



Beyond conscientiousness: Career optimism and satisfaction with academic major

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on psychological predictors of academic major satisfaction. According to the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), vocational personality and career adaptability should generate career satisfaction. In this study, vocational personality was operationalised as Big Five conscientiousness, and career adaptability was operationalised as generalised self-efficacy and career optimism. A sample ($N = 529$) of university students completed an online survey. The resultant data were used to construct a structural model of the hypothesised relationships among variables. A good fitting model [$\chi^2 = 10.454 (7) p = .164$; GFI = .993; CFI = .999; RMSEA < .031 (<.001–.066)] indicated that career optimism fully mediated the relationship between conscientiousness and academic major satisfaction. Results were consistent with previous research into personality and academic performance. Moreover, the results highlight the significant role of optimism in satisfaction with career generally, and studies, specifically. Suggestions are made for future research into modelling the relationships according to different academic disciplines and for the potential role of optimism as a learning objective for career education and counseling.

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University students' satisfaction with their studies is an important matter for themselves, their teachers, their institutions, and public bodies that scrutinise universities. Indicators of students' satisfaction are associated with institutional reputation in an increasingly international market place. In their review of over 7000 publications, Richardson, Abraham, and Bond (2012) classified 42 non-intellective correlates of academic performance into five classes: personality traits, motivational factors, self-regulatory learning strategies, students' approaches to learning, and psychosocial contextual factors. These, so-called non-intellective factors represent sites of psychological or educational interventions that aim to enhance students' engagement and satisfaction with their studies (e.g., teaching study techniques according to approaches to learning). In this paper, we address facets of two of the non-intellective predictors of student satisfaction with their academic major: the personality factor *conscientiousness* and the motivational factors *self-efficacy* and *optimism*.

1. Career construction theory and academic satisfaction

To conceptually frame the research, we referred to the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) that provides an integrative conceptual framework to understand career in terms of three inter-related domains: *vocational personality*, *career adaptability*, and *life themes*. Students' engagement with their studies can be understood from the perspective of these conceptual domains. The first two classes of non-intellective correlates of academic performance identified by Richardson et al. (2012) conceptually correspond to vocational personality (i.e., personality factors) and career adaptability and life themes (i.e., motivational factors).

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1.1. Vocational personality

The notion of personality pertains to stable occupational interests, traits, abilities, needs, and values that can objectively describe a person. For example, the most notable vocational interest framework (Holland, 1997) describes Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional occupations and work environments, respectively abbreviated as R, I, A, S, E, and C. The congruence between vocational interests and choice of academic major is a reliable predictor of academic performance, more so than academic abilities (Tracey & Robbins, 2006). According to this framework, students are most satisfied if they are enrolled in an academic program that is consistent with their interest type (e.g., Realistic: engineering; Investigative: laboratory sciences; Artistic: literature; Social: psychology; Enterprising: marketing; Conventional: accounting).

From another perspective of personality, the Five Factor Model (FFM) of personality (McCrae & Costa, 2003) has been upheld across cultures, including translations into German, Portuguese, Hebrew, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese (McCrae & Costa, 1997). The FFM subsumes the personality factors *neuroticism*, *extraversion*, *openness to experience*, *agreeableness*, and *conscientiousness*. The factor conscientiousness reliably links to academic performance. Conscientiousness is of most relevance to this study and pertains to personal characteristics of being diligent, reliable, efficient, responsible, organised, dutiful, achievement-oriented, and goal-directed. It could be expected that a student high in conscientiousness is committed to and engaged in his/her studies of a particular academic major and is keen to put in the effort to pursue his/her career objectives.

The aforementioned expectations of a conscientious student are empirically borne out in a series of large-scale meta-analytic studies that address personality factors and grade point average (GPA). O'Connor and Paunonen (2007) found that conscientiousness correlated moderately with academic performance ($r = .24$, 90% CI [.12, .36]). Poropat's (2009) meta-analytic study, that was based upon an aggregate sample size of 70,926, found that the correlation between conscientiousness and academic performance had a moderate effect size of Cohen's $d = .46$; which was similar to the moderate effect size of the correlation between intelligence and academic performance, Cohen's $d = .52$. Taken together, these meta-analytic studies present unequivocal evidence of the positive relationship between the personality factor conscientiousness and academic performance. Richardson et al. (2012) found that among the Big Five personality factors, conscientiousness was the strongest correlate of GPA ($r^+ = .19$, 95% CI [.17, .45]). As expected, procrastination was significantly negatively correlated with GPA ($r^+ = -.22$, 95% CI [-.18, -.27]). The studies by O'Connor and Paunonen and Richardson et al. both indicate ostensibly small correlation coefficients between conscientiousness and GPA. However, their relative effects should be considered in light of the fact that GPA is a high-stakes outcome for students, and any factor that contributes to a high-stakes outcome deserves due consideration. Indeed, Poropat's study demonstrates that conscientiousness almost has the same effect as intelligence on GPA.

Despite the importance of satisfaction with academic major, there has been relatively little research into its relationship with personality (Logue, Lounsbury, Gupta, & Leong, 2007). Lent, Singley, Sheu, Schmidt, and Schmidt (2007) recommended that future research examine the influence of personality traits and affective states on academic satisfaction. Using a one-item measure of academic major satisfaction administered in sample of undergraduate business students, Logue et al. (2007) found that optimism, conscientiousness, and extraversion together predicted 38% of the variance in major satisfaction. In secondary analyses, optimism sustained its predictive capacity (of 8%) in the presence of other predictors such a type of vocational interest (e.g., Realistic) and assertiveness. Thus, in the current study, we sought to further explore whether the personality factor conscientiousness in combination with motivational factors, namely optimism and self-efficacy, influence academic satisfaction.

1.2. Career adaptability

Savickas (2005) described career adaptability as attitudes, beliefs, and competencies clustered as four dimensions: developing a positive *concern* for a career future, enhancing personal *control* over that future, enacting *curiosity* to explore future career scenarios, and enhancing personal *confidence* to pursue future scenarios. With respect to non-intellective motivational factors, career adaptability pertains to a student's readiness and capacity to manage the challenges and demands of study.

According to career construction theory, career-related optimism is a non-intellective motivational factor reflecting expectations of "the best possible outcome or to emphasise the most positive aspects of one's future career development, and comfort in performing career planning tasks" (Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen, 2005, p. 11). In this way, an optimistic student is keenly interested in his/her career future, enthusiastically engages in learning that is directly related to that imagined future, and feels comfortable that he/she is on the appropriate path for career success. Such students should evince high levels of satisfaction with their academic studies and career choices.

A conceptual distinction is to be made between generalised *dispositional optimism* and optimism specific to a particular behavioural domain, in this case the academic domain (Solberg Nes, Evans, & Segerstrom, 2009). In their study that differentiated between dispositional optimism and academic optimism (i.e., belief in chance of good grades), Solberg Nes et al. (2009) found that dispositional optimism and academic optimism were associated with enhanced student retention, however, their effects were mediated by other motivational factors. Academic optimism had a direct, albeit relatively small, predictive effect upon GPA, whereas dispositional optimism had no effect. Although GPA provides contextual validity for the current study, it is not the variable of primary interest; instead we focus upon satisfaction with academic major. Furthermore, the current study addresses optimism specific to career, as distinct from the global optimistic outlook of dispositional optimism and academic optimism. Richardson et al. (2012) found that optimism has a smaller correlation ($r^+ = .11$, 95% CI [.04, .17]) with GPA than does conscientiousness and the other motivational factors.

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