

Person-Environment Value Congruence and Satisfaction with Life

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Abstract

The present study analyzes the relationship of person-environment value congruence and individual satisfaction with life among German adolescents (N=1229). A positive relationship between person-environment value congruence and individual life satisfaction was hypothesized based on person-environment fit theory (e.g., Fulmer, et al., 2010). It was further hypothesized that—living in an individualist culture like Germany—individuals, who favor an interdependent self-construal (as introduced by Markus, & Kitayama, 1991) should be less satisfied with their lives than individuals with an independent self-construal, thereby testing the person-environment fit hypothesis on a higher, more abstract level. The hypothesis of a positive relationship between person-environment value congruence and individual satisfaction with life was confirmed. An unexpected finding was that individuals with an interdependent self-construal were more satisfied with their lives than those with an independent self-construal, in spite of the fact that they lived in an individualistic culture.

Keyword: person-environment fit, values, satisfaction with life, adolescents

1. Introduction

Person-environment value congruence is defined as the similarity between one's own value priorities and the value priorities prevailing in one's environment (Stromberg & Boehnke, 2001). The central assumption of this study is that individuals feel more satisfied with their lives, when they experience value congruence with their environment. This relation has often been assumed, and a number of empirical studies have been conducted which confirmed a relation between the person-environment value congruence and well-being (Pervin, 1967; Sagiv & Schwartz, 2000; Triandis, 2000), however, few—if any—studies have been conducted with adolescents.

Sagiv and Schwartz (2000) proposed three mechanisms on which a (positive) relationship between value congruence and satisfaction with life can be based conceptually. These are *environmental affordances*, *social sanctions*, and *internal conflict*. First, environments can be congruent or not. In the case of congruence they may offer affordances to people (Gibson, 1979) to express their values, and consequently people are likely to experience well-being. On the other hand, incongruent environments block goal attainment, which is likely to lead to negative well-being. Second, people with values congruent to those cherished by their life context are likely to be supported by their environment, which again produces well-being. In contrast, people with incongruent values tend to be sanctioned; producing negative well-being (Holland, & Gottfredson, 1976). Thirdly, well-being may be undermined by difficulties in decision-making (Tetlock, 1986), because of internal conflict between own values and values cherished in one's cultural context. A positive relation between person-environment value congruence and individual satisfaction with life is the core hypothesis of this study.

Hofstede (1980, 1991) has described the cultural dimension of individualism and collectivism. In individualist societies people are essentially expected to look after themselves, whereas in collectivist societies people are expected to integrate into cohesive in-groups. Parallel to this cultural dimension, Markus and Kitayama (1991) make a distinction between an *independent self-construal* and an *interdependent self-construal*.

Individuals with an independent self-construal see themselves mostly as autonomous persons, whereas people with an interdependent self-construal see themselves primarily as part of a group. Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and Clark (1985) have used the terms idiocentricvs. allocentric for essentially the same differentiation.

Following reasoning put forward by Schwartz (1990) as well as by Triandis (2000), namely that one’s self-construal must fit to the prevailing society to experience high satisfaction with life, we expect that individuals with an interdependent self-construal are less satisfied with their lives than individuals with an independent self-construal when they live in individualist cultures like Germany (where our study was conducted). In other words, individuals who score high on allocentrism should be less satisfied with their lives than individuals who score low on allocentrism, when they live in an individualist culture.

1.1.Values and Value Congruence

The present study’s concept of values is based upon the value theory proposed by Schwartz (1992). Schwartz defines values as desirable transsituational goals, which vary in importance and serve as guiding principles in people’s lives. According to the theory ten motivationally distinct value types exist. These are power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security. The value types are located in a circumplex structure (Figure 1).

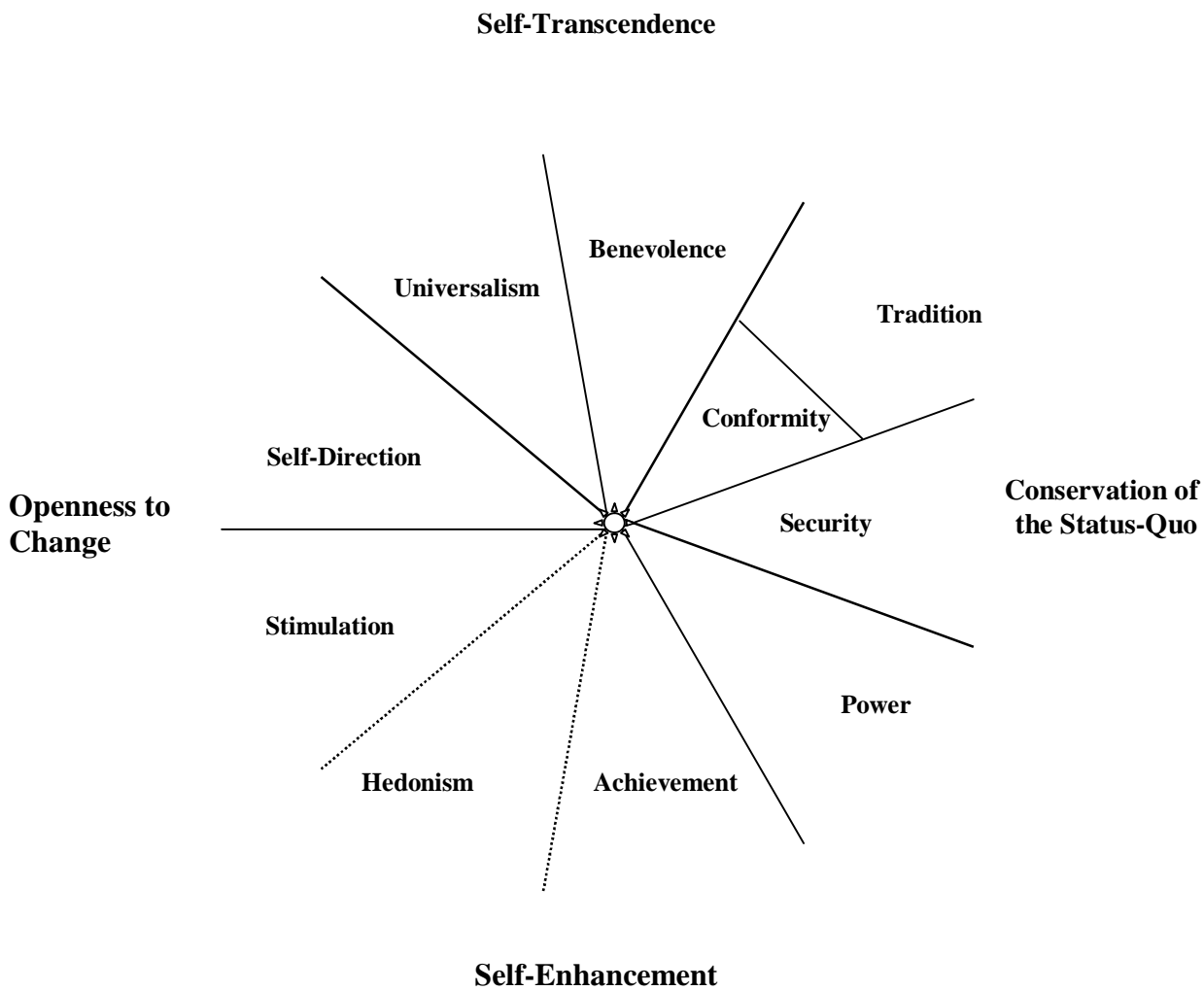


Figure 1: Schwartz’s Circumplex Model of Human Values

In line with their location in the circumplex depicted in Figure 1 dynamic relations among these values are obvious: Complementary values are close to each other in the structure, while competing values stand on the opposite side of the structure. Additionally, value types can be ordered into four higher-order value orientations along two underlying dimensions (self-transcendence vs. self-enhancement and openness to change vs. conservation of the status quo). Value incompatibility can arise when a person holds values that are dynamically opposed to each other. In this case the person can experience *intrapersonal* value conflict. However, in the present study, we focus on *interpersonal* value incompatibilities. These are differences between the value priorities of individuals and their environment. They will be analyzed and related to the individual's satisfaction with life.

Person-environment value congruence can be conceptualized in two possible ways: In the *subjective* approach the value priorities of the individual are contrasted with value priorities of the cultural context as perceived by the individual. In the *objective* approach individual value priorities are contrasted with the mean value priorities of the environment. In this study the focus is on *objective* value congruence and its relation to satisfaction with life.

1.2. Well-Being and Satisfaction with Life

According to Diener, Sapyta, and Suh (1998, p. 34), "*Subjective well-being* is a person's evaluation of his or her life: This valuation can be in terms of cognitive states such as satisfaction with one's marriage, work, and life, and it can be in terms of ongoing affect ([...] the presence of positive emotions and moods, and the absence of unpleasant affect)." Satisfaction with life (SWL) is the cognitive aspect of well-being. In this study SWL is taken as indicator of subjective well-being (SWB).

1.3. Self-Construals

Markus and Kitayama (1991) distinguish two different self-construals: the interdependent and the independent self-construal. People with an interdependent self-construal seek out relatedness with other people and harmonious interdependence. They want to fit into the group and attend to others. In contrast, people with an independent self-construal want to be independent from others, they attend to the self and want to be a unique personality (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, Chan, Bhawuk, Iwao, & Sinha, 1995). Triandis, Leung, Villareal, and Clark (1985) introduced the terms allocentrism and idiocentrism. These terms include the independent and interdependent views of the self but are defined slightly more broadly (Triandis, et al., 1995), for example, personal goals have priority over group goals in idiocentrism, whereas group goals have priority over individual goals in allocentrism. Nonetheless, the terms interdependent/independent self-construal and allocentrism/idiocentrism essentially refer to the same phenomenon.

1.4. Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There is a positive relationship between objective person-environment value congruence and individual satisfaction with life.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals with a strong interdependent self-construal/a high degree of allocentrism are less satisfied with their lives than individuals with a weak interdependent self-construal/low degree of allocentrism when they live in an individualist culture like Germany.

Both hypotheses were tested in the grand sample and, additionally, in the subsamples of younger (< 14 years of age) and older (\geq 14 years of age) adolescents, to check for age effects, without a specific hypothesis on age trends.

2. Methods

2.1. Samples

The data used in the present study were gathered in the project "Identity Development and Value Transmission among Veteran and Migrant Adolescents and their Families in Germany and Israel: Life Transitions and Contexts" (Boehnke & Knafo, 2006; Möllering et al., 2009). The second author of this paper and Ariel Knafo from The Hebrew University of Jerusalem were the principal investigators. Data were collected throughout 2007/2008 in secondary schools in the North West of Germany. The sample of the current study included 1229 German adolescents, thereof 611 girls and 616 boys (two youth did not give their gender).

In order to simplify the analytic complexity of our hypothesis test, we only included veteran German adolescents in our analyses: youngsters with a migration background (they themselves and/or at least one parent not born in Germany) were excluded, because for them “environment” has a dual character a priori, encompassing both the value priorities of their (or their parents’) culture of upbringing and of Germany as their culture of destiny. The adolescents surveyed for the study were between 9 and 18 years old ($M = 12.80$; $SD = 2.49$). Two subsamples were also created by separating participants into early (younger than 14 years) and mid adolescence (14 years and older). The early adolescence group encompassed 789 young people ($M = 11.02$ years; $SD = .75$), the mid adolescence group encompassed 440 young people ($M = 15.98$, $SD = .67$).

2.2. Instruments

2.2.1. Value Congruence

Value priorities were measured by the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006). In it respondents were requested to rate 25 items on a Likert scale from 1 to 6 (not like me at all, not like me, a little like me, somewhat like me, like me and very much like me), how similar a person portrayed as to his/her value priorities in a short scenario is to themselves. The mean of the two or three items representing a value type indicated the value priorities.

In the grand sample reliabilities of the value types were satisfactory. For the two- to three-item value scales Cronbach’s α s were .52 for self-direction, .56 for stimulation, .66 for hedonism, .79 for achievement, .54 for power, .60 for security, .65 for conformity, .35 for tradition, .68 for benevolence and .61 for universalism. A value congruence index reflected the difference between the value priorities of an adolescent and the mean value priorities of the grand sample (for analyses pertain to this sample) and of two subsamples (for analyses pertaining to the two different age groups). Means, thus, stand for the environment of the person; the index assessed objective value congruence.

For the PVQ data an MRAT-adjustment (Fischer, 2004) was performed to correct data for scale-use idiosyncrasies: The individual mean of all PVQ items was calculated as a new variable MRAT (for *mean rating*), which was then subtracted from the raw score for every PVQ item. By this, for every item a new variable was obtained, reflecting differences of all PVQ items from the mean of a person. To bring scores back to the original range of scores between 1 and 6, an empirically derived constant of 4 was added to the MRAT-adjusted values.

The value congruence index was obtained by squaring the absolute difference of the score for the individual participant and the mean value preference score for the relevant group of reference for each and every value type (squared Euclidean distance model). The distance score was then multiplied by -1 in order to convert the distance scores into congruence scores. A constant of 1 was added to let means of the new scores have numerically positive values. Finally, the sum of the ten congruence scores was determined.

2.2.2. Satisfaction with Life

The *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (SWL; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985) measures global life satisfaction, which is a person’s evaluation of his or her life as a whole. It consists of the following five items: “In most ways my life is closely to my ideal,” “The conditions of my life are excellent,” “I am satisfied with my life,” “So far I have gotten the important things I want in life,” and “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.” Items had to be answered on a seven-point-Likert-type response format running from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). A Cronbach’s α of .79 indicated a very good consistency of the SWL scale.

2.2.3. Allocentrism

According to Schwartz (1990, 1994) the three value types tradition, conformity, and security, which all belong to the conservation pole of Schwartz’s circumplex model of values, can be seen as a measure of allocentrism (or individual-level collectivism), which may also be taken as a proxy for an interdependent self-construal. In order to generate such a score, the preferences for the three value types have to be averaged. To create the index, data obtained with the Portrait Value Questionnaire (PVQ; Schwartz, Montgomery & Briones, 2006) were once again used. To calculate the allocentrism (interdependence) index the three MRAT adjusted scores of the value type’s security, conformity, and tradition were averaged for each participant. Cronbach’s α for the allocentrism scale was .75. The scale was, thus, highly consistent.

Subsequently two groups were formed by separating people with high and low allocentrism at the median. For the grand sample, the grand sample median was chosen as the cut point, for the two age groups subsample medians were used as cut points.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptives

Before testing our two hypotheses, we document descriptive evidence for the variables addressed in the hypotheses. Table 1 displays means and standard deviations for SWL in the grand sample and in the two age groups.

Table 1. Satisfaction with life in the grand sample and differentiated by age

Satisfaction with Life	N	Mean	SD
Grand sample	1154	5.27	1.10
Young Adolescents (8-13 years)	728	5.44	1.04
Mid Adolescents (14-18 years)	426	4.99	1.13

There was a significant difference in life satisfaction between the two age groups ($t = -6.74$, $p < .001$), the 14- to 18-year-olds being less satisfied with their lives than the young adolescents.

Table 2 documents the raw scale scores for each of the 10 value types in the grand sample.

Table 2. Value priorities

	Sample ^a	N	Mean	SD	Rank
Self-direction	GS	1207	4.70	.81	4
	YA	771	4.70	.84	4
	MA	436	4.71	.75	3
Stimulation	GS	1211	4.57	1.05	5
	YA	775	4.64	1.05	5
	MA	436	4.44	1.04	5
Hedonism	GS	1209	5.06	.89	1
	YA	772	5.11	.87	1
	MA	437	4.96	.92	1
Achievement	GS	1213	4.02	1.19	7
	YA	777	3.89	1.24	8
	MA	436	4.24	1.06	6
Power	GS	1215	3.28	1.31	10
	YA	780	3.11	1.33	10
	MA	435	3.59	1.21	9
Security	GS	1218	4.45	1.18	6
	YA	780	4.59	1.16	6
	MA	438	4.20	1.18	7
Conformity	GS	1190	3.85	1.06	8
	YA	759	3.93	1.07	7
	MA	431	3.69	1.03	8
Tradition	GS	1207	3.61	1.17	9
	YA	771	3.69	1.18	9
	MA	436	3.48	1.12	10
Benevolence	GS	1205	4.96	.82	2
	YA	769	5.00	.86	3
	MA	436	4.89	.76	2
Universalism	GS	1213	4.83	.91	3
	YA	778	5.00	.84	2
	MA	435	4.53	.95	4

^a GS = Grand Sample, YA = Young Adolescents, MA = Mid Adolescents

The rank order of preferences is not all that unusual for German youngsters, however, compared to German university students surveyed some ten years earlier (Boehnke, 2004), the 'jump' of hedonism to Rank 1 is remarkable.

Table3. Value congruence in the grand sample and differentiated by age^a

Value congruence	N	Mean	SD
Grand sample	1227	2.62	5.44
Adolescents from 8-13 years	788	2.84	5.72
Adolescents from 14-18 years	439	2.78	4.65

^aReaders should note that the three congruence variables have different reference means to assess congruence. For the grand sample, the grand sample mean is the mean of reference, for the two other groups it is the age-group-specific mean.

Table4. Allocentrism in the grand sample and differentiated by age

Allocentrism	N	Mean	SD
Grand sample	1227	3.62	.58
Adolescents from 8-13 years	788	3.68	.56
Adolescents from 14-18 years	439	3.49	.59

3.2. Testing of the hypotheses

We tested our two hypotheses by calculating simple bivariate correlations and running independent sample t-tests where appropriate.

Hypothesis 1. For the grand sample the bivariate correlation between value congruence and satisfaction with life was $r = .16$, $p < .001$. Differentiated by age the bivariate correlation between value congruence and satisfaction with life was $r = .17$, $p < .001$ in the younger age group. Also for the adolescents between 14 and 18 years value congruence and satisfaction with life correlated $r = .16$, $p = .001$. Altogether, this suggests that there is a weak but significant and positive correlation between value congruence and satisfaction with life regardless of age in adolescence. Hypothesis 1 was confirmed, but effect sizes were low.

Hypothesis 2. In the grand sample the mean satisfaction with life was 5.27 (Table 1). The adolescents who scored low on allocentrism had an average satisfaction with life of 5.13. Those, who scored high on allocentrism, had an average the life satisfaction of 5.41. A *t*-test for independent samples showed that the difference in satisfaction with life was significant ($t = -4.32$, $p < .001$). In the group of the younger adolescents, mean satisfaction with life was 5.44 (Table 1). The younger adolescents who had low scores on allocentrism had a satisfaction with life of 5.37. Those who had high scores on allocentrism had a satisfaction with life of 5.51. A *t*-test for independent samples this time showed that the difference in satisfaction with life was not significant ($t = -1.88$, $p = .060$) in the younger group. In the age group from 14-18 years the satisfaction with life was 4.99 in average (Table 1). Adolescents in this age group who scored low on allocentrism had an average satisfaction with life of 4.83. Adolescents in this age group who scored high on allocentrism had an average satisfaction with life of 5.15. A *t*-test for independent samples showed that the difference in satisfaction with life was significant ($t = -2.91$, $p = .004$).

In both age groups and in the grand sample youth who scored high on allocentrism had a *higher* satisfaction with life than youth who scored low on allocentrism. In the younger age group the difference in satisfaction with life was not significant, whereas it was a significant difference in the older age group and the grand sample. The results suggest that we have to reject Hypothesis 2. Following a positivist test logic, we cannot on the grounds of our findings accept the reverse hypothesis, but results suggest that the relationship between allocentrism/interdependence and well-being is more complex than assumed in Hypothesis 2.

4. Discussion

According to our first hypothesis there should be a positive relation between objective person-environment value congruence and individual satisfaction with life. This hypothesis was confirmed. Effects were significant but weak: Positive correlations between value congruence and satisfaction with life were found. Low effect sizes for an essentially confirmed relationship may be explainable by different factors.

First of all, in the literature, correlations between value congruence and satisfaction with life are assumed and in part corroborated as being high, when close social units are examined (like neighborhoods, school classes, or peers with whom one regularly interacts; Schwartz & Boehnke, 1998; Frydenberg & Lewis, 1991; Frindte, 1991). In this study we compared adolescents with a 'generalized other,' namely their age group. As the participating adolescents obviously did not interact with all the other youth in the sample, it was not likely to find a high correlation between congruence and well-being.

Stromberg (2001) suggests that people have the possibility to adjust their own values to those dominant in the environment. As adolescents depend a lot on the appreciation of their peers (Berndt, 1979), it might be the case for many adolescents who cannot bear value discrepancies that they have changed their values for a better fit with their peers. Research shows that people adapt to many situations, so to ensure that their well-being will not be affected negatively in the long run (Okun & George, 1984; Suh, Diener & Fujita, 1996). Presumably people, youngsters in particular, do also adapt to value incongruence. Differences in social competence as well as self-esteem (both unanalyzed here) in all probability also help to buffer negative effects of objective value discrepancies with the generalized other. Another buffer against a lower satisfaction with life as a consequence of value incongruence within the age group will certainly be value congruence with closer and more relevant social units like friends or family (Stromberg, 2001).

Finally, a reason for low correlations could be seen in the very fact that participants live in an individualistic country. Individualistic societies, particularly when population density is not overly high, rarely sanction value deviance explicitly (Hofstede, 1991). In light of all the spelt-out provisos, it seems more surprising that a significant positive correlation between objective person-environment fit in values and satisfaction with life was indeed found than that its size was comparatively low.

Our second hypothesis claimed that individuals with a strong interdependent self-construal/a high degree of allocentrism should be less satisfied with their lives than individuals with a weak interdependent self-construal/low degree of allocentrism when they live in an individualistic country like Germany. This tested the person-environment fit hypothesis on another level. It assumed that certain value preferences a priori fit better to an individualist culture than other preferences. Results disconfirm this hypothesis: In the grand sample and in both age groups the satisfaction with life was *higher* for youth who exhibited a high preference for allocentric views of life than for youth low on allocentrism (though insignificantly so in the younger age group).

The result demonstrates that (against our initial reasoning) a high degree of allocentrism *can* go along with a high degree of satisfaction with life in an individualistic society. To interpret this result it is helpful to bring to mind, what it means to live in an individualistic society. In such a society people have to decide for themselves (Hofstede, 1991). But such a society also tends to be loose and a variety of different value priorities is allowed (Triandis, 1993). Even if security, tradition and conformity are not typical value priorities in an individualistic society, they are accepted and tolerated.

According to Markus and Kitayama (1991) people with an interdependent self-construal emphasize harmonious interdependence with other people. And as the adolescents who score high on allocentrism have a higher satisfaction with life, it might be the case that the values security, tradition and conformity help them to fulfill their wish for intensive relationships and satisfy their need for relatedness. Our finding may indicate that values are not just abstract guidelines, but that they are put into behavior on a day-to-day basis. According to the self-determination theory of Deci and Ryan (2000) relatedness is one of the three innate psychological needs (besides autonomy and self-regulation) where fulfillment makes people happy. The results of the present study demonstrate that well-being can indeed go along with allocentric value priorities in an individualistic society. In our study, adolescents who score high on allocentrism might also be more satisfied with their lives, because they receive more and better social support (Diener, Diener & Diener, 1995; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai & Lucca, 1988).

According to Triandis et al. (1988) the experience of harmony in the in-group and stability in relationships lead to less loneliness and lower stress levels among individuals high on allocentrism, regardless of societal context. Of course, much of what we spell out here is speculation and needs a new study to be tested, as our initial assumption was different.

The results of our study demonstrate that the exploration of the impact of objective person-environment value congruence is worthwhile. At the same time, the study has obvious limitations. In future research one would obviously have to direct more attention to other possible moderators than age that may impact the relationship between person-environment value congruence and well-being (like gender or social class). One would also want to study the impact of possible mediators (like self-esteem or individually received social support). Last but not least, questions of “congruence with what/whom” need to be addressed in more detail. Here congruence with a generalized other—only matched for age—with the study participants was used as an operationalization of the person-environment fit. In future research one would have to look more closely at less generalized other (peers with whom youth directly interact, in particular).

The conviction that a fresh look at the “age-old” (Pervin, 1967) person-environment fit hypothesis is necessary and important is sustained by the present study, adding a small stone to the mosaic recently brought into focus again by Fulmer et al. (2010).

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