



What employees dislike about their jobs: Relationship between personality-based fit and work satisfaction



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ABSTRACT

Personality has been largely neglected in research investigating person-job fit, particularly in terms of appraisals of distress and subsequent strain outcomes. In this study, the effects of congruence between personality and task-demands on job satisfaction was examined based on the idea that employees become distressed when asked to perform activities that require trait elevations inconsistent with their own. Job tasks were identified for resident assistants and linked to personality traits using job analysis. A sample of employees ($N = 89$) were then asked to complete a personality inventory, rate their distress when performing the various job tasks, and evaluate their job satisfaction. Results indicated that tasks associated with Agreeableness and Conscientiousness were perceived as more distressing when workers were low on those traits, and increased distress was related to less satisfaction across task domains. In addition, individuals high in Neuroticism tended to evaluate all tasks as being more distressing and most notably those related to Extraversion. Implications are discussed in terms of research on Trait Activation Theory, job fit, and work stress.

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1. Introduction

Person-job fit refers to the match between a person's knowledge, skills, abilities and the demands of the job (Edwards, 1991). Effects of the correspondence between individual differences and job demands have been generally examined in terms of the relationship between fit, work attitudes, and performance (Kristoff-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). The idea that employees will be most satisfied when there is a congruence between their temperaments and the demands of the job also has a long history in vocational psychology (De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1997), and more recent research has extended this to incorporate job analytic methodology (Fritzsche, Powell, & Hoffman, 1999) and the Five-Factor Model of personality traits (De Fruyt & Mervielde, 1997). In this study, we propose that the effects of a misfit between personality and job demands can be conceptualized within a more general stressor-strain framework.

From the perspective of Trait Activation Theory (Tett, Simonet, Walser, & Brown, 2013), employees are satisfied with their jobs when their trait elevations are consistent with task demands for

two reasons: (a) the expression of traits as work behavior is intrinsically rewarding, and (b) when traits are expressed as successful completion of tasks there are likely to be extrinsic rewards provided. Individuals will be less motivated if task cues are not consistent with their trait levels because they will not frequently experience rewards. We extend this in the present study by positing that workers become distressed when they are frequently asked to perform tasks that require a trait elevation for success that is inconsistent with their own and that this will result in less satisfaction and other strains. In other words, it is not just the absence of opportunities for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards when employees' personality traits are not congruent with demands that results in lower satisfaction, but also that this mismatch functions as a stressor that will result in a variety of psychological strains. Other possibilities besides job satisfaction include depression, anxiety, burnout, and role overload due to a lack of congruence between personality and the personality-based task requirements of the job.

Personality-based job fit therefore refers to the degree to which a person's elevations on job-relevant personality traits (e.g., Conscientiousness) are consistent with the tasks that comprise that job. For instance, a sales job might involve making sales calls (related to Extraversion), listening to unruly customers (Agreeableness), and keeping track of new, current, and potential customers

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(Conscientiousness). In each of these examples, those with higher elevations might be expected to be more comfortable performing the tasks and therefore would have better fit; those with lower elevations would have worse fit and therefore experience distress when asked to perform the tasks frequently. We acknowledge that personality-based fit in the workplace might also derive from cues or demands at the social and organizational levels, but chose to focus on congruence with task-based demands in the present study.

Research has consistently shown that a lack of correspondence between characteristics of a person and the work environment will result in negative psychological, physiological, and behavioral outcomes (Edwards & Cooper, 1990). This has been shown to generalize to a range of strains on the job such as boredom, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and even irritation (Edwards & Harrison, 1993; Kristoff-Brown et al., 2005). Research on the relationship between misfit and strain has generally focused the congruence between knowledge, skill, and abilities and job demands, and has not considered that personality traits may play a causal role as well. When personality has been incorporated into stressor-strain frameworks, traits are generally construed to be moderators or mediators of the relationship rather than an antecedent (Bowling and Jex, 2013).

Why would a misfit between personality and job tasks to result in strain outcomes? Personality should impact the *appraisal* of job tasks, with a more negative appraisal in turn resulting in strain-based outcomes. From the perspective of the transactional theory of stress, personality should impact the perception of stressors through the process of primary appraisal. Primary appraisal is the perception of what is threatening in a stressful encounter (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). For instance, two employees may be assigned to do an organizing task (e.g., filing). One employee might perceive this as a stressor, whereas the other employee may not—all stressors are not created (or perceived) equally.

Costa and McCrae (1990) argue that personality traits are central in determining how people appraise environmental stressors. That is, high levels of some personality traits might predispose people to appraise some events as more threatening and others as less threatening. More specifically, according to the challenge-hindrance occupational stressor model (Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling, & Boudreau, 2000), some stressors have a favorable relationship with employees outcomes (challenges) while others have an unfavorable relationship with these outcomes (hindrances). Challenge stressors tend to take the form of work demands that take effort but can result in feelings of performance efficacy, personal fulfillment, professional and development, whereas hindrance stressors tend to be those stressors that interfere with personal goals and development. Note that this is similar to the conceptualization from Trait Activation Theory discussed above in terms of how personality is thought to affect the likelihood of being intrinsically and extrinsically rewarded depending on the task-based cues.

Although research has generally supported a broad challenge-hindrance framework for understanding workplace stressors, there has been little research explicitly examining what factors might influence these appraisals. Researchers have posited—without testing—that individual difference traits might impact the appraisal of a stressor as a challenge or a hindrance (e.g., Podsakoff, LePine, & LePine, 2007). Indeed, traits such as Neuroticism are often controlled for in stressor-strain research because many researchers believe that this trait might predispose people to report, rather than experience, higher levels of stressors. We believe that the appraisal of work tasks—as distressing (a hindrance) or not distressing (a challenge) will be based on a match between a person's personality and the characteristics of that task. For example, if an employee is extraverted, they will likely appraise an interpersonal task as less distressful, and have subsequent better strain

outcomes. Alternately, an introverted person might perceive any task involving interpersonal interaction as distressful and would experience worse strain.

Past research has addressed the role of personality in job-person fit with very broad strokes. For example, Judge, Bono, and Locke (2000) examined the role of core self-evaluations (CSE, a factor that includes Neuroticism) in terms of whether those low on the trait tend to perceive challenges at work more negatively, and that the perceptions of job characteristics would therefore explain why those individuals have lower job satisfaction. The conceptualization of the current study expands on this by positing additional traits become relevant if personality-based fit is considered with regard to more *specific* demands of the job, namely the tasks and work activities that are performed most frequently. This is important because it suggests that the traits relevant to satisfaction (and potentially other strain-based outcomes) will differ depending on the tasks. The results of the research on CSE do not take into account other traits or the explicit work activities that the job requires.

In the present study, tasks were identified that conceptually required the same trait and similar elevations for success. Three hypotheses were then examined in terms of personality-based job fit in a sample of residence hall assistants. First, it was expected that lower trait elevations would result in the report of more distress when asked perform tasks that require higher levels for success. Negative correlations between the traits and distress on relevant tasks were therefore expected. Second, we posited that certain personality characteristics would influence the appraisal of tasks as distressing hindrance without regard to whether those characteristics were actually required for the activity. In particular, tendencies related to Neuroticism were expected to operate in this fashion and be positively related to task-based distress because they have been consistently linked to stress exposure and perceived stress (Podsakoff et al., 2007). Finally, it was predicted that higher levels of task based distress would associated with less job satisfaction and that these correlations would be also be expected to be negative. More specifically, TBD would mediate the relationship between personality traits and job satisfaction.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A job analysis was conducted where RAs were interviewed to identify job tasks and then 20 RAs completed ratings of the tasks on the frequency and importance the tasks. The resulting task was evaluated by a focus group comprised of four RAs and two graduate students in IO Psychology. The purpose of the group was to determine which traits of the Five-Factor Model (FFM) were related to the task list and the direction of the relationship (i.e., whether lower or higher levels were associated with successful performance). Three traits emerged based on the consensus of the focus group: Agreeableness, Extraversion, and Conscientiousness.

For each of these traits, four job tasks were identified as most relevant and requiring similar elevations based on the linkages from the focus group and importance ratings from the original job analysis sample, resulting in 12 total tasks to be used in the study. Example tasks include “Settles disputes and conflicts between residents discussing problems with both parties and encouraging resolution” (Agreeableness), “Talks with problematic residents about reports of misconduct and offensive behavior” (Extraversion), and “Completes appropriate written documentation of interactions in a thorough manner, explaining causes, actions taken, and potential consequences” (Conscientiousness). Eighty-nine RAs who had not

been part of the job analysis process completed surveys online, including measures of personality, the amount of distress experienced when performing the 12 job tasks, and a job satisfaction questionnaire. The RAs were currently-enrolled college students, mostly female (62%), and were required to have at least one semester of job experience ($M = 3.3$, $SD = 1.5$).

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Personality

The *Mini-IPIP Scale* (Goldberg, 1999) is a 20-item short form of the 50-item International Personality Item Pool (IPIP) FFM measure that was used for this study. This shortened form includes 4 items to assess each of the traits with Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, and Neuroticism included in the current study. Previous studies have revealed that despite the small number of items, the Mini-IPIP can display adequate psychometric properties (Donnellan, Oswald, Baird, & Lucas, 2006).

2.2.2. Task-based distress

Each of the tasks created as a result of the job analysis were assessed based on the level of distress/discomfort experienced while performing that task. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = not distressing at all, and 5 = extremely distressing. Average scores were computed for tasks linked to Extraversion ($\alpha = .76$), Agreeableness ($\alpha = .77$), and Conscientiousness ($\alpha = .79$). Finally, in order to test predictions regarding Neuroticism and overall task-based distress, a composite was computed as an average of all 12 task ratings ($\alpha = .82$).

2.2.3. Job satisfaction

Although job satisfaction is a multi-faceted construct, given the focus on task demands and space constraints, the most relevant facet was satisfaction with the work itself. The Work Satisfaction subscale of the Job Satisfaction Survey (JSS; Spector, 1985) was therefore used in this study (4-items; $\alpha = .74$). Items were assessed on a six-point scale, ranging from 1 = disagree very much to 6 = agree very much.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables are provided in Table 1. Tasks linked to Extraversion were rated as the most distressing ($M = 2.56$) and Conscientious-linked tasks the least ($M = 2.06$). The distress composites of the task clusters for the three traits displayed adequate internal consistency given that they were comprised of four items, with alphas ranging from .76 to .79. The correlations between the distress scores ranged from .33 to .37, suggesting that they were discriminable and not just measuring a general factor.

Overall, scores on the personality inventory were related to work satisfaction [$R = .48$, $F(4,79) = 5.75$, $p < .001$], explaining approximately 23% of the variance. In terms of the hypothesized relationships between trait scores and task-based distress (TBD), the correlations were in the predicted direction for two of the three dimensions. Scores on Agreeableness correlated $r = -.27$ [$t(87) = 2.61$, $p = .005$] with the linked TBD composite and scores on Conscientiousness $r = -.33$ [$t(87) = 3.26$, $p < .001$]. In contrast, the correlation between scores on Extraversion with the distress on linked tasks was small and positive ($r = .11$). As expected, scores on Neuroticism were consistently associated with more distress when asked to perform any task, although sampling error could only be ruled out as an alternative explanation for two of the three composites as well as the overall TBD: $r = .35$ [$t(87) = 3.49$, $p = .024$] for TBD-Extraversion, $r = .11$ [$t(87) = 1.03$, $p = .152$] for TBD-Agreeableness, $r = .19$ [$t(87) = 1.81$, $p = .037$] for TBD-Conscientiousness, and $r = .30$ [$t(87) = 2.93$, $p = .002$].

Regressing work satisfaction of the three measures of task-based distress that were linked to traits showed that these scores were also related [$R = .35$, $F(3,85) = 3.87$, $p = .012$], explaining only 12% of the variance. As predicted the relationships between the three TBD composites with job satisfaction were all negative: $r = -.21$ [$t(87) = 2.01$, $p = .024$] for TBD- Extraversion, $r = -.22$ [$t(87) = 2.10$, $p = .019$] for Agreeableness, $r = -.31$ [$t(87) = 2.01$, $p = .024$] for Conscientiousness, and $r = -.33$ [$t(87) = 3.26$, $p < .001$] for overall TBD.

To more fully model the relationship among the study variables, mediation analyses were conducted where TBD mediated the relationship between personality traits and satisfaction. Bootstrapping methods, as discussed in Preacher and Hayes (2008), were utilized to obtain indirect effect estimates and standard errors based on 1,000 bootstrapped resamples. Using this method, confidence intervals are then estimated but traditional test statistics are not computed (as the results are approximations rather than actual parameters). Results of these analyses were consistent with what might be expected based on the zero-order relationships detailed above. For Extraversion, the indirect effect on satisfaction was negative due to the negative correlation between the trait and distress ($\alpha\beta = -.03$; 95% $CI = -.13$ to $.01$) and therefore inconsistent with the proposed process. For the other three traits, indirect effects were in the predicted directions, although sampling error could only be ruled out with confidence for two of the three. Specifically, the indirect effects were $\alpha\beta = .05$ (95% $CI = -.02$ to $.21$) for Agreeableness and $\alpha\beta = .11$ (95% $CI = .03$ to $.26$) for Conscientiousness. Finally, the indirect effect of Neuroticism on satisfaction through composite-TBD was also significant ($\alpha\beta = -.10$; 95% $CI = -.29$ to $-.02$). Thus, the proposed process that personality relates to satisfaction with work due to distress when performing tasks inconsistent with trait elevations was supported for some, but not all, traits. The most notable exception was Extraversion.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and correlations among study variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Extraversion	3.51	.68	.78	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
2. Agreeableness	4.19	.62	.22	.75	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
3. Conscientiousness	3.51	.80	–.23	–.11	.84	–	–	–	–	–	–
4. Neuroticism	2.45	.61	–.14	.05	–.09	.62	–	–	–	–	–
5. TBD: Extraversion	2.56	.77	.11	.05	–.11	.35	.76	–	–	–	–
6. TBD: Agreeableness	2.21	.64	–.20	–.27	.09	.11	.34	.77	–	–	–
7. TBD Conscientiousness	2.06	.65	.05	–.18	–.33	.19	.33	.37	.79	–	–
8. Overall TBD	2.22	.51	–.01	–.16	–.23	.30	.77	.74	.74	.82	–
9. Job Satisfaction	4.12	.82	.08	.32	.07	–.32	–.21	–.22	–.31	–.33	.74

$N = 89$; TBD = task-based distress. Cronbach's alpha is indicated along the diagonal. Values exceeding .20 are significant at the .05 level; values exceeding .24 are significant at the .01 level.

4. Discussion

The goal of the present study was to advance understanding of the impact of personality-based job fit on satisfaction by expanding the Trait Activation Theory conceptualization to include the proposition that misfit with tasks will result in distress. Task-based distress will lead to less satisfaction with the job. Results of the study were generally consistent with the hypotheses. For two of the three traits (Agreeableness and Conscientiousness) that were related to the tasks, there was a correlation with distress performing relevant tasks. Neuroticism was related to reporting distress for tasks without being linked to success performing the tasks themselves. Finally, increased task-based distress was related to decreases in job satisfaction.

Why were scores on Extraversion not related to distress when performing the tasks that were linked to the trait? One possibility has to do with the nature of the tasks and that personality was assessed as broad factors. Consider the other three of the four tasks identified by the focus group in job analysis as being relevant to the trait (along with “Talks with problematic residents about reports of misconduct and offensive behavior”):

- Approaches people who may not belong in hall after visitation hours.
- Confiscates and reports alcohol that is in violation of Resident Hall policies.
- Confronts violations of residence hall policy.

The logic of the focus group during the job analysis appeared to be that social assertiveness would be necessary for these tasks. However, the Mini-IPIP items focus almost exclusively on the sociability aspects of the construct (e.g., “I am the life of the party” and “I Don’t talk a lot”). It may be that a more narrow measure of assertiveness would have predicted distress. However, it is also informative that the strongest correlation between traits and task-based distress was for Neuroticism and this task composite. Thus, another possibility is that focus group in the job analysis identified the wrong trait as being necessary for successful performance and that emotional stability is more relevant for these activities. All of the above tasks involve confrontations that might be expected to result in more anxiety and discomfort for those higher in Neuroticism, but participants in the focus group may have lacked enough experience with behavioral expressions of the trait to recognize this.

It is also interesting to note that distress resulting from being low in Conscientiousness when the tasks require the trait was the composite most related to satisfaction with work. This finding may be related to the time-consuming nature of conscientious tasks; only tasks that were frequently performed were included (per the job analysis), but did not take into account duration. It may be that conscientious-related tasks (such as writing up incident reports and other paperwork) take longer than other types of tasks and may be more distressful. Alternatively, it could be that extrinsic rewards or punishment may be more salient for the tasks related to this trait.

4.1. Limitations and future directions

The current study has two noteworthy limitations. First, all of the measures were completed by participants at one point in time and common method variance is a concern. Future research should consider getting observer ratings of personality from multiple coworkers. Second, the focus was on RAs, which is not generally a career-track job. It also combines the stress of being available to residents at any time with the additional stress associated with being a full-time student. As such, an area of future research should

be to see whether the results of the current study generalize to other occupations. Future research should extend this approach to other jobs, consider linking tasks to narrow trait facets, and include additional strain measures. It would also be beneficial to get supervisor ratings on tasks to provide a check as to whether traits are actually related to performance; tasks could even be clustered in this fashion rather than based on personality-based job analysis. In future research it would also be helpful to measure how frequently tasks are performed by each employee or how much time is spent. Strain should be greatest when distressing tasks are performed more often or for longer duration, and some employees spend more time on some aspects of their jobs than others. Finally, in the present research all of the tasks that were relevant to a trait were similar in the elevation expected to be associated with success. It would be interesting to include tasks for some traits that differ markedly in the direction of the relationship with success and examine how trait scores and distress relate across levels.

4.2. Conclusions

Misfit between personality and the tasks required for the job may result in less satisfaction because employees are distressed when asked to do activities they may not prefer and are not likely to excel at. The results of this study suggest that such task-based distress is one reason, but not the only reason, personality it related to performance. Decreased motivation as a result of infrequent intrinsic and extrinsic rewards are undoubtedly another. Trait Activation Theory might therefore be expanded to focus on the stressor-strain perspective and consider other common strains (e.g., anxiety, depression, burnout, role overload). In addition, the results of this study invite stress researchers interested in challenge and hindrance stressors to consider the antecedents of specific aspects of the stressors, and personality in particular. The results also suggest that this may need to be examined within jobs by referencing specific tasks and related traits rather than across jobs or organizations. In general, a more narrow focus on facets of personality and the outcomes of performing specific work behaviors is most likely to yield a better understanding of job-person fit.

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