFQ, followed by the CRFM, and the GRFM. It was non-significant when using the RFSS.

We also ran further tests decomposing the composite CRFM score in two indicators (GRFM/RFQ). These analyses confirmed that the subsets of items produced similar results as the original scale from which they had been extracted (see bottom half of Table 4 and ESM3).

Meta-analysis of the coefficients of determination (R^2)

In a final step, we turned to coefficients of determination to assess how much variance of generalised trust was explained by the model considering promotion and prevention scores as multiple predictors. Following Viechtbauer (2010)'s recommendations and

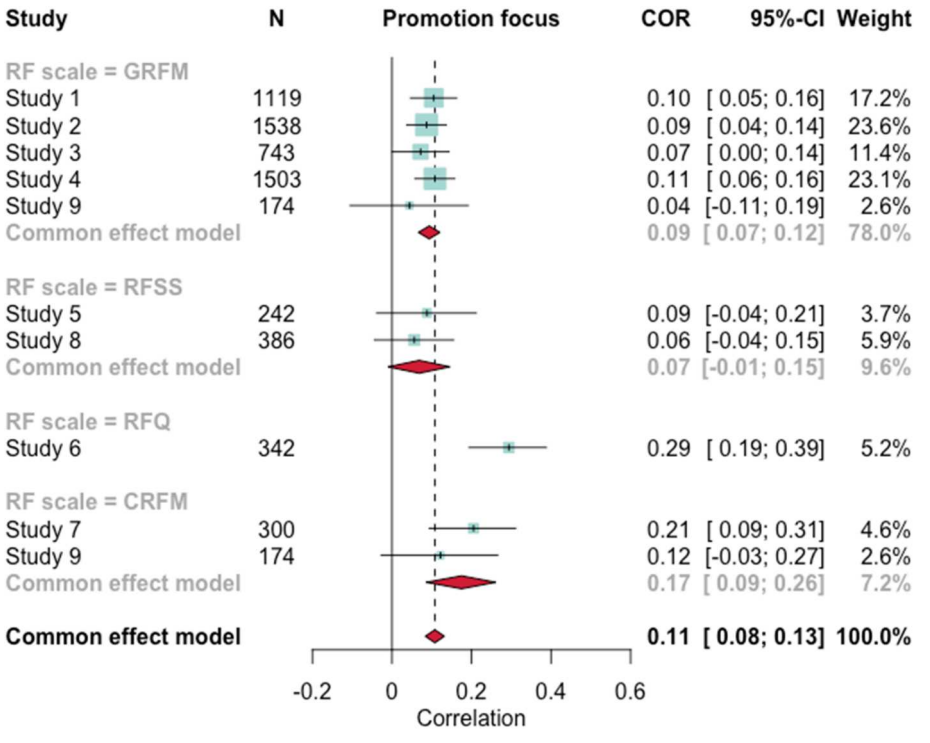

Figure 2. Promotion focus and generalised trust: forest plot.

Notes: Individual study effects are reported in mint colour (black line = 95% CI) and common effects (for each regulatory focus scale and overall) are reported in red (stretching of the diamond shape = 95% CI). The size of each mint-colour square represents the weight given to the study for the total effect size calculation, based on sample size.

relying on the *metafor* package, we extracted the adjusted R^2 from each study. In individual studies, R^2_{adj} ranged from 0.023 (Study 5) to 0.129 (Study 7). We then relied on the *escalc* function to apply a variance-stabilising transformation and conducted the meta-analysis on this *z*-transformed indicator. This yielded a meta z-transformed coefficient of determination of 0.246, 95% CI [.221, .270]. Reverse-transforming this to normal R^2_{adj} indicated that across studies, promotion and prevention together explains 6% of variance of generalised trust (meta-R^2_{adj} = .058, 95% CI [.047, .069]).

Table 4. Promotion focus and generalised trust: results of the small-scale meta-analysis.

	k	*r*	95% CI	*Q*	I^2	τ^2	τ
Overall	10	.108	[.083, .131]	19.33	53.5%	.003	.056
Results for subgroups							
RF scale = GRFM	5	.094	[.066, .120]	1.31	0.0%	< .001	< .001
RF scale = RFSS	2	.068	[−.010, .146]	0.15	0.0%	< .001	< .001
RF scale = RFQ	1	.294	[.194, .388]	0.00	–	–	–
RF scale = CRFM	2	.175	[.086, .261]	0.79	0.0%	< .001	< .001
Decomposing the CRFM							
GRFM	6	.096	[.069, .122]	1.96	0.0%	< .001	< .001
RFSS	2	.068	[−.010, .146]	0.15	0.0%	< .001	< .001
RFQ	3	.262	[.196, .324]	0.81	0.0%	< .001	< .001

Notes: *k* = number of studies. GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure, RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale, RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire, CRFM = Composite Regulatory Focus Measure. τ^2 is estimated with the Paule-Mandel method.

Discussion

Study 1 provided consistent evidence for the relationship between generalised trust and prevention/promotion focus. It also highlighted important differences between the theoretical conceptualisations of regulatory focus. However, the findings' reliability is confined to its reliance on self-reported measures of generalised trust. Indeed, one may argue that part of the observed relationships could be due to a mere semantic and connotative overlap between measures of regulatory focus and trust. To address this limitation, we conducted a second study where we relied on a trust game to directly measure trusting (or cooperative) behaviour.

Study 2: Assessing trusting behaviour

Study 2 aimed to conceptually replicate the findings from the small-scale meta-analysis with a direct measure of trusting behaviour in a trust game. Cooperation in a trust game, especially single-shot and with no possibility to communicate, reflects willingness to trust a stranger because of positive expectations of reciprocate cooperation, and is therefore commonly considered as an expression of generalised trust (see Thielmann et al., 2020). Previous work has also demonstrated the connection between trust game decisions and attitudinal measures of trust (e.g. Houser et al., 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2006). Replicating our findings on a behavioural measure of generalised trust would expand and strengthen the results that initially emerged from self-reported measures. The study design, hypotheses, materials, sample size, and rules for exclusion, were preregistered: https://aspredicted.org/s5r4-6x6m.pdf. Code for analysis is available in ESM4: https://osf.io/qeyjd/.

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants were recruited on the crowdsourcing platform Prolific to complete an online study. Criteria for inclusion were to currently reside in the UK and to speak English as a first language. We estimated the smaller effect size of interest as $r = |.11|$ (equivalent: Odds Ratio = 1.49). An a priori power analysis recommended a minimum of 468 participants to detect such an effect in a logistic regression with .80 power (see pre-registration). We rounded this up to 480. Participants who failed two attention checks embedded in the study were automatically routed out of the questionnaire and their slot reopened to new participants. Four hundred eighty-seven participants completed the questionnaire, including eight who failed the attention checks and were excluded from analysis. The final sample was therefore $N = 479$, including 237 men, 241 women, and one non-binary/other, with a mean age of 43.61 ($SD = 13.89$).

Participants first completed three regulatory focus scales in a randomised order. They were then introduced to the trust game, for which they believed they were paired with another Prolific participant. They played the single-shot trust game as the 'trustor' (see below) and we measured the amount of money, if any, they chose to entrust to their

partner. They finally filled a brief measure of generalised trust, before being fully debriefed and remunerated.

Materials

Regulatory focus measures. To corroborate the comparative findings from Study 1, we included the three major measures of regulatory focus: GRFM (Lockwood et al., 2002), RFQ (Higgins et al., 2001), and RFSS (Ouschan et al., 2007). Given that Haws et al.'s composite scale (CRFM, 2010) yielded results that were comparable to the aggregate of the GRFM and RFQ in Study 1, we did not include it in Study 2. All instruments utilised a 7-point Likert scale. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 5.

Trust game. The trust game is a two-person game including a trustor (Player 1) and a trustee (Player 2), although one of these roles can be played by the computer, unbeknown to the real participant. Both players start the game with a fixed endowment (here: £4). Player 1 then has the possibility to send part of their endowment (from £0 to £4 in 0.25 increments) to Player 2, in which case this amount is tripled. Player 2 then decides whether to send back half of the amount to Player 1 or to keep it for themselves. The first decision by Player 1 is therefore a trusting one, because of the risk of being betrayed by Player 2 (for further discussion of economic games, see e.g. Thielmann et al., 2021).

We used a low-stake variant of the game where participants do not commit real money in the game but have the opportunity to win the final amount if selected in a lottery. This procedure ensures that participants take the game seriously (Lount et al., 2008). A recent meta-analysis also found that psychological dynamics were similar in hypothetical and incentivised economic games, suggesting that high-stake games are not necessary (Thielmann et al., 2020). In this study, we randomly selected five participants to receive the amount won in the game as a 'bonus' paid via Prolific.

Participants read detailed instructions and completed comprehension checks before starting the game. They were always assigned the role of the trustor ('Player 1'), although this assignment was presented as random to them. Participants were then allegedly paired with another participant who would be the trustee ('Player 2') and learned that both players were making their decision simultaneously. We recorded whether participants decided to send any amount at all (coded 1) or not (coded 0) as a measure of **Cooperation**, and how much they sent (from £0–4, in possible increments of £0.25, hereafter **Amount sent**; see Table 5). This 'single shot' version of the trust game with increments is most often used in the literature (see Johnson & Mislin, 2011; van den Akker et al., 2020).

Self-reported generalised trust. Participants completed the three-item measure of generalised trust derived from the ESS on a 7-point scale (e.g. 'Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?'). This served as a pre-registered replication of the findings documented in Study 1's small-scale meta-analysis.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the measures from Study 2.

#	Measures	Descriptive statistics		Pearson's correlations							
		α	*M* (*SD*)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	GRFM Prev	.76	4.27 (0.98)	−.11*	.37***	.06	−.39***	−.02	.04	−.03	−.32***
2	RFQ Prev	.80	4.27 (1.13)		.07	−.01	.09*	−.08	−.02	.04	.06
3	RFSS Prev	.83	4.55 (0.91)			.04	−.09	−.02	−.06	−.13**	−.27***
4	GRFM Prom	.88	4.89 (1.02)				.44***	.47***	.05	.13**	.05
5	RFQ Prom	.69	4.50 (0.89)					.21***	.06	.12*	.25***
6	RFSS Prom	.77	4.73 (0.80)						.08	.12**	.04
7	Cooperation (N/Y)	–	*n* = 48/431							.60***	.24***
8	Amount sent (£)	–	2.30 (1.29)								.34***
9	Generalised trust	.82	4.09 (1.35)								

Notes: GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure. RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale. Prev = Prevention, Prom = Promotion. The GRFM, RFQ, RFSS, and generalised trust are measured on 7-point Likert scale. Amount sent in the trust game ranges £0–4.

*$p < .05$.

**$p < .01$.

***$p < .001$.

Results

Analysis strategy

For each outcome and as preregistered, we conducted three analyses, each using one scale of regulatory focus (with promotion and prevention scores as multiple predictors). Results are summarised in Figure 3. Each analysis was adapted to the nature of the outcome (i.e. linear models for self-reported generalised trust and amount sent in the game, logistic regression model for the dichotomous measure of cooperation).

Self-reported generalised trust

We first analysed self-reported generalised trust, in direct replication of Study 1 (see Table 6). Results of multiple linear regression models, including promotion and prevention scores as predictors (one analysis per scale of regulatory focus), were consistent with the small-scale meta-analysis: prevention focus was negatively related to generalised trust when assessed with the GRFM, $r = -.32$, $p < .001$, or the RFSS, $r = -.27$, $p < .001$. In line with the meta-analysis findings, the effect of RFQ-prevention was not significant, $r = .04$, $p = .39$. Promotion focus, on the other hand, was positively related to generalised trust, although links were globally less strong. Specifically, RFQ-promotion yielded a strong link, as expected, $r = .24$, $p < .001$. RFSS-promotion yielded no significant result, consistent with the meta-analysis findings, $r = .03$, $p = .47$. GRFM-promotion was not significantly related to trust, but the effect size ($r = .08$, $p = .10$) was consistent with that observed in the meta-analysis (meta-$r = .11$). Therefore, five out of six tests yielded results similar to Study 1 and the sixth one was consistent in terms of effect size even though it did not meet the threshold for significance.

Behaviour in the trust game

Cooperation. We then turned to cooperative behaviour in the trust game. Most participants (431 or 90.0%) decided to cooperate in the trust game, passing at least some of

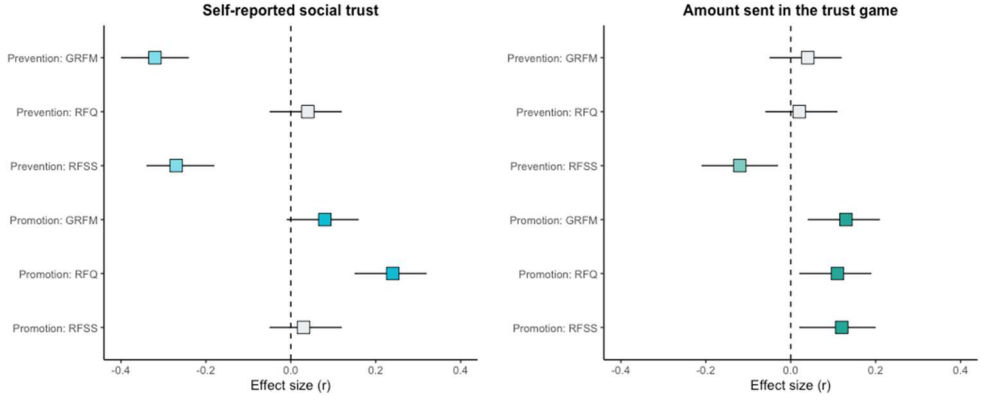

Figure 3. Study 2: effects of promotion and prevention focus on self-reported generalised trust and amount sent in the trust game (trusting behaviour).

Notes: GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure. RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale. Effect sizes are reported as partial correlation coefficients *r*. Black lines show the 95% confident intervals. Effects marked as grey box are non-significant at $p > .10$.

Table 6. Study 2: effect of promotion and prevention focus on generalised trust.

Models	*b* (*SE*)	*t*-test	*p*-value	Effect size: *r*, 95% CI
Analysis 1: GRFM				
Intercept	5.54 (.37)	14.88	< .001	–
Prevention	−0.45 (.06)	−7.48	< .001	−.32 [−.40, −.24]
Promotion	0.09 (.06)	1.63	.104	.08 [−.01, .16]
Analysis 2: RFSS				
Intercept	5.63 (.47)	12.06	< .001	–
Prevention	−0.39 (.07)	−6.03	< .001	−.27 [−.34, −.18]
Promotion	0.05 (.07)	0.72	.47	.03 [−.05, .12]
Analysis 3: RFQ				
Intercept	2.25 (.37)	6.12	< .001	–
Prevention	0.05 (.05)	0.86	.39	.04 [−.05, .12]
Promotion	0.37 (.07)	5.42	< .001	.24 [.15, .32]

Note: GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure. RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale.

their endowment to the other player. This led to low sensitivity of the dichotomous decision to collaborate or not. As a result, none of the logistic regression analyses could yield any significant results, $z_s < 1.63$, $p_s > .10$. Results are reported in ESM5.

Amount sent. The next analysis focused on the amount sent by participants (see Table 7). The variable was not normally distributed (Kurtosis = 2.08), with many participants deciding to send the maximum amount of £4. To better handle the variable, we therefore relied on robust linear regression analyses (M-estimate). One can note that analyses relying on the least squares (LS) method yielded almost identical results.

Promotion focus was consistently related to greater cooperation behaviour, irrespective of the scale being considered (GRFM: $r = .13$, $p = .004$; RFSS: $r = .12$, $p = .012$; RFQ: $r = .11$, $p = .015$). Prevention focus yielded less consistent results: only RFSS-Prevention was related to cooperation behaviour, in a negative direction, $r = -.12$, $p = .007$. RFQ-Prevention showed no significant link, which was expected based on the meta-analysis, $r = .02$, $p = .60$. However, the effect of GRFM-Prevention was also non-significant, $r = .04$, $p = .39$. Therefore, on this behavioural measure of trust, four out of six tests yielded results similar to that of generalised trust in Study 1; one was unexpectedly significant and one was unexpectedly nonsignificant.

Table 7. Study 2: effect of promotion and prevention focus on amount sent in the trust game (trusting behaviour).

Models	*b* (*SE*)	*t*-test	*p*-value	Effect size: *r*, 95% CI
Analysis 1: GRFM				
Intercept	1.69 (.39)	4.38	< .001	–
Prevention	−0.05 (.06)	−0.85	.39	.04 [−.05, .12]
Promotion	0.17 (.06)	2.87	.004	.13 [.04, .21]
Analysis 2: RFSS				
Intercept	2.21 (.47)	4.66	< .001	–
Prevention	−0.18 (.07)	−2.69	.007	−.12 [−.21, −.03]
Promotion	0.19 (.08)	2.53	.012	.12 [.02, .20]
Analysis 3: RFQ				
Intercept	1.43 (.37)	3.84	< .001	–
Prevention	0.03 (.05)	0.53	.60	.02 [−.06, .11]
Promotion	0.17 (.07)	2.45	.015	.11 [.02, .19]

Note: GRFM = General Regulatory Focus Measure. RFQ = Regulatory Focus Questionnaire. RFSS = Regulatory Focus Strategies Scale.

General discussion

The present paper advances our understanding of the relationship between generalised trust and motivational orientation, operationalised here through regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997). We report data from two studies: one secondary analysis of nine individual studies collated using a small-scale meta-analysis approach, and one preregistered experiment investigating self-reported generalised trust and trusting (cooperative) behaviour in a trust game. Overall, our analyses suggest that *prevention focus* is related to *lower* generalised trust and trusting behaviour, whereas *promotion focus* is related to *higher* generalised trust and trusting behaviour. The relationship between generalised trust and prevention focus was stronger than that with promotion focus, which might be explained by prevention focus being associated with a stronger attention to social cues (Florack & Scarabis, 2006; Lalot et al., 2019). Both effects were independent and appeared when the foci were considered as multiple predictors in the same regression analysis. The secondary data meta-analysis indicated that promotion and prevention scores together explained 6% of variance of generalised trust. Therefore, we can conclude with some confidence that chronic regulatory focus is associated with generalised trust.

Theoretical and practical implications

Regulatory focus is a broad framework that addresses differences in people's prioritisation of needs, goals, strategies, and emotional responses (see Vriend et al., 2023). The properties of different measures of regulatory focus have been discussed in the motivation literature because different operationalisations of the same constructs are sometimes only weakly correlated with one another (Ouschan et al., 2007; Summerville & Roese, 2008; Vriend et al., 2023). In the present research regulatory focus was measured with different instruments across studies, enabling us to explore how specific assessments of regulatory orientations (at the methodological level) and specific conceptual underpinnings (at the theoretical level) relate to generalised trust.

The present evidence reveals that some facets of the promotion and prevention focus constructs (i.e. goals, strategies, outcomes, etc.) are more important than others in the relationship with generalised trust. This is reflected in the significant heterogeneity of findings associated with the four scales in the meta-analysis. Importantly, however, the analysis revealed a distinct set of interrelationships consistent with conceptual accounts that differentiate the self-guide definition from the reference-point definition in self-regulation. This has both theoretical and methodological implications for motivation psychology research.

Methodologically, the evidence highlights that researchers should consider the underlying conceptualisation and facets of regulatory focus carefully in relation to the chosen measurement method because its linkage with other variables may depend heavily on the facets underpinning the experimental manipulation or the particular scale used to measure regulatory focus. In this context, conceptual replications that employ different tools to ensure the overall validity of the findings (or define boundary conditions) become crucial.

Theoretically, the present evidence reinforces the conceptualisation of promotion and prevention focus not as a unidimensional construct but as a multifaceted conception of

goal orientation (Chen & Bei, 2017; Summerville & Roese, 2008; Vriend et al., 2023). Some facets may be more relevant than others depending on the research question being investigated. More clarity about which facets are central to particular research questions is needed so that the field can establish greater specificity in its predictions and conclusions.

Prevention focus

We found that the link between prevention focus and (lower) generalised trust was stronger with the GRFM, whose items tap into 'preventing negative events', 'preventing bad things from happening', and 'fulfilling responsibilities and obligations' (Lockwood et al., 2002), and with the RFSS, which assesses more narrowly 'being cautious', 'avoiding failure', and 'anticipating obstacles'. It was nonsignificant with the RFQ, which mostly measures '(not) getting in trouble', 'respecting rules and regulations', and 'crossing the line when growing up'. This pattern of findings was similar for trusting behaviour, although the GRFM did not yield a significant result. Therefore, it seems that the elements underlying the negative relationship between prevention focus and trust are the cautious approach to life and effort to prevent and avoid negative events. Theoretically, this is consistent with a view of (dis)trust as (refusing versus) accepting vulnerability in relationship to others. It also resonates with other work that considered the link between social risk-seeing, a specific subtype of risk propensity, and trust behaviour (Wang et al., 2017). In fact, there is much similarity at the semantic level between social risk-seeking and the goal component of promotion/prevention focus (e.g. 'Choosing a career that you truly enjoy over a more secure one') – although it is worth stating again that regulatory focus is a broader construct than just risk seeking.

The nonsignificant relationship with the RFQ may be explained by at least two aspects. First, this scale – and the prevention subscale most apparently – has a strong focus on early life and relationship to one's parents. It is possible that these aspects are not related to generalised trust as it developed and expressed itself in our (adult) respondents. Second, the concern for 'respecting rules and regulations' may be differentially related to generalised trust.

Indeed, some findings suggest that generalised trust is positively influenced by social norms and shared representations that others expect us (not) to trust. For example, Dunning et al. (2014) showed that the more participants thought they 'should trust', the more they cooperated in a trust game. They also felt more agitation (a typical prevention-related emotion) when thinking about *not* trusting. Given that prevention is related with greater sensitivity to reputational cues (Keller & Pfattheicher, 2011; Pfattheicher, 2015) and norm violation (Pfattheicher & Keller, 2013), as well as greater conformity (Keller & Kesberg, 2017), prevention focus as measured solely through the rule-respecting lens may actually translate into greater trust – at least in some specific others, depending on the contextual social norm. This possibility opens intriguing new lines of research.

Promotion focus

In contrast to findings for prevention focus, the link between promotion focus and generalised trust was stronger with the RFQ. RFQ-promotion items do not dwell as much on parental relationships (compared to RFQ-prevention items), but instead emphasise

'getting what I want', 'performing well', and 'getting psyched' at pursuing many 'hobbies and interests'. This encapsulation of promotion as a state of elation and frequent success may also encompass greater self-efficacy and greater self-esteem, which are correlates of promotion focus (Lanaj et al., 2012; Leonardelli et al., 2007), and also facilitate trust (McCarthy et al., 2017).

The GRFM yielded a smaller albeit significant relationship; its items pertain to 'achieving positive outcomes', 'obtaining good things / success', and 'fulfilling hopes and wishes'. While the focus on positive things that could happen may underpin the positive correlation to trust, it is possible that these items tap too much into a personal goal approach (e.g. personal success) that would be less strongly connected to interpersonal aspects. The same logic may apply to the RFSS (items assessing 'taking risks' for 'achieving success' and being 'optimistic') which might be even more oriented towards personal and not *inter*personal aspects, theoretically explaining the non-significant relationship observed. When it comes to trusting behaviour however (Study 2), all instruments yielded significant and similar effects, suggesting that the nuances between scales are more relevant for trusting attitudes than trusting behaviour.

Limitations

Along with the strengths of Study 1's small-scale meta-analysis approach (which include a broader perspective on synthesised results, clarification of the magnitude and consistency of effects across studies, and identification of overarching trends and moderators), there are also limitations. The number of studies available for inclusion limits the generalisability of the meta-analytic findings. These might also be subject to some temporal or contextual biases. It will be important for future search to explore more diverse contexts and samples and further approaches to measurement.

The present research considered *generalised* trust, that is, the general tendency to trust other people. Study 2 relied on a trust game and showed a pattern of results that was globally consistent with that of self-reported generalised trust. Nonetheless, trusting behaviour is not the mere projection of generalised trust in an applied context and other factors come in play that influence people's behaviour (e.g. social norms and expectations; Dunning et al., 2014). Notably, it is not entirely clear what respondents have in mind when they evaluate 'other people' in the generalised trust measure. Some evidence suggests that 'most people' predominantly connotes out-groups (Delhey et al., 2011), which might not be the case when people imagine their anonymous co-player in a trust game. Future work will need to compare generalised trust to more specific forms of it (e.g. in specific individuals).

Future directions and conclusions

This secondary analysis of correlational data and one experiment utilising a trust game reveal that prevention focus (and more specifically the motivation to prevent bad things from happening) is related to lower generalised trust and lower trusting behaviour, while promotion focus (and more specifically the sense of elation at achieving positive outcomes and seeing that things go well) is related to higher generalised trust and trusting behaviour.

It remains to be seen whether regulatory focus and generalised trust influence each other reciprocally, or causally only in one direction. Both are conceptualised as relatively stable tendencies that are shaped by early life interactions: on the one hand, chronic regulatory focus arises from caretaker-child interactions and the caretaker's explicit and implicit communications about desired end states and important needs (Manian et al., 1998, 2006). Regulatory focus can be contextually activated, but one's *chronic* regulatory focus is not expected to vary through time. On the other hand, generalised trust, although remaining globally stable in adulthood (Jennings & Stoker, 2004), can be subject to lasting changes when the person's social context evolves (e.g. new work context, van der Werff, Freeney, et al., 2019; or moving abroad, Uslaner, 2008). It also fluctuates on a momentary basis, following one's most recent positive or negative interactions (Baer et al., 2018). At this stage, and consistent with Keller et al. (2015), we therefore cautiously suggest that regulatory focus (chronic or situationally manipulated) may influence generalised trust. Future experiments, manipulating one or the other construct, will be helpful to further illuminate the matter.

Future research may expand the present evidence by examining interpersonal trust, that is, trust in specific others. Different from generalised trust (that is, in strangers), interpersonal trust builds on repeated interactions during which information may be gathered about the trustworthiness of the person (Mayer et al., 1995). Here we provide evidence that regulatory focus influences general trust ('at zero acquaintance') but it will be interesting for future research to assess whether this effect disappears when people get a chance to learn more about the trustee (see Vaughn et al., 2010) or whether it persists, thus contributing to the ongoing effort to better understanding motivation(s) to trust (van der Werff, Legood et al., 2019).

Studying dynamics of losing and restoring trust in the aftermath of a betrayal (Lewicki & Brinsfield, 2017) depending on one's regulatory focus will also be intriguing. Molden and Finkel (2010) showed that forgiveness was more driven by trust in promotion focus and by commitment in prevention focus. In the same vein, studies might want to investigate how well trust can be rebuilt depending on the focus. Similarly, it might be helpful to consider not just trust but also distrust. While distrust was long considered the simple opposite of trust, this view is being reconsidered (see Sitkin & Bijlsma-Frankema, 2018). Some argue that trust and distrust should be conceptualised as distinct, albeit related, constructs with a functional asymmetry (e.g. different patterns of emotional response, different behavioural tendencies; Bertsou, 2019; Six & Latusek, 2023). This resonates with the conceptualisation of promotion and prevention as independent motivations. As such, it is possible that the foci are differentially related to trust and distrust: for example, prevention might be related to low trust but not necessarily to high distrust. This would be consistent with the idea that people with a prevention goal are satisfied with non-loss ('0') situations as long as they avoid a loss ('−1'; Zou et al., 2020).

In sum, the present findings expand the theoretical boundaries of regulatory focus theory and underscore its implications for understanding and enhancing social dynamics involving generalised trust. They open innovative lines of research into the individual motivational processes that bear on trust in interpersonal and intergroup relationships and cooperation.

Note

1. Let us note that a few other articles touch on the topic of regulatory focus and trust but do *not* hypothesise nor test for relationships between the constructs. Instead, they have for example investigated incidental regulatory *fit* as a feel-right heuristic increasing trust in an acquaintance (Vaughn et al., 2010), or differential reliance on trust versus commitment in forgiveness decisions (Molden & Finkel, 2010), or relationships between regulatory focus and *feeling* trusted by – but not trusting – one's supervisor (Song et al., 2020).

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Notes on contributors

Fanny Lalot is a SNSF-funded senior researcher at the University of Basel. Her current research focuses on dynamics of political and interpersonal trust.

Rainer Greifeneder heads the Centre for Social Psychology at the University of Basel. His research focuses on how individuals make sense of the world they live in.

Dominic Abrams is the Director of the Centre for the Study of Group Processes in the School of Psychology at the University of Kent. His research examines all aspects of relations between different social groups and the behaviour of groups in general.

Data availability statement

Data, code for analysis, codebooks, and all materials are publicly available on the OSF: https://osf.io/qeyjd/.

ORCID

Fanny Lalot http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1237-5585
Rainer Greifeneder http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0725-5626
Dominic Abrams http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2113-4572

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