Chapter 6
General Discussion
Most of the time people do not self-regulate isolated from the social environment but while being surrounded by others with whom they are interdependent. The way people self-regulate has an impact on their interactions with others and others exert an influence on the way people self-regulate. The present dissertation focused on the interplay between self-regulation and interpersonal processes. Chapters 2 and 3 examined the impact of regulatory focus on interpersonal goal support and how interpersonal goal support affects the individual’s motivation and goal achievement. Chapters 4 and 5 examined the impact of self-control strength on interpersonal processes such as trust and sacrifice. Below we will provide a summary of the key empirical findings for each chapter. Given that the empirical chapters of this dissertation do not focus on one single aspect of self-regulation but they examined two different forms of self-regulation (regulatory focus theory in Chapters 2 and 3 and self-control strength in Chapters 4 and 5), we will address implications and future research separately for the first two (regulatory focus) and the last two (self-control strength) empirical chapters.

**Overview of the Empirical Findings**

**Regulatory Focus and Interpersonal Goal Support**

Chapter 2 investigated the role of regulatory focus in the Michelangelo Phenomenon. The Michelangelo Phenomenon examines the role of relationship partners in support of the individual’s ideal self goals, which are promotion-orientated goals. We tested our predictions using data obtained via four complementary measurement methods – self-report questionnaire measures, measures from daily diary records, participant-ratings of interaction behaviors, and coder-ratings of interaction behaviors (the latter two based on partners’ conversations of ideal self goals). Results revealed that promotion orientation facilitated the Michelangelo Phenomenon. Promotion-oriented individuals elicited goal support from their partners and promotion-oriented partners were likely to exhibit goal support. Goal support, in turn, resulted in the individuals’ movement toward their ideal self.

We also tested several mechanisms responsible for our findings and found that promotion-orientated individuals displayed great motivation to achieve the ideal self, good strategies for achieving ideal goals, high goal efficacy, and high receptivity to partners’ goal support. All this, in turn, facilitated goal support. Furthermore, promotion-orientated partners were particularly skilled in the support of ideal self goals because they were highly motivated to offer support and they were able to suggest good strategies to achieve those goals. Prevention orientation (for both target and partner) revealed to be irrelevant or weakly destructive for the Michelangelo Phenomenon. This first chapter demonstrated that interpersonal goal support benefits from the match
between the individual’s orientation (promotion orientation) and the type of goal at hand (ideal self goals).

In Chapter 3 we examined the benefits of interpersonal goal support that derive from another type of the match: the fit between two individuals’ regulatory orientations. We tested whether this form of interpersonal fit yielded the same motivational benefits as intrapersonal regulatory fit (e.g., feeling right, enhanced motivation). We also tested whether the motivational benefits of interpersonal regulatory fit were experienced by both promotion- and prevention-oriented individuals. Across six experiments, we found that only promotion-oriented individuals described promotion-oriented partners as more instrumental than prevention-oriented partners and exhibited high motivation, enjoyment, and feeling right after receiving advice from promotion-oriented partners. Among prevention-oriented individuals, these motivational benefits were in no case significantly affected by their interaction partners’ regulatory orientation.

We also tested possible reasons why prevention-oriented individuals cannot experience benefits from interpersonal fit. We found that, because prevention-oriented individuals are concentrated on the specific features of a task to maintain security, they are reluctant to seek interpersonal advice and they are not very receptive to it once they obtain this advice. Furthermore, prevention-oriented individuals do not recognize the regulatory similarities that they have in common with prevention-oriented partners and, consequently, cannot experience interpersonal regulatory fit.

**Self-control, Trust and Sacrifice**

Chapter 4 investigated the role of perceived self-control on trust. We hypothesized that people infer the level of another person’s self-control from her behavior, and this, consequently, influences people’s perception of her ability to act in a trustworthy manner. This hypothesis was tested for interactions between close partners and between strangers. In the first two experiments, we found that people who were perceived to be high in dispositional self-control were trusted more than people who were perceived to be poor in this characteristic. In close relationships, we also found that the observation of three behaviors diagnostic of self-control (forgiveness, reliability, and goal achievement) affected people’s assessment of their partner’s trait self-control which, in turn, affected their judgment of trustworthiness. In the last two experiments, we found that people can also detect the temporary depletion of self-control of another person with subsequent consequences for trust. Finally, our results revealed that in ongoing relationships people are more committed to high self-control others than to low self-control others, because they trust them to a greater extent. In interactions between strangers, however, people like high self-control others and low self-control others to a similar extent.
Chapter 5 investigated the role of self-control in the decision of sacrificing (or not) for a close other. In our study, we considered small sacrifices that people confront daily in a relationship (e.g., going out with the close other’s boring friends) where the partners’ interests differ in minor ways. In four studies, we found that low level of self-control increased the willingness to sacrifice for the close other and the relationship. We also examined one possible mechanism responsible for this effect. A small relationship threat, such as a situation of small divergence of interests, automatically activates and increases the goal of connectedness. We found that, because depleted participants relied on the contextualized activation of connectedness, they reported to be more willing to sacrifice than nondepleted participants. Finally, replicating previous research, we also found that low level of self-control decreased forgiveness and willingness to sacrifice for a non-close other.

Regulatory Focus Findings: Implications and Future Research

The benefits of promotion focus

The first two empirical chapters showed that promotion orientation facilitates goal pursuit in multiple different ways. Promotion orientation (a) promotes people’s movement toward their ideal self, (b) elicits affirmation of the ideal self from partners, (c) increases affirmation of the ideal self of the partner, (d) induces people to seek interpersonal goal support and to be receptive to it, (e) facilitates the recognition of regulatory similarities, and (f) enables people to experience the motivational benefits derived by interpersonal regulatory fit. Thus, our findings suggest that promotion orientation is helpful in maximizing the potential gains that can be achieved by interpersonal goal support. Given that regulatory focus is not only a dispositional variable but can also be triggered by certain conditions in the environment, our findings have practical implications for several domains of human functioning, such as educational, work, and romantic settings. For example, in organizations where people need to work together or where others have the potential to contribute to the individuals’ goal achievement, it might be profitable to stimulate a promotion orientation. Promotion orientation can be induced, for example, by creating an environment where the individuals’ performance is evaluated through rewards (as opposed to punishments) or where people are rewarded for thinking in a creative way, and not for focusing on rules, norms and traditional procedures.

Our findings showed that motivational benefits can be acquired from interpersonal goal support through two different types of regulatory match. Chapter 2 focused on the match between the individual or the partner’s orientation and the type of goal, whereas Chapter 3 focused on the match between two individuals’ regulatory
orientations. Although both types of regulatory match are beneficial for the individual’s acquisition of motivational strength, the underlying processes through which they operate are different. When there is a match between the individual or the partner’s orientation and the goal at hand, the benefits are derived from goal-focused mechanisms, such as partners being skilled in clarifying the goal, in suggesting the right strategies, and in being responsive toward a specific target goal. This type of match is likely to result in successful goal achievement. When there is a match between two individuals’ regulatory orientations, the benefits are derived from a mechanism that is strategy-focused. Suggestions and advice about the way to approach goals that fit the individual’s regulatory orientation are experienced as a reinforcement of the individual’s strategic inclination. The individual, therefore, feels right about his strategic approach and, consequently, experiences increased motivation toward the goal. However, this type of match does not necessarily result in successful goal accomplishment. Chapter 3 showed that interpersonal regulatory fit increased feeling right, motivation, enjoyment and perceived partner instrumentality but our data do not provide any information about actual goal accomplishment. While it is plausible that a reinforcement of strategies that fits promotion orientation is beneficial for the achievement of promotion types of goals, this is not probably the case for prevention types of goals. If for example, the eagerness of a promotion-oriented individual is reinforced by the suggestions provided by a promotion-oriented partner, the resulting manner in which the individual will approach the goal is likely to be harmful for a prevention task that would require vigilance and accuracy. Future research should investigate the impact of multiple types of match (match with the goal and match with another person’s strategic orientation) to examine how they interact to ultimately affect goal performance. Future research should also test whether, under the right circumstances, interpersonal regulatory complementarity -rather than fit- might benefit goal achievement.

Our findings have shown that promotion orientation is beneficial for interpersonal goal pursuit, one important aspect of relationships. Does this mean we should seek for promotion-oriented partners to have a satisfying relationship? Not necessarily so. So far, research has shown that: (a) neither promotion or prevention-oriented partners are more likely to forgive in front of a transgression, but there is greater forgiveness among promotion-oriented individuals when they trust their close other and among prevention-oriented individuals when they are committed to their close other (Molden & Finkel, 2010), (b) prevention orientated partners are probably more faithful partners in that promotion-oriented individuals attend more to romantic alternatives, evaluate them more positively, and pursue them more vigorously than prevention-oriented individuals (Finkel et al., 2011), (c) however, promotion orientated close others are good at goal support (Righetti, Finkenauer, & Rusbult, 2011; Righetti, Rusbult, & Finkenauer, 2010). Thus, from what research has shown so far, it seems that
there is not one orientation that is more favorable for relationship well-being than the other, but that both promotion and prevention orientations differently benefit distinct relationship processes and dynamics.

Interestingly, previous research has found a relation between promotion orientation and independent self-construal (e.g. identity defined by personal and unique traits, preferences and values) and between prevention orientation and interdependent self-construal (e.g. identity defined by relationships with others) (Lee, Aaker, & Gardner, 2000) which suggests that promotion-oriented individuals may be generally focused on the self, whereas prevention oriented individuals may be more focused on others. Our findings in Chapter 3 showed that, under certain circumstances, promotion-oriented individuals may be more oriented toward the social environment than prevention-oriented individuals (for a review on this issue, see Förster & Dannenberg, 2010a, 2010b; Kuhnen & Hannover, 2010; Wyer, 2010). We believe that promotion-oriented individuals may extensively attend to the social environment when this is instrumental for their self-enhancement and self-relevant goals. If, for example, promotion-oriented John realizes that to become a good football player (his ideal self goal), he can profit from his trainer’s advice or from observing other players that perform well, then promotion-oriented John might become extremely tuned to the social environment. Future research should explore this possibility, as well as the impact of promotion orientation for processes that occur in different types of relationship. For example, in non-close relationships, when the other is not much of a concern for the self, promotion-oriented individuals might be prone to behave in an individualist manner and to focus on the self. On the contrary, in close relationships, when people are highly interdependent and the partner is part of the self concept, promotion-oriented individuals might well focus on the close other because of his significant impact on the self.

**What about prevention focus?**

Our findings showed the benefits of promotion orientation for goal pursuit in an interpersonal context. A legitimate question is whether, independent of social support, promotion-oriented individuals are generally more successful in goal accomplishment than prevention-oriented individuals. The reply is no. Conceptually, both promotion- and prevention-oriented individuals are equally motivated and successful in their goal accomplishment (Molden et al., 2008). The distinction between the two orientations relies on their specific focus in the situation; for promotion focus on advancement, for prevention focus on security. As Molden and colleagues (2008) pointed out, if Mary is promotion-oriented and Sarah is prevention, they can be equally motivated to earn an A in an exam. The difference consists in the fact that Mary perceives the situation as an opportunity to improve his or her class rank, while Sarah
perceives it as a necessity to protect his or her good average. Consistent with this argument, Chapter 3 showed that promotion-orientated individuals are not perceived by others to be more successful than prevention-oriented individuals.

However, our findings revealed some detrimental effects of prevention orientation when goal pursuit occurs in an interpersonal context. Prevention-oriented individuals are reluctant to seek goal support and they tend not to be receptive to it once it is obtained. This might result in poor goal performance given the advantages that are often provided by interpersonal support (e.g., Brunstein et al., 1996; Drigotas et al., 1999). Others can be a source of encouragement, they might provide practical help and they might contribute to reach diverse and creative solutions for our problems. However, although we mostly benefit from others, sometimes interpersonal support may also hinder goal achievement. Suggestions and advice may also create distractions from the focal goal, and diversity is not always the best approach to goals (e.g., Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999). When a goal activity requires focused attention and concentration, the prevention manner of pursuing a goal (i.e. insulation from interpersonal inputs that may represent distractions) may well be the best strategy for successful goal achievement.

The present dissertation focused on interpersonal goal support in the context of ideal self goals (Chapter 2) and self-relevant goals (Chapter 2 and 3). Despite the absence of interest for interpersonal support displayed by prevention-oriented individuals in these contexts, future research should examine whether prevention-orientated individuals could still profit from the different forms of interpersonal regulatory match when they are pursuing ought self goals or interdependent goals (i.e. goals that both individuals pursue together and for which the consideration of the partner’s point of view is a necessary requirement for successful goal accomplishment). If, for example, prevention-oriented Sarah is aiming at a successful performance with her music band, she needs to carefully listen to what the other members of the band think and wish. Only in this way she will be able to coordinate with them and give a great show. In this circumstance, attending to the others is the requirement to achieve her goal. If the other members of the band are prevention-oriented, maybe Sarah might then be able to experience interpersonal regulatory fit and the subsequent motivational benefits.

Furthermore, future research should investigate to which extent the differences in attitude toward support and in perception of regulatory similarity between promotion and prevention-oriented individuals are extendable to other interpersonal processes. For example, prevention-oriented individuals might be reluctant to seek not only goal support but any kind of support (e.g. emotional, practical) provided by others. Alternatively, because prevention-oriented individuals locally focus on duties and obligations to ensure security, they might as well be less prone to offer and provide support to others if that is not required from them.
Finally, our data showed data prevention-oriented individuals cannot perceive regulatory similarity. Perception of similarity, even more than actual similarity (Montoya, Horton, & Kirchner, 2008), is an extremely important variable for many interpersonal processes, such as attraction (e.g., Luo & Klohnen, 2005), understanding (Murray, Holmes, Bellavia, Griffin, & Dolderman, 2002), self-affirmation (Byrne & Clore, 1967), and trust (Kubacka, Finkenauer, & Rusbult, 2011). Thus, the impairment in the perception of similarity of prevention-oriented individuals might affect a broad range of phenomena in the interpersonal sphere and it should be fruitfully explored in future research.

**Self-control Strength Findings: Implications and Future Research**

The plasticity of self-control

Self-control strength is typically needed to resolve motivational conflicts. Self-control is especially useful to prevent some impulses from being enacted in behaviors that would be costly to the individual, even if they promise short-term benefits. All of us sometimes experience a struggle between two opposing wishes. We want to eat a delicious apple pie and, at the same time, we want to be healthy and fashionably slim. When motivations clash and we are confronted with two opposing goals like in the above example, self-control strength becomes needed to override the automatic response (eating) and instead redirect the self toward the most desirable change (dieting). Perhaps one of the most important motivational conflicts occurs from the clashing demands of nature and culture. Baumeister and Vohs (2007) argue that selfishness is a natural motivation while culture, as a group system, fosters the group benefits at the expenses of the individual’s personal outcomes. In order to be accepted by the group and be able to reproduce, human beings had to learn to restrain selfishness and to adhere to group norms, a behavior that requires self-control strength (Baumeister, 2005; De Wall et al., 2008; Heatherton & Vohs, 1998). Self-control is therefore an ability that, very often, serves interdependent functioning. This view is consistent with the literature showing that high level of self-control, in the majority of the cases, is associated with good interpersonal functioning (see introduction of the present dissertation for a review).

However, self-control is ultimately a tool that enables people to attain the chosen goal. As we have seen in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, self-control does not always operate as a function of pro-social goals. Chapter 5 has shown that when people face a small threat to their relationship and automatically become overly absorbed with pro-relationship concerns, self-control enables the individual to take into account broader considerations, such as self-protective motives and respond in a more selfish
way. While previous research has repeatedly shown that self-control enhances prosocial behavior (Balliet et al., 2011; De Wall et al., 2008, Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel et al., 2009; Pronk et al., 2010; Tangney et al., 2004), the findings of Chapter 5 are particularly striking because they show that, under certain circumstances, the desire to connect with close others at the expenses of the immediate self-interest can be the automatic concern. Self-control strength is then required to inhibit this impulse and to avoid neglecting other self goals that, although incompatible with the relationship, may be important for the individual too.

Future research should explore other circumstances in which self-control strength is used to correct for pro-social responses and to change the self toward other goals that better suit the situation as a whole. For example, in competitive settings, the goal that best suits the situation is to harm the competitor to gain personal advantage. However, some people might feel some impulsive empathic concerns that might refrain them from doing so. Self-control may enable the individual to minimize the impact of those empathic concerns and instead act upon the main competitive goal. In a war, for example, an enemy with high self-control is able to inhibit feelings of empathy, and he can behave in a goal-oriented manner. He will be able to destroy and kill ignoring personal and human scruples. In such a context, a high self-controlled other may be perceived as extremely dangerous and obviously not trustworthy. Certainly, situations in which self-control is used to promote selfishness or harm to others represent only a minority of interpersonal situations and settings. As previous research has shown, most of the times self-control is used in favor of interpersonal harmony (Balliet et al., 2011; De Wall et al., 2008, Finkel & Campbell, 2001; Finkel et al., 2009; Peetz, & Kammrath, 2011; Pronk et al., 2010, 2011; Ritter, et al., 2010; Tangney et al., 2004). People may have learned the association between self-control strength and positive interpersonal behaviors and, as Chapter 4 demonstrated, they are more likely to expect pro-social responses from others who are high, rather than low, in self-control. A very interesting question for future research is whether people are able to correct for this expectation and are able to consider self-control a characteristic that could be used harmfully toward them. In other words, are people aware that, in certain contexts (e.g. small divergence of interests in close relationship or competitive settings), high self-control may promote self-interested behaviors?

This question is particularly intriguing in the context of daily sacrifices. The association between a particular observed behavior and perceived self-control is especially likely to be learned in all those situations in which the individual carefully evaluates the situation and engages in attribution processes. Meaningful events trigger attention and the individual is likely to try to understand the other’s motives, personal dispositions or situational properties that lead to certain outcomes. Those attributions may also be more likely remembered and used as an anchor for future predictions. For example, as Chapter 4 showed, Mary is likely to learn the positive association between
John’s forgiveness and his level of self-control probably because this association is learned in situations in which Mary risks to be significantly hurt (e.g. John could decide to take revenge or to leave her). Such situations are likely to capture her attention and in those circumstances she is likely to carefully evaluate and remember John’s behavior and dispositions. On the contrary, Mary and John encounter very frequently situations of small divergence of interests in which Mary does not risk to lose much (e.g. the divergence of interest is over something small, for example, who is going to wash the dishes after dinner). Therefore, Mary might be less likely to carefully assess these kinds of situations and, therefore, might not learn and remember the association between John’s level of self-control and his self-oriented response.

**Sacrifice: is the focus on the self, the relationship, or the close other?**

Willingness to sacrifice is generally associated with positive outcomes for the relationship, including increased commitment, trust, satisfaction, and persistence over time (Van Lange, Agnew, Harinck, & Steemers, 1997; Van Lange, et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999). This is not surprising because, with the decision to sacrifice, the individual solves the interdependence dilemma on the partner’s behalf and avoids bothersome arguments, conflicts, and exhausting negotiations. However, sacrifice can also be costly for the individual’s well-being. If sacrificing solves the immediate interdependence problem, it might also leave unpleasant feelings of resentment, dependence, guilt, and other psychological costs (Gottman, & Krokoff, 1989; Jack & Dill, 1992; Lerner, 1988). When individuals sacrifice frequently to maintain their relationship, even when doing so is detrimental to the self, they are more likely to experience depressive symptoms (Whitton, Stanley, & Markman, 2007). This is probably true to the extent that acts of sacrifice are not reciprocal in the relationship but they are more likely to be provided by one individual. Sacrifice may then represent a sign of overinvolvement with the relationship at the expense of other needs of the self and other wishes that are also important for the individual’s well-being (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). If situations of small divergence of interest automatically trigger the goal to connect with close others, self-control is then required to re-direct the self toward choices that are more in line with needs and desires of the self that go beyond the relationship. Let’s imagine for example that every Thursday evening John goes to the gym to keep his condition. This Thursday Mary asks him no to go because her aunt is coming for a visit and Mary would like John to be present at home. This situation represents a dilemma for John, on one hand he needs to go to the gym to keep being fit, on the other hand he does not want to disappoint Mary and possibly start an argument. The resolution of this dilemma is influenced, among other things, by the amount of self-control resources that are available to John at the decision point. If John has self-control
resources, he is likelier to decide to go to the gym than to stay home as Mary wishes. Thus, in such a situation, self-control is used to promote the individual’s well-being (e.g. being fit) rather than the short-term benefits of the relationship (e.g. avoid a discussion with Mary).

Sacrifice can be driven by two different motivations: promoting the partner’s well-being vs. the relationship well-being. In the first case, the individual is moved by purely altruistic reasons. The goal is to benefit the other. In the second case, the individual wants to benefit and preserve the relationship as a whole. An interesting question for future research is whether the underlying motivation to sacrifice is affected by the way people decide to sacrifice or not (in automatic vs. self-controlled fashion). If situations of small divergence of interests trigger relationship-protection concerns, the automatic motivation to sacrifice might be especially driven by the desire to preserve and benefit the relationship and not by the desire to promote the close other’s well-being. On the contrary, when the individual uses self-control and makes a decision taking into account various considerations, altruistic concerns can also be evaluated and sacrifice may also derive from a genuine desire to promote the other’s well-being.

**Closing Remarks**

In interpersonal interactions, two selves face each other. The way each individual self-regulates is likely to exert an impact on both the interpersonal interaction and the way the other individual self-regulates. In the present dissertation we have shown different ways in which this process may occur. In two chapters we have shown the importance of promotion orientation for interpersonal goal support. Our findings show that others can help us to achieve our dreams. But when we look for support from others we should carefully evaluate whom to approach. We should not rely on just anyone. Partners, friends or colleagues who embrace the opportunities of life and eagerly try to accomplish goals are the type of support we should look for. At the same time, we should be open and receptive to them and we should pursue our goals with optimism and enthusiasm. With such approach, we can maximize their beneficial impact on our goal pursuit.

In two chapters, we have shown that self-control has important implications for trust and sacrifice. Research demonstrates that self-control impacts interpersonal behavior. Therefore, self control is a meaningful characteristic to perceive in others in order to predict their behavior. Frequently, self-control helps people to behave in a prosocial way. However, we should not neglect the importance of the situation. While, in most situations, we can expect prosocial behavior from people who are high in self-control, in other specific circumstances (e.g. when close others needs to decide whether to engage in small sacrifices or not) self-control may stimulate attention to self-oriented concerns. Thus, our findings suggest that, in order to evaluate and predict other people’s
behavior, self-control is a characteristic to consider in relation to the context in which it is exerted.

While research has only recently started to focus on the interplay between self-regulation and interpersonal processes, with our work we hope to have contributed to this developing field and to have shown the profound impact that self-regulatory processes can have on relationships and that relationships can have on self-regulatory processes.