



Moderation of the relation between person–environment congruence and academic success: Environmental constraint, personal flexibility and method

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ABSTRACT

The relation of interest–major congruence to indicators of college success was examined as it was moderated by environmental constraint, individual flexibility, and congruence definition in an initial sample of 88,813 undergraduates (38,787 men and 50,026 women) from 42 different colleges and universities in 16 states. College achievement (GPA after 1 semester and 2 years), persistence (enrollment status after 1 year and after 2 years) and major persistence in year 3 were used as criteria of college success. The significance of congruence (i.e., Euclidean distance and profile correlation) and its moderators above that of measures of academic achievement (i.e., ACT scores) and gender were examined for each of the college outcome criteria using hierarchical modeling. Results indicated that both the environmental constraint of the major and the interest flexibility of the individual moderated the congruence–outcome relation for both types of congruence indices. There was a greater relation between congruence and college outcomes for those majors that had more homogeneity and were more differentiated (i.e., were more constrained) than for majors where this was not true. There was a stronger relation between congruence and college outcomes for those individuals with lower overall profile levels (i.e., low flexibility) than those with high. Findings point to the importance of interest–major congruence in the college outcome process, but also highlight the complexity of the congruence–outcome relation.

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Introduction

Person–environment (P–E) fit has served as a cornerstone of vocational and organizational psychology since the work of Parsons (1909). There have been a myriad of empirical examinations of P–E fit (cf. Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) and they vary with respect to the definition of P–E fit including similarity, need satisfaction, and demand–ability match (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson, 2005). We focus on the examination of interest–occupation or interest–major congruence whereby a person's interests are matched to those of different occupations and majors. It is theorized that the greater the match, the better the satisfaction and greater the productivity (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984; Holland, 1997). The research shows that the magnitude of the congruence–outcome relation is small to moderate (Assouline & Meir, 1987; Spokane, 1985; Spokane, Meir, & Catalano, 2000; Tranberg, Slane, & Ekeberg, 1993; Tsabari, Tziner, & Meir, 2005). This has led to a debate regarding the centrality of congruence whereby some advocate its eschewal (Arnold, 2005; Tinsley, 2000) while others view the magnitude as appropriate and comparable to trait–behavior relations in the personality domain (Rounds & Tracey, 1990; Spokane, 1985).

We view the magnitude of the congruence–outcome relation significant but that there are other dimensions that moderate this relation, and in fact, may help explain the conflicting findings around the salience of congruence. So in keeping with the recommendations of Spokane (1985) and Spokane et al. (2000), we sought to examine several moderators of the congruence–

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outcome relation in a large, nation-wide sample of college students. Specifically we examined interest–major congruence and its relation with college outcomes including GPA at various points and several persistence indicators.

In the next sections we detail moderation effects from both environmental and person perspectives. Environmental constraint and individual flexibility were hypothesized as being moderators of the congruence–outcome relation. In addition, we examined two different measures of congruence — so we can consider measurement methodology as a third potential moderator.

Environmental constraint

Long ago, Mischel (1977) discriminated between strong and weak environments with regard to their effects on behavior where strong environments led people to construe behaviors similarly, including uniform expectations regarding appropriate behavior. Weak environments are characterized by greater variance in this construal and definition of appropriate behavior. This concept has been applied to organizational cultures (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Tosi, 2002) where it is viewed that strong environments decrease the relation between personality and behavior. Strong environments thus exert a heavy constraining influence on people's behavior, urging them to act more similarly, and less according to their underlying personality. Weak environments are less constraining on behavior and thus enable people to act in a manner more in keeping with their personality. Environmental constraint arises because of both individual and environmental selection. People who have strong preferences that match an environment would be attracted to this environment and seek entry. As the environment is composed of people, the people in the environment would then act to constrain the behavior of individuals in it. This constraint would result in specifying what behaviors are appropriate as well as result in selecting out those who do not adhere. In application to academic environments, this means that different majors will reward different patterns of student abilities and interests (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2000).

This view of the moderation of personality–behavior relation by environmental strength is commonly held but as Cooper and Withey (2009) argue, it is based only on indirect evidence. A reason for this is the difficulty of defining environmental strength as well as commensurate measurement of environment and individual (Murtha, Kanfer, & Ackerman, 1996; Withey, Gellatly, & Annett, 2005).

The application of interests makes this definition of environmental constraint somewhat easier as the reigning model of interests, Holland's (1997) six RIASEC types, can be directly mapped onto occupations and academic major environments whereby both can be defined using the same system. We chose to define environmental constraint using the variance in the RIASEC scores for individuals in each major. Majors with high variance in RIASEC scores are viewed as weak environments in that they accept many different interest patterns. Majors with low variance in RIASEC interest scores are viewed as strong environments with greater constraint on members because there is little difference in the interest patterns of individuals within these majors, i.e., greater homogeneity.

Given this definition of environmental constraint, we hypothesized that the relation between P–E congruence and college outcomes would be greater for those in strong environments, whereas it would be weaker for those in weaker environments. Those in strong environments, i.e., with less interest variance of those in the major, are constrained to behave in common appropriate manners and this should also manifest in common interest patterns. There are both strong self and environmental selection forces. We hypothesized that individuals deviating from this modal set of interests would be more likely to either find another more congruent environment or be selected out by the environment. Success, as indicated by GPA and persistence, would be higher for those that fit these strong, constraining environments. Conversely, individuals in environments that are less constraining as characterized by greater heterogeneity of interests among those in the environment would be hypothesized to have a lower relation between P–E congruence and college success. The weaker environment would allow more variance in interests and thus other aspects perhaps would play a larger role in college success. This moderation by environmental constraint hypothesis was examined by Schmitt, Oswald, Friede, Imus, and Merritt (2008) relative to college outcomes although they focused only on perceived fit — not actual fit as represented by measured interests. So we sought to examine the environmental constraint moderation hypothesis more directly using interest variance within the different majors as the measure of constraint.

Individual flexibility

Prediger (1998) demonstrated that the relative levels of an interest profile are related to major choice, and that the absolute level did not matter. Profile level did not matter and thus he recommended that the overall level of scores should be ignored and attention paid only to the relative rankings. However, Darcy and Tracey (2003) argued that interest levels were important and had substantive meaning. They proposed that the overall level of the interest profile was indicative of interest flexibility. Those individuals who scored high on all interest scales would have a high overall level and thus be indicating a preference for most of all activities. Individuals with low scores would be indicating a lack of preference for many activities. They posited that while this interest flexibility would not relate to major selection, as Prediger determined that it did not, it would moderate the relation between interest–major congruence and outcomes.

Specifically, they proposed that individuals who were more flexible (i.e., had higher overall interest score levels) would demonstrate a lower relation of congruence with outcomes. Those individuals with low flexibility, i.e., those who were less indiscriminately approving of activities, were those for whom P–E congruence mattered most. For these low flexibility individuals, it was important to have an environment that matched their interests. If this match occurred then positive outcomes would be more likely. So like the environmental constraint above, individual flexibility was hypothesized to moderate the P–E congruence–outcome relation. Less flexible individuals should demonstrate a stronger relation between P–E congruence and college outcomes.

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