



Core self-evaluation and life satisfaction: The person-environment fit perspective



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ABSTRACT

This study is the first to test the mediating roles of three person-environment (P-E) fit variables (i.e., person-major fit, person-university fit, and person-society fit), in the relationship between core self-evaluation and life satisfaction. Data from 794 Chinese university students were analyzed using structural equation modeling. Results supported a partial mediating effect for all three P-E fit variables on the relationship between core self-evaluation and life satisfaction. Person-major fit and person-university fit partially mediated the relationship between core self-evaluation and person-society fit. Additionally, person-society fit partially mediated the relationships of life satisfaction with person-major fit and person-university fit. The findings reveal the complicated mechanisms underlying the influence that core self-evaluation has on life satisfaction and suggest important implications for future research.

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1. Introduction

Since its inception, core self-evaluation (Judge, Locke, & Durham, 1997) has been recognized as an important factor influencing individuals' judgments of well-being in different life domains (Chang, Ferris, Johnson, Rosen, & Tan, 2012; Rey & Extremera, 2014). It is defined as "fundamental premises that individuals hold about themselves and their functioning in the world" (Judge, Erez, & Bono, 1998, p. 168). People with positive core self-evaluations like themselves and regard themselves as capable, effective, and able to control their environments. In contrast, those with negative core self-evaluations dislike themselves, lack confidence in their capabilities, and see themselves as powerless to affect their environments (Judge & Bono, 2001; Robbins, Judge, Millett, & Maree, 2014).

According to Judge et al. (1997), core self-evaluation involves an evaluation focus (not description), fundamental and basic traits (not midrange traits), and scope (the degree of broadness of a trait). That is, core self-evaluations do not strictly reflect cognitive processes but broadly encompass specific appraisals rooted in the traits central to individuals' self-concepts (Johnson, Rosen, & Levy, 2008; Judge, Erez, Bono, & Thoresen, 2003). Judge et al. (1997)

proposed that overall core self-evaluation consists of four personal-ity traits: self-esteem, generalized self-efficacy, emotional stability, and locus of control. Judge et al.'s (1997) view that these four traits are saturated with the conceptualization of core self-evaluation is supported by research that shows these traits are strongly correlated and load on the same higher order factor (Chang et al., 2012).

Judge, Locke, et al. (1998) contend that core self-evaluation is an important source of life satisfaction, the overall cognitive assessment of one's satisfaction in various life domains (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Indeed, the aforementioned four traits underlying core self-evaluation have been consistently found to positively relate to life satisfaction (Judge, Erez, et al., 1998; Piccolo, Judge, Takahashi, Watanabe, & Locke, 2005). This cluster of empirical evidence is strongly aligned with prior research that reported positive linkages between overall core self-evaluation and life satisfaction and other subsets of subjective well-being (Judge, Locke, Durham, & Kluger, 1998; Rey & Extremera, 2014; Yan, Su, Zhu, & He, 2013). These results have been observed to be consistent across situations, populations, and cultures, which further strengthens scholars' predictions of the function of core self-evaluation in cognitive appraisal of life events (Judge, Locke, et al., 1998; Piccolo et al., 2005).

Although this informed evidence is useful in understanding the role of core self-evaluation in humans' lives, the current literature does not offer a comprehensive answer regarding how the effect of core self-evaluation can be transmitted to individuals' life experiences, nor does it provide theoretical reasons. Only a very few studies have examined the mechanisms of the relationship

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between core self-evaluation and well-being (e.g., Rey & Extremera, 2014; Yan et al., 2013). However, these studies mainly focus on personal characteristics directly related to one's internal processing, having largely overlooked some key elements embedded in the construct of core self-evaluation. Specifically, the fundamental conceptualization of core self-evaluation proposed by Judge et al. (1997) emphasizes not only individuals' appraisal of themselves but also the connections of the evaluative attributes to their associated environments (Piccolo et al., 2005; Robbins et al., 2014). This conceptual basis suggests that effective mediators that can explain the influence of core self-evaluation in life domains may need to reflect the psychological processing that more explicitly relates to both personal and environmental aspects. Accordingly, the present study aims to advance our understanding by introducing person-environment (P-E) fit to explore potentially new mechanisms linking university students' core self-evaluation and life satisfaction.

Based on core self-evaluation theory, Judge and colleagues (Judge, Locke, et al., 1998; Judge et al., 1997) further propose that environmental specific perceptions tend to be influenced by and mediate the effects of self-evaluation traits on sense of satisfaction. From one side, Lazarus' (1991) appraisal theory suggests that self-evaluation or self-appraisal processes can extend to one's appraisal of environments, and subsequently lead people to judge whether they fit into the environment (Song & Chathoth, 2011). Indeed, existing research supports this viewpoint by showing that core self-evaluations positively affect P-E fit related variables (e.g., Rode, Judge, & Sun, 2012; Song & Chathoth, 2011; Yang & Kim, 2011). From the other side, the P-E fit theory suggests that well-being is a function of people's interactions with their environments, and that the congruence between personal characteristics (e.g., knowledge, abilities, skills, needs, values, and other traits) and environmental characteristics (e.g., role characteristics and organizational values and structures) promotes well-being and feelings of satisfaction (Gilbreath, Kim, & Nichols, 2011; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). Edwards, Caplan, and Van Harrison (1998) indicate that humans generally tend to pursue P-E fit because the perceived misfit between a person and his or her environment may cause stress, negative psychological experiences, and lower levels of well-being. Due to its ability to generate positive feelings, P-E fit has the potential to lead to happiness in life. Empirical studies demonstrate that P-E fit can increase overall life satisfaction (Ton & Hansen, 2001), subjective well-being and happiness (Park, Monnot, Jacob, & Wagner, 2011). These theoretical perspectives, along with extant findings that emphasize the effects of core self-evaluation on P-E fit and the effects of P-E fit on life satisfaction, suggest the potential mediating role of P-E fit in the relationship between core self-evaluation and life satisfaction.

This study focuses on three P-E fit variables: person-major fit, person-university fit, and person-society fit. These three variables are chosen because the literature applying the P-E fit theory to the higher education context suggests that university students mainly care about their fit with their majors (Eun, Sohn, & Lee, 2013), universities (Gilbreath et al., 2011), and a broader society (Yang, Noels, & Saumure, 2006). Such types of fit are congruent with university students' situations, and may intensively capture students' psychological processes related to P-E fit (Porter & Umbach, 2006).

Briefly, past research suggests that core self-evaluation is important in understanding the development of life satisfaction (e.g., Judge, Locke, et al., 1998; Rey & Extremera, 2014). However, it is still unclear what mechanisms underlie the core self-evaluation and life satisfaction relationship through integrating personal and environmental characteristics. As a solution, this study aims to examine this relationship using a university student sample from mainland China, with a focus on the mediating roles of three P-E

fit variables (person-major fit, person-university fit, and person-society fit), which have never before been studied together. It advances the literature by exploring new paths that transmit core self-evaluation to life satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Data were collected from undergraduate students in a key public university in Northeastern China. Students were invited to answer a survey in the classroom by their lecturers. Volunteer participants were provided an informed consent form and assured that the survey was anonymous and confidential and that the data could be accessible to the research team only. A total of 794 students returned valid questionnaires, generating a valid response rate of 93.41%. Among these students, 314 (39.5%) were male and 480 (60.5%) female. They had an average age of 20.43 years ($SD = 1.40$).

2.2. Measures

Participants answered all measurement items on a Likert-type scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)".

2.3. Core self-evaluation

Judge et al.'s (2003) Core Self-Evaluation Scale measured students' overall core self-evaluations. This scale consists of 12 items, which reflect four personality traits: generalized self-efficacy, self-esteem, neuroticism (conversely emotional stability) and locus of control. One example item is "I am confident I get the success I deserve in life". The Cronbach's alpha reliability for core self-evaluation was .70.

2.4. Person-major fit, person-university fit, and person-society fit

Person-major fit was assessed using five items adapted from Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001). These items evaluate the extent to which students fit into their current majors based on characteristics such as skills, ability, and personality. One example item is "My abilities fit the demands of this major". Person-university fit was measured by three items adapted from Lauver and Kristof-Brown (2001), which assess how the values of respondents match those of the university. One example item is "I am able to maintain my values at my university". Similar items were adapted to measure person-society fit after "university" was replaced by "affiliated society". One example item is "My values match or fit the values of my affiliated society". The Cronbach's alpha reliabilities for person-major fit, person-university fit, and person-society fit were 0.90, 0.79, and 0.76, respectively.

2.4.1. Life satisfaction

Diener et al.'s (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) was used to assess respondents' overall life satisfaction. The SWLS contains 5 short statements about individuals' current life status. One example item is "I am satisfied with my life". The Cronbach's alpha reliability for life satisfaction was 0.79.

2.5. Data analysis

A two-step procedure, which involves confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and structural equation modeling (SEM) (Chen, Aryee, & Lee, 2005), was used to examine mediating effects of P-E fit variables on the relationship between core self-evaluation and life

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