

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL SECTION

Person–Environment Fit: Theoretical Meaning, Conceptual Models, and Empirical Measurement

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the construct of “fit” between a worker and a job has provided the framework for comprehending vocational behavior. This heuristic construct—also referred to as congruence and correspondence—has prompted more than 100 empirical studies. Unfortunately, these studies have reported confusing results, many of which have been described and discussed in several meta-analytic articles. Puzzled by these data and discussions, researchers and practitioners have generally ignored them, concluding that the research underestimates the true relation between fit and its hypothesized outcomes. Little attention has been directed at understanding why this is so and what can be done about it. To address the lack of movement in fit research, Howard Tinsley accepted my invitation to attempt unraveling the puzzle and prompt movement in new directions by “reviewing the reviews” of literature on person–environment fit. He presents the results of his review in the form of 10 principles abstracted from reviews of more than 100 studies on P–E fit. In the main, he concludes that the construct of P–E fit has substantial validity and practical use yet could benefit from conceptual refinement, longitudinal research designs, more precise measurement, and better data-analytic techniques. He also offers specific suggestions on how to advance research on P–E fit, including discontinuing research on the hexagonal structure of Holland’s RIASEC dimensions.

Six respondents agreed to discuss Tinsley’s conclusions. The respondents, in addition to adding their own ideas about P–E fit, clarified and elaborated some conclusions drawn by Tinsley as well as challenged other conclusions. Furthermore, they offered suggestions on how to elaborate P–E theory, refine the models that conceptualize P–E fit, employ longitudinal research designs, increase the precision of measurement approaches, and use more meaningful data-analytic strategies. Several of the discussants took issue with Tinsley’s conclusions about Holland’s model, arguing that the hexagon is a good approximation of reality and more than meets the requirements of the circular order hypothesis. Tinsley’s reactions to the responses will appear in the June 2000 issue of this Journal.

I hope that the target article and responses prompt work to elaborate theories of person–environment interaction and refine models of fit, starting with more

meaningful conceptualizations, better research designs, and improved measurement procedures. In particular, I encourage researchers to further elaborate P-E interaction as the paradigm for vocational psychology by devising commensurate and more precise measures of personal and environmental requirements and supplies, comparing alternative models of fit including the present status model, and examining personality as a moderator of fit. Hopefully these new investigations will use longitudinal designs to study how individual career patterns consist of occupational moves toward increasingly better fit and how individuals actively shape their jobs to better fit their requirements and supplies. Finally, I hope that some researchers begin to examine how individuals fit work into their lives rather than concentrating on how individuals fit into occupations.

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