

# **Consequences of Person-Environment Fit Across Contexts: We Are Where We Live**

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What would happen if neurotic New Yorker Woody Allen woke up and found himself deep in the heart of Texas? If an impulsive teenager woke up and found herself having to live like her more sedate grandmother? If a liberal Berkeley student woke up and found himself studying among more conservative peers at Ole Miss?

Personality traits can dramatically interact with a person's environment. The subsequent degree of Person-Environment Fit, or PE-Fit, can produce vastly different outcomes, as explained during the APS Student Caucus symposium, "Consequences of Person-Environment Fit Across Contexts," at the APS Annual Convention in Atlanta.

The research presented in this symposium provides a glimpse into how the reciprocal relationships between personality traits and how the environment can influence well being. Student researchers used diverse methodologies, including a large Web-based survey, a cross-sectional study, and a longitudinal, archival approach, and different types of PE-fit across regions of America, across different age-based roles, and across the college years.

## **PE-FIT ACROSS US REGIONS: FEELING AT HOME**

Despite the prevalence of stereotypes about regions of the United States, few researchers have empirically identified how the fit between personality and regional environment can affect well-being. In an extensive Web-based study that surveyed over 238,000 people across America, Simine Vazire and Jason Rentfrow of the University of Texas at Austin found that there is validity to regional stereotypes about Westerners, Midwesterners, Northeasterners, and Southerners.

Specifically, Midwesterners are in fact more extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious than people living in other parts of the country. Northeasterners are the most neurotic group in the country, and people living on either coast (Westerners and Northeasterners) are the most open to new experiences. After forming a personality profile for each region, calculated by taking a weighted average of the responses from participants in the states comprising the region, Vazire and Rentfrow found that people's objective degree of PE-fit with their region's personality can directly influence their well-being. That is, people whose personality correlates most highly with the personality profile of the region they currently live in are likely to have higher self-esteem, be less depressed, and be more emotionally stable than those whose personality is mismatched with their region's personality, perhaps indicating that Woody Allen might do well to stay in New York.

## **PE-FIT ACROSS AGE-BASED ROLES: ACTING YOUR AGE**

Taking a different approach to studying PE-Fit, Dustin Wood of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign investigated how the early psychological maturity of college students influences the extent to which they acquire the personality characteristics of older adults. To establish the psychological profile

for a number of age-graded roles, a sample of college students and adults rated the personality traits of the typical high school student, college student, parent, and grandparent. Consistent with the stereotypes, participants in both samples thought that people occupying older age-graded roles were seen as more agreeable, conscientious, and emotionally stable but less extraverted and open to experience than those in younger age-graded roles.

In a second study, Wood sought to determine if college students who consider themselves adults assume the personality profile of adults. If so, these students would look more “trait mature” and have more positive well-being than their peers who do not consider themselves to be adults. As expected, he found that the adult-oriented students were more agreeable and conscientious and also had higher positive affect than the students who did not perceive themselves as adult-minded.

#### PE-FIT ACROSS THE COLLEGE YEARS: BECOMING THE HARVARD MAN

Through a retrospective analysis of student life in the 1960s, P.D. Harms of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign examined the antecedents of PE-Fit and studied whether PE-Fit influenced personality change in a group of college students at a Northeastern university from 1961 to 1968. After reviewing the personality inventories typically given during this era, including the Stern Activities Index and the College Characteristics Index, and conceptually matching them with the more widely accepted inventories of today, Harms found that the most reliable antecedent of PE-Fit across the college years was openness to experience. Moreover, he found a corresponding effect between the students and the characteristics of their surroundings such that students who had a strong actual (objective) and perceived (subjective) PE-Fit with their campus environment had a higher class rank, graduated with more honors, and adjusted better to college life than those students with a lower PE-Fit.

These three studies provide a distinctive perspective on the phenomenon of PE-fit, and bring a new theoretical breadth and depth to the literature. More practically, these studies provide scientific insight to age-old adages by empirically demonstrating the psychological consequences resulting from people “feeling at home, acting your age, and becoming the Harvard man.”