

PE Fit/Misfit and Regulatory Focus: Evidence for Different Profiles of Strategy and Performance

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Recent articles on Person-Environment (P-E) Fit propose a dynamic approach taking into account theories on emotions (Yu, 2009) or self-regulation (Johnson, Taing, Chang, & Kawamoto, *submitted*). This paper presents an empirical test of the link between P-E Fit and self-regulation, based on regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998).

Person-environment fit

In general, P-E fit refers to the correspondence between the person and the environment (Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). Today, P-E fit is considered as multidimensional (Edwards & Shipp, 2007), and one can also distinguish different types of fit. Needs-supplies fit (Kristof, 1996) refers to the means by which the environment meets the individual's needs. Demands-abilities fit (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987) refers to the capacity of the individual to meet the requirements of the environment.

Recently, it was clarified that in general, P-E fit is assessed by three different approaches (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006): molar, molecular, and atomic. The molar approach refers to an overall assessment or feeling of fit, and it is strongly correlated with affective attitudes (Edwards et al., 2006). We propose that an "a priori" feeling of fit (i.e., a general, first impression using the molar approach) in a new situation should influence people's behaviour in their attempts to respond correctly to the environment's requirements.

Regulatory focus theory addresses the way in which people respond to their environment and posits that there are two motivational principles (Higgins, 1997, 1998) that govern behaviors and strategies for achieving goals. The first one relates to the achievement of ideals and personal fulfillment, and is called the promotional focus. People guided by this focus develop promotional behaviors and attitudes of approach (Carver & Scheier, 1998). The second one relates to concerns for obligations and responsibilities and seeking preservation and security, and is called the preventive focus. People guided by this focus develop preventive behaviours and attitudes of avoidance (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Initially defined as a chronic orientation, regulatory focus can also be influenced by the situational context (Crowe & Higgins, 1997).

We will focus on the molar perception of demands-abilities fit. Perceptions of demands-abilities misfit can be conceptualized as concern about the discrepancy between the actual-self and the normative-self, whereas perceptions of demands-abilities fit can be conceptualized as concern about the discrepancy between the actual-self and the ideal-self (Higgins, 1987). Thus, we propose that a feeling of **misfit** focuses people on their inability to respond to what is expected of them, and that this gap results in the use of a preventive strategy with respect to goal attainment. Furthermore we propose that the feeling of **fit**

focuses the person on achieving success, which corresponds to a promotional strategy (Higgins, 1987).

In the present study, we used a game similar to a task of analytical reasoning. Our experimental context should make the perception of fit influence either choosing a promotional strategy where one is faster and less attentive to the risk of error, or a preventive strategy where one is slower and avoids the risk of error. We expected that the nature of the chronic focus influences perception of fit (Johnson, Chang, and Yang, 2010). Specifically, we hypothesized that the promotion focus would be related to P-E Fit perceptions.

Hypothesis 1: Chronic promotion focus is positively correlated to perceptions of P-E Fit.

We also expected that the impact of perceived fit on response time (interpreted as a behavioural expression of a preventive or a promotional strategy) would be moderated by the chronic focus.

Hypothesis 2: Chronic regulatory focus moderates the effect of P-E Fit on response time.

Method

Participants were 102 students who played our computerized reasoning game during which we collected response times. They first completed the Regulatory Focus Questionnaire (Higgins, Friedman, Harlow, Idson, Ayduk, & Taylor, 2001) from which we computed chronic promotion and chronic prevention focus scores. Then, a sample item from the game was presented to provide instructions and allow participants to form their “a priori” perception of fit. We measured fit with a 6-item molar demands-abilities fit scale developed for our game context. Finally, they played the game which consisted of 8 items. Participants had to respond true or false to a question regarding each stimulus item presented as quickly as possible. Reaction times were recorded.

Results and Discussion

Both hypotheses were supported. We observed a significant correlation between chronic promotion focus and the “a priori” perception of fit ($r = .22, p < .05$). People with a greater chronic promotion focus reported more fit in a new situation for which they had little knowledge, consistent with hypothesis 1.

We predicted that fit perceptions would interact with focus influencing people’s strategies as indicated by their reaction times. We therefore conducted a moderated regression predicting response times from **perception of fit** (fita), prevention focus (prev), promotion focus (pro), the two-factor interactions (fita X prev; fita X pro; prev X pro), and the three-factor interaction (fita x prev x pro). The three-factor interaction was significant, and as shown in Figure 1, Hypothesis 2 is confirmed in that, people who perceive misfit are slower and people who perceive fit are faster in responding. This effect is observed for people who are high on promotion focus and low on prevention focus.

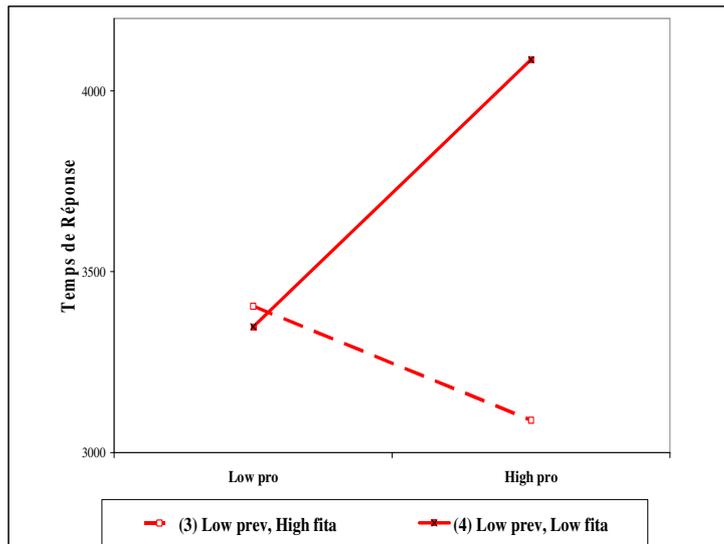


Figure 1: Moderated impact of fit or misfit perception by regulatory focus on response time.

Our results contribute to understanding the relation between demand-abilities fit and performance. Moreover, this study supports ideas of distinct strategies of action from Fit and Misfit perceptions. We would like to continue our research on strategies of exploration, information processing, and decision-making. These issues are especially relevant in the career decision-making field. Indeed, the effectiveness of exploration depends on the ability of the individual to develop an open mind and to produce alternative responses and analogies (Pelletier, Noiseux, & Bujold, 1974). We also know that Regulatory Focus is related to formulating of alternative hypotheses (Lieberman, Molden, Idson, & Higgins, 2001). Now, we would like to test the interaction effect observed here on the formulation of alternative hypotheses and exploration strategies and behaviours in vocational choice. We are therefore exploring ways of measuring divergent thinking in relation to occupational and vocational choices.

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