

Article

Examining the Interaction between Perceived Cultural Tightness and Prevention Regulatory Focus on Life Satisfaction in Italy

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Abstract: This study aimed to investigate how some specific cultural and personal factors can influence people’s life satisfaction. By embracing an interactionist perspective, we hypothesized that perceiving one’s social environment as culturally tight (greater strength of social norms) can “match” with regulatory prevention focus (focus on safety following guidelines and rules) resulting in increased life satisfaction. This study relied on a cross-sectional design with 472 participants residing in Italy who filled out a questionnaire with self-report measures of perceived cultural tightness of their place of residence, and well-validated measurement scales of prevention focus and life satisfaction. A moderated multiple regression model revealed that regulatory prevention focus moderated the relationship between perceived cultural tightness and life satisfaction in such a way that the relationship was positive in high (vs. low) prevention focus. Therefore, results confirmed our match hypothesis that individuals’ perception of tight social norms where they reside is associated with higher life satisfaction, particularly in those who are highly focused on prevention. These findings provide insight into identifying possible interactions of perceived culture and regulatory focus on subjective well-being within an Italian sample.

Keywords: sustainable development goals; health and wellbeing; individual and interdependent wellbeing; resilient communities



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1. Introduction

Promoting well-being in the population is one of the sustainable development goals (SDGs 3) set by the UN 2030 agenda [1]. Nonetheless, global challenges require governments, policy makers and researchers to address multiple dimensions and implications for health and wellbeing, including the psychological dimension [2–5]. Sustainable development goals need to account for cultural assets and their changes [6]. On the other hand, individuals can have characteristics that can be more or less adaptive relative to their places of residence [5,7]. For instance, cultural psychology informs us that societies often need to keep a tight system of rules and punishments because this is effective for surviving threatening events [8–11]. In turn, this may (or not) serve people’s optimal functioning and well-being [12]. Accordingly, some theorists [13,14] argue that cultural restrictiveness should produce poor well-being and high stress. However, we propose that cultural restrictiveness can “match” [15,16] a regulatory focus on prevention and attention to duty [17,18] even being positively associated well-being. Hence, within the *social cognition* arena, we aimed to explore how the interplay between perceived cultural tightness and prevention regulatory focus may contribute to people’s self-evaluation of their quality of life (i.e., the cognitive component of well-being) [19] in Italy.

As regards the specific context of our study, Italy was not found to be a tight culture in previous works [9]. However, people's perceived levels of cultural tightness can vary in different areas of a country [8]. A culturally tight environment (as opposed to loose one) is generally characterized by well-defined social norms, univocal behavioral expectations (i.e., little room for individual interpretation and reduced possibility of error), many constraints and a strong punishment system for offenders [8,20], overestimated compliance (duties) and strong attention to prevention/safety [21]. Furthermore, in culturally tight societies, there is a widespread motivational focus on avoiding potential losses, with an emphasis on duties, responsibilities, and preference for vigilant/avoidant strategies (i.e., prevention regulatory focus), [17,22]. A representative phenomenon of prevention motivational focus is Singapore's *Kiasu*—not losing, or at least reducing failure, rather than winning or succeeding [21].

Our rationale is based on the following considerations. First, we rely on the Higgins [23,24] notion of “regulatory fit,” or the pleasurable congruence between the means for the pursuit of a goal and one's own regulatory style. When actors use means consistent with their regulatory focus in the pursuit of a goal, they feel “right” about what they are doing, resulting in more engagement in the goal-pursuit activity [23,24]. Regulatory fit can be both an intrapersonal and interpersonal [16,25] motivational experience. In this vein, if individuals share personal characteristics with others in a context, they should have greater social validation of “the way they are”; this is also consistent with the concept of shared reality [16,26]. Therefore, we suggest that the greater-felt accountability and normative self-guides (i.e., caution and dutifulness) in tight environments (vs. loose) [9] could make prevention regulatory focus more “socially validated” due to its intrinsic characteristics, compared to other regulatory variables [18]. The social validation of one's regulatory focus should then promote development of positive feelings, according to the literature on the interaction between person and context [16]. Consistent with this point, research has confirmed that the fit between personal and contextual factors influences emotions [27] and individual adjustment [15]. Based on these interactive effects, we hypothesize that people's satisfaction is positively associated with the interaction between the perception that compliance with the rules is fundamental in one's cultural context and a regulatory focus on abiding rules and duties. Thus, we propose that having a high preventive focus in environments perceived as tight would be positively associated with satisfaction with life. Below, we explain in detail our theoretical background.

1.1. Tightness–Looseness

The cultural “tightness–looseness” theory [20,21] explains the wide cultural variation in world societies in the strength of social norms and tolerance for deviance. Following theory and empirical investigations [9,21], tighter cultures, such as Singapore, China, and South Korea, have stricter norms and punishments for deviance; looser cultures, such as Brazil, Spain, and the United States, have weaker norms and are more permissive [9,21].

As social norms can change over time and across different groups, it was noted that tightness–looseness variation often relates to a history of social and ecological threats [9,10]; tight nations, compared to loose ones, have historically had many natural threats, such as disasters, famines and pathogen outbreaks, or non-natural threats, such as invasions or wars. From an adaptive point of view [28], collective threats lead to a tightening of norms, which helps people and governments coordinate to survive chaos and crisis. Consequently, tight cultures have historically developed stronger senses of order, coordination, and self-control; on the other hand, they have less openness (i.e., tolerance and creativity) than loose nations [8]. At a national level, there would be a curvilinear relationship of well-being with both freedom and constraint, such that, compared to moderate nations, very tight and very loose nations show poorer national well-being [29]. On the other hand, a perceived tight culture in small workgroups was found to promote positive outcomes of organizational well-being, probably due to the greater possibility of predicting expected behaviors [30]. At the individual level, members of tight cultures exhibit greater impulse

control, as well as a need for structure and self-monitoring, somewhat mirroring the greater amount of social regulation that exists at the national level [9]. Of particular interest to our interaction hypothesis, in tight societies, individuals show higher-felt accountability, chronic accessibility of normative duty self-guides (i.e., what a person believes is his or her responsibility, based on the prescriptions of the generalized society) and a prevention focus [9,21].

1.2. Prevention Regulatory Focus

In regulatory focus theory, Higgins [17] extended the basic pleasure principle, whereby people strive for pleasure and try to avoid pain, distinguishing two regulatory foci, or different ways of regulating pleasure and pain: promotion focus (accomplishments and aspirations) and prevention focus (safety and responsibilities) [17,22,31]. According to the theory, prevention focus pushes individuals to approach non-loss, resulting in a general sensitivity to the presence or absence of negative outcomes and to the maintenance of a satisfactory status quo “0” against a worse state “−1.” In this vein, individuals with a prevention focus generally adopt vigilant, risk-averse avoidance-oriented strategies aimed at precluding a negative end state [17,22,31]. Furthermore, according to the idea that individuals have diverse self-guides [32]—functioning both as goals they are motivated to move towards, and as a standard against which to compare their current focus—self-prevention is constantly concerned in aligning their current self with their “duty self”, represented by their own or others’ beliefs about their duties or obligations [17,32]. Such a concern on safety and responsibility means that, for example, individuals with a prevention focus adhere more to workplace rules [33] or prefer leadership styles that provide clear rules on how to act to gain rewards and avoid punishment [34]. The effects of prevention focus on well-being are quite mixed [35,36]. Nevertheless, Higgins [23,24] has proposed that individuals’ “feeling right” increases when they are allowed to pursue a goal using a means that matches their regulatory focus. This regulatory “fit” should act to increase the positive feelings people have in relation to events, engagement with the activity, and a feeling of “rightness” about what one is doing [23,24]. Research has also extended this notion into broader contexts, as we will see.

1.3. Satisfaction with Life

Past research has focused on finding a consensus definition of subjective well-being [19]. In this respect, scholars agree in defining subjective well-being as a multi-dimensional construct which comprehends three components [37,38]. The first two components, i.e., positive and negative affective states, referred to the subjective well-being’s affective dimension [38–40]. The latter component, called satisfaction with life [19], is defined as a cognitive, judgmental process. Within this theoretical framework, judgments on satisfaction with life considered the individuals’ satisfaction with respect to life as a whole and is a function of a comparison between one’s life situation and what is thought to be an adequate standard. That is, a standard that everyone sets for themselves, which is, thus, individual-related and subjective [41].

1.4. The Present Research

We mentioned earlier that the well-being of individuals can benefit from the interactive effect of culture and individual characteristics [15,16]. The basic mechanism is that people who perceive that their characteristics match the prevailing culture in their environment live in a “shared reality” that socially validates their experiences and reactions to events [16] in a similar way to “feeling right” from regulatory fit [23,24]. This can be because the individuals’ basic need to know that they are “going in the right direction” leads them to consider some characteristics as more deserving or positive if they are shared and verified as “right” by others [26,42]. We have previously described that tight (vs. loose) cultures promote compliance with obligations and minimize the possibility of error. In this vein, individuals who are highly prevention-focused, that is, more cautious (concerned about

avoiding mistakes) and dutiful (focused on appropriate behavior), should experience social validation of their regulatory elements. Relatedly, a prevention focus can represent an adaptive means of pursuing goals related to safety, duties, and risk avoidance [21] in tight environments. Likewise, people with a high (vs. low) prevention focus should feel their experiences congruent to these environments, thus depicting a positive association with satisfaction with life. Drawing from the perspective of social cognition, we verify this predicted interactive effect by testing a moderated multiple regression model in which the prevention regulatory focus moderates the impact of cultural tightness felt in one's environment on life satisfaction (i.e., the cognitive component of well-being) in such a way that the relationship is positive in high (vs. low) prevention focus.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants, Design, and Procedures

A sample of 472 adults (69% females, 31% males; $M_{age} = 38.22$, $SD_{age} = 14.61$) residing in Italy volunteered in the present study with a cross-sectional design. A total of 49.7% of participants resided in northern Italy, 16.7% resided in central Italy, and 33.6% resided in southern Italy. The sample consisted of 28% of students, 61% workers, and 11% who indicated "other". Regarding their education levels, 4.9% had a middle school education or lower, 43.4% had a high school education, 50.5% had a university degree, and 1.3% of participants had a PhD. Participants were recruited through an online procedure. Specifically, they were contacted on social networks (i.e., groups on Facebook and Telegram), and sent a link to the research questionnaire on the platform 'Google Forms'. Given that our hypotheses regarded Italy and Italian communities, in order to participate in the study, participants, at the time of compilation, had to reside in Italy. The study was presented as an investigation of the perception of the degree of regulation within Italian communities. After providing their informed consent, participants filled an online survey comprising socio-demographic information (gender later coded as 0 = male; 1 = female, age, educational level, occupation) and the measures described below (all study materials were presented in Italian).

2.2. Measures

Perceived cultural tightness in the participants' place of residence was measured through nine statements adapted from tightness–looseness measures (e.g., "In my place of residence, there are very clear expectations for how people should act in most situations"; "In my place of residence, if someone breaks the rules, they will be punished") [9,30]; participants indicated their agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A total score was computed by averaging the responses to the items. Internal reliability was adequate (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$).

Prevention regulatory focus was assessed with the Italian version of the Prevention Focus scale from the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (RFQ) [28], designed to measure individual differences in prevention focus (five items, e.g., "Not being careful enough has gotten me into trouble at times", reverse scored). Ratings are obtained on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never or seldom) to 5 (very often). A total score was computed by averaging the responses to the items. The reliability and validity of this instrument was established by prior studies [31,43]. In the present research, internal reliability was adequate (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.74$).

Life satisfaction was assessed with the Italian translation [44] of the Review of the Satisfaction with Life Scale [19,45] composed of five items (e.g., "I am satisfied with my life"; "If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing"). For each statement, participants were required to indicate their degree of agreement on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A total score was computed by averaging the responses to the items. The measure showed good internal consistence (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$).

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed using SPSS (IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, Version 25.0. Armonk, NY, USA: IBM Corp). The reliability of the variables was tested using Cronbach's alpha. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine associations between the study variables. Our moderated multiple regression model was tested using the PROCESS macro (model 1) [46]. Specifically, we evaluated the role of prevention focus as moderator between perceived cultural tightness and life satisfaction, using a mean-centering approach; therefore, perceived cultural tightness and prevention focus variables were mean-centered prior to analysis. The interaction term between the two was based on these centered scores.

In order to identify which effect size we were able to detect given our sample and analysis strategy, we performed a sensitivity analysis. Given our sample of 472 participants, six predictors, the power set to 0.80, and $\alpha = 0.05$, G*Power (V3.0) [46] identified $f^2 = 0.03$ (i.e., small effect size) as the smallest effect size we were able to detect in our research.

3. Results

As can be seen on Table 1, perceived cultural tightness, which was stable across Italy (We performed a univariate ANOVA to test whether the perception of cultural tightness varied across different Italian areas (i.e., northern vs. center vs. southern). The test revealed no significant differences between the above-mentioned areas ($p = 0.08$). Description regarding perceived cultural tightness: Northern Italy ($M = 3.63$; $SD = 0.76$), Center Italy ($M = 3.86$; $SD = 0.70$), Southern Italy ($M = 3.72$; $SD = 0.79$)), was significantly and positively—albeit relatively weakly—correlated with ($r = 0.12$, $p = 0.008$) life satisfaction, such that individuals who perceived that their own culture was tighter were also slightly more satisfied with their own lives. Moreover, prevention regulatory focus was also positively and significantly correlated ($r = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$) with life satisfaction, such that individuals with a prevention focus were also moderately more satisfied with their lives.

Table 1. Bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics.

	1	2	3	M	SD
1. Perceived Cultural Tightness	(0.76)			3.71	0.76
2. Prevention Regulatory Focus	0.07	(0.74)		3.20	0.82
3. Life Satisfaction	0.12 *	0.27 **	(0.85)	4.60	1.15

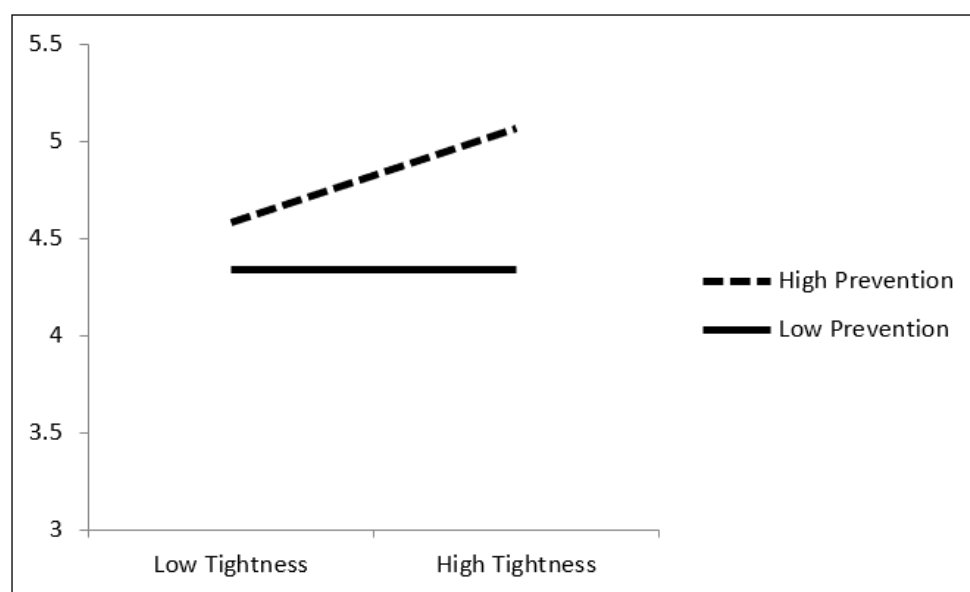
Note. * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.001$; Cronbach's alpha on the diagonal.

We then regressed life satisfaction on the interaction between perceived cultural tightness and prevention regulatory focus; participants' gender, age, and education level were entered as covariates. As can be seen from Table 2 and consistent with our correlational results, there were significant and positive main effects on life satisfaction for both perceived cultural tightness ($b = 0.16$, $se = 0.07$, $t = 2.96$, $p = 0.014$, 95%CI [0.07; 0.33]) and prevention regulatory focus ($b = 0.30$, $se = 0.06$, $t = 4.98$, $p < 0.001$, 95%CI [0.19; 0.44]). More importantly, however, was evidence for a significant interaction between these two variables ($b = 0.20$, $se = 0.08$, $t = 3.55$, $p = 0.017$, 95%CI [0.04; 0.28]). The simple slopes analysis (see Figure 1) revealed that there was a positive and significant effect of perceived cultural tightness among individuals with a high (+1 SD) prevention regulatory focus ($b = 0.32$, $se = 0.09$, $t = 3.18$, $p < 0.001$, 95%CI [0.11; 0.48]). On the other hand, the effect of perceived cultural tightness among individuals with a low (−1 SD) prevention regulatory focus was nearly zero, $p = 0.99$. With respect to covariates, gender ($b = 0.25$, $se = 0.11$, $t = 2.96$, $p = 0.023$, 95%CI [0.02; 0.45]), age ($b = 0.01$, $se = 0.003$, $t = 2.96$, $p = 0.007$, 95%CI [0.001; 0.02]), and educational level ($b = 0.14$, $se = 0.05$, $t = 2.96$, $p = 0.007$, 95%CI [0.03; 0.23]) were positively and significantly associated to the outcome (i.e., satisfaction with life).

Table 2. Life satisfaction regressed on interaction between perceived cultural tightness and prevention regulatory focus.

	b	se	p
Age	0.01	0.003	0.007
Gender	0.25	0.11	0.023
Education	0.14	0.05	0.007
Perceived Cultural Tightness	0.16	0.07	0.014
Prevention Regulatory Focus	0.30	0.06	<0.001
Tightness x Prevention	0.20	0.08	0.017

Note. Gender coded as 0 = male; 1 = female. N = 472. Perceived cultural tightness (ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree); prevention regulatory focus (ranged from 1 (never or seldom) to 5 (very often)).

**Figure 1.** N = 472 Life satisfaction (ranged as 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree) as a function of perceived cultural tightness (ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) and prevention regulatory focus (ranged from 1 = never or seldom to 5 = very often). The axes are represented non-full for a more readable graph.

4. Discussion

In one study, we examined the association between perceived cultural tightness (clear and strict rules and sanctions) on individuals' subjective life satisfaction (i.e., the cognitive component of well-being) at high (vs. low) prevention regulatory focus. Results have shown that perceived cultural tightness was significantly and positively associated with subjective life satisfaction, particularly in high prevention focus. Indeed, the relationship became insignificant in low prevention focus. We relied on the notion of person–culture fit and the interactionist perspective [15,16,27], according to which the interaction between personal and contextual factors can amplify positive outcomes. Our findings, obtained within the Italian context, confirmed that individuals' cognitive subjective well-being was higher when individuals had a high preventive regulatory focus congruent with what is required by a cultural context that is perceived as tight.

As a matter of fact, the data supporting the study were collected during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with the literature, we should consider that the health threat may have tightened community cultures [9,10,47] and/or may have stimulated a prevention focus on safety (for example, avoiding contagion) and fewer health risks-related behaviors [48,49]. Indeed, since threatened societies must strengthen their systems of norms and punishments in order to survive [9,10] as well as individual factors, which must rapidly

adapt to changes [6], the present results may provide some insight into person–culture fit to maintain well-being.

5. Limitations

We should recognize that the present study has some limitations. The first derives from using a cross-sectional design with each of the independent variables (perceived tightness, prevention focus) being measured and not manipulated. Therefore, no causal inferences can be drawn. Future research could address this limitation by implementing true experiments and/or longitudinal designs. Furthermore, since we had self-reported variables, we cannot rule out that common method/source bias inflated our results. However, it should be remembered that it is unlikely that the interaction effect can be attributed to biases [50,51]. Future research should, in any case, profitably test the interaction effect using aggregate perceptions of cultural tightness [9,10,16] at the community level in order to mitigate both the random variance in individual responses and the systematic differences that may have contaminated individual perceptions [52]. This multi-level analysis approach could also further confirm the importance of the individuals' well-being as a pivotal building block of societal well-being. Moreover, as another limitation, we highlight that, as clearly stated, we approached our research question through a socio-cognitive perspective, thus exclusively considering the cognitive component of individual subjective well-being (i.e., satisfaction with life). We recommend future research to complete our findings by also considering the two affective components of subjective well-being (i.e., the positive, and the negative affective component). Accordingly, scholars should be able to determine if there is a dissociation or not between the affective and the cognitive components of subjective well-being. It must also be remembered that the study was conducted with a completely Italian sample; therefore, it would be advisable to replicate the study in other populations. A further shortcoming concerns the socio-demographic variables not measured in the present study (e.g., income, family status, degree of urbanization etc.), which, instead, could help to provide a more precise picture of the results. Future research should address this concern. Overall, this study can provide helpful knowledge about predictive effects of the examined variables on subjective well-being, but we must recognize that the limitations of the study do not allow us to draw any conclusions that are causal and generalizable to the whole population. In fact, we also have to highlight that our sample was collected through an online procedure entailing social media groups, which does not warrant an 'unbiased' sample. Moreover, even though we included education level as a covariate in the analyses, our participants were highly educated, and this should be considered both in the interpretation and generalization of the results.

6. Implications

Despite the above limitations, our interactive effects are aligned with previous findings [15,16,23,24]. There are possible implications of the results that may serve as a starting point for future research. First, a potential predominance of prevention focus and cultural tightness in global communities may also have undesirable consequences, i.e., it could hinder the search for creative solutions needed to contain the threat, or exacerbate resistance to new ideas [8,10,17,53–55]. Conversely, cultural ambidexterity [8] is generally suggested to implement both sets of norms (e.g., tight or loose) when needed and based on threat levels. Another possible development of these findings is the possible role of the promotion regulatory focus [31] in loose contexts. It is, in fact, possible to hypothesize that, as a mirror effect of the results we have obtained, a promotion focus (i.e., a concern for advancement, growth, achievement) [31] could moderate a positive effect on subjective well-being in culturally loose societies. Loose cultures are generally characterized by fewer prevention self-guides [9]; even in times of less uncertainty, when governments can relax the systems of norms and punishments, people's well-being could benefit from a more promotion-oriented regulatory focus [26]. Furthermore, there are moderate societies where the balance

between freedom and constraint seems to favor greater societal well-being [29]; it would be interesting to understand which regulatory features best promote life satisfaction.

In summary, sustainable development goals could be pursued, following a socio-cognitive approach, implementing an in-depth study of the most adaptive regulatory characteristics with respect to the culture of each society. We recommend further exploration in this matter.

7. Conclusions

In a study conducted on a sample of Italian residents, we found a positive interactive effect of perceived tight culture and high prevention focus on life satisfaction. Thus, we confirmed the person–culture fit hypothesis [15,16], which indicates that people’s subjective well-being is higher when individuals’ features converge with those of the culture and the society where they live. Although this result was exploratory, and we strongly suggest testing the same variables at the group level in multilevel designs, it provides us with insight into what regulatory characteristics fit best with cultural contexts perceived as more restrictive and, consequently, potentially stressful [13,14,29]. If our results are to be confirmed through experimental or longitudinal designs at the application level, it would suggest that having and developing a prevention regulatory focus could help individuals to adapt positively when social norms are rigid.

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