

Goodness of Fit: The History of the Person-Environment Paradigm

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Matching people to the environments they live and work is centrally important in industrial/organizational psychology. At this year's Annual Convention in Los Angeles, an invited symposium examined the history of the person—environment paradigm.

Symposium Chair David Baker, Director of the Archives of the History of America at the University of Akron, said person—environment matching gained popularity in the early 20th century, with the rise of the new urban and industrial order. According to Frank Landy, an APS Fellow and Charter Member, the concept of person—environment fit marked the beginning of studying individual rather than general laws of behavior in applied psychology.

At the turn of the 20th century, Landy said, Taylorism and scientific management, designed for large organizations of people, were the dominant paradigm. The emergence of tests designed to place a person in a certain environment or job during World War I were responses and reactions to ideas that had dealt mainly with groups rather than individuals.

“This was maybe the very first inkling that an individual difference could be used to place people within an environment,” Landy said. After World War I and continuing through the first half of the century, he said, psychologists increasingly began to rely on the person—environment paradigm as a method for placing individuals in particular positions.

A world war was also instrumental in the emergence of another approach (and subfield) within the person—environment fit paradigm, according to APS Fellow and Charter Member William Howell, Arizona State University. Human factors and ergonomics deal with human-centered design — making a job, say, or piece of software or equipment, fit better with the person using it.

Beginning with World War II, Howell said, the Army Air Force used psychologists to help fix “user-unfriendly design features” such as communication problems with aircraft and radar. After the war, the military continued to support such research. Howell said the field of human-factors and ergonomics was not formalized, however, until the mid-1950s.

Since then, Howell said, academic programs in human factors and ergonomics have slowly emerged, and the idea is gaining ground outside of the classroom. “There’s a growing awareness, I think, for the demand of human user-friendly design.” Howell said. “You just look around and you can see it. People talk about user-friendliness. This is something people recognize.”

APS Charter Member Mark Savickas, Northeastern Ohio University, discussed the person—environment fit paradigm in vocational psychology.

Early-20th-century urbanization and industrialization created jobs and occupations, but also created uniformity within the labor force, Savickas said. Examples include the beginnings of reliance on assembly lines, such as the one that produced the first Ford Model T automobiles in 1911.

Researchers and scientists began examining individual workers within this new urban order, Savickas said, slowly narrowing on people's individual differences and developing tests such as the personal IQ test. Later, during both world wars, psychology was used to put individuals into different classifications or occupations based upon such tests — which were essentially matching models, according to Savickas, identifying those who would be best suited for certain positions.

The challenge for vocational psychology in the present, Savickas said, lies in adapting to society's shift away from industrialization to a more service-oriented economy. Because of this change, a person's fit with their job, occupation, or supervisor is waning in importance. The important thing now, he said, is a person's fit with the organization as a whole.