

The relationship between objective and perceived fit with academic major, adaptability, and major-related outcomes

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Abstract

This study examined the effects of fit with college major on major commitment, GPA, college satisfaction, and changing one's major. We further examined how individual adaptability may moderate the importance of fit on these outcomes. College students ($N = 198$; 160 women and 38 men; mean age = 19.14 years) completed an interest inventory used to assess objective fit with major, and also indicated their perceived fit with major. Results revealed little correlation between perceived fit and objective fit, with differential relationships to these outcomes. Perceived fit showed stronger positive correlations with affective major commitment and academic self-efficacy than did objective fit. Regarding the moderating role of adaptability, individuals higher in adaptability reported higher institutional satisfaction when there was lower perceived fit. Adaptability also had a main effect on major-related outcomes above and beyond the effects of fit. Practical and theoretical implications of these results are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Research shows that without any formal guidance, students choose their college major for many reasons other than a pure match with their interests (Frehill, 1997; Gianakos & Subich, 1988; Harren, Kass, Tinsley, & Moreland, 1979; Hearn & Moos, 1976; Simpson, 2003). Thus, high schools and colleges can enhance their ability to counsel students effectively in choosing a college major by understanding the nature of perceived fit, namely how perceived major fit relates to more objective indices of fit between interests and college major, and how perceived fit relates to another important subjective measure, that of adaptability.

The underlying concept of person–environment (P–E) fit is broad and fundamental—though not straightforward. There have been many different approaches to examining P–E fit, each informed by the academic specialty of the researcher as well as by the outcomes of particular interest (Walsh, Craik, & Price, 1992). P–E fit conceptualizations vary in several ways, including the characteristics of interest for both person and

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environment, the actual operationalization of fit, and the method used for identifying fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). One way P–E fit conceptualizations differ is in terms of whether fit refers to *objective* fit or *perceived* fit. Early research acknowledged the actual environment, known as the *alpha press* as distinct from the *beta press*, or perceived environment (Murray, 1938). Subsequent research on P–E fit has emphasized the importance of perceived fit over objective fit (Pervin, 1968). Kristof (1996) views *perceived fit* as a direct measure of fit, in that perceived fit entails directly asking individuals about the degree to which they believe they “fit” with their environment. By contrast, *objective fit* measures are viewed as more indirect in nature, examining fit by measuring the person and the environment on commensurate dimensions; fit is then measured by taking a difference between the two scores or by modeling the difference by polynomial regression (Edwards, 1993). It is important to note here that the term *perceived fit* is often used interchangeably with the term *subjective fit* (Cable & Derue, 2002; Kristof, 1996), but Kristof-Brown and colleagues (2005) distinguished the two terms. Specifically, *subjective fit* is measured through obtaining separate direct assessments of personality and environment characteristics from the same individual source, while *perceived fit* is measured through an individual’s perception of his/her compatibility with the environment. We chose to use these definitions as well, limiting our scope to *perceived fit* as it relates to measures of objective fit.

Although objective and perceived fit are conceived and measured as two distinct constructs with potentially different effects on outcomes, it is important not to overstate their independence. To clarify, for most people there should be a relationship between the objective fit to their environment and their perceptions of that fit, unless they have an extremely low sense of reality (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Dineen, Ash, and Noe (2002) found person–organization objective and perceived fit to relate ($r = .23$), and Cable and Judge (1996) found a significant positive relationship ($r = .33$) between perceptions of occupational fit and calculated fit between personal values and perceptions of organizational values. Although these correlations are significant, they are relatively low; suggesting the measures are not interchangeable, that each measure has the potential to provide incremental validity, and that there may be differential patterns of effects for each measure. In this study, we examined both objective and perceived fit for these reasons.

1.1. Outcomes of fit

Many studies have examined the link between P–E fit and both performance and affective outcomes (see Kristof-Brown et al., 2005 for a recent meta-analysis). Research specifically concerning a relationship between college major fit and satisfaction yields no clear consensus. Assouline and Meir’s (1987) meta-analysis found a positive small mean correlation of .10. However, this finding was based only on six studies (e.g. Morrow, 1971; Spokane & Derby, 1979). Other earlier studies, however, did find a positive relationship between fit and satisfaction (Nafziger, Holland, & Gottfredson, 1975; Walsh, Howard, O’Brien, Santa-Maria, & Edmunson, 1973). More recent studies, however, have failed to find a significant fit–satisfaction relationship for college major fit (Hansen & Tan, 1992; Logue, Lounsbury, Gupta, & Leong, 2007). Weak or null relationships between fit and major satisfaction, however, may be due to a severe restriction of range bias, as many studies examined only one or two majors and/or measured fit on only one personality dimension, limiting the variability of both fit and satisfaction (Logue et al., 2007; Morrow, 1971). Thus, the present study examined satisfaction as an outcome of fit with major, using both a variety of majors and more complex measures of fit.

In support of other fit with major–outcome relationships, significant positive relationships have been found between fit and academic achievement (Nichols & Holland, 1963; Tracey & Robbins, 2006) and negative relationships with major change (Tracey & Robbins, 2006). Specifically, Tracey and Robbins found that major fit predicted GPA and enrollment above the effects of ACT scores, such that individuals who fit more with their major tended to have higher GPAs and stayed in school longer.

This study examined some of these same outcomes in relation to major fit, with a few important differences. First, we examined the effects of both perceived and objective fit measures, in order to get a more comprehensive view of the major fit relationship with outcomes. Second, as stated before, we looked at the effects of fit from students across a wide sample of college majors. Furthermore, instead of examining how fit relates to the distal outcome of change in major or college enrollment, we looked at more proximal withdrawal outcomes that lead to change, namely commitment to the major, GPA, satisfaction with the academic institution, self-reported probability of major change, and the amount of avoidable absences from class.

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