Early Adolescent Development and Person-Environment Fit:
An Overview
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There has been a long tradition in social, organizational and educational psychology of person-environment fit approaches to understanding human behavior and motivation. These approaches suggest that a person is optimally motivated and optimally satisfied when the environment they are in meets their needs. In other words, when there is a good fit between the person's needs and desires and the opportunities available to them to meet these needs in their environment. The papers in this symposium make use of this basic idea to explore early adolescent development in the school and the home.

The development of autonomy and independence are two key tasks of the adolescent period. Numerous studies suggest that the desire for autonomy increases across the school years. For example, Lee and his colleges have demonstrated an increasing desire for student input into classroom decision-making between grades 2 and 6. Theories of adolescent development suggest that the rate of change in this desire may accelerate during the early adolescent period.

Furthermore, the limited available data suggest that smooth progress through the early adolescent period is expedited by having opportunities to be independent and to make autonomous decisions. For example, family environments that provide the early adolescent with opportunities for both personal autonomy and a voice in family decision-making are associated with positive developmental outcomes (like higher self-esteem) for the early adolescent (Elder, 1963; Flanagan, 1985).

But too much independence and autonomy can have a detrimental effect on development. For example, Baumrind's work clearly points out the negative effects of laize-faire parenting, and numerous studies in education demonstrate the importance of well structured, well managed classrooms for learning.

What is needed is the right mix of opportunities for autonomy within appropriately structured environments. Achieving this right mix

during the early adolescent period may be especially important yet especially difficult to achieve. On the other hand, for the child, growth of both the desire to have more autonomy and the capacity to handle autonomy in a responsible manner may be accelerating during this period. On the other hand, parents and teachers may feel that the growth in the children's desires for autonomy exceeds the growth in the child's capacity to handle increased autonomy responsibility. Therefore, these adults may be reluctant to provide opportunities for increased autonomy. If so, then the rate of change in the opportunities for autonomy and independence both at home and at school may be slower than the rate of change in the early adolescents' desire for such opportunities, leading to poor person-environment fit during this particular period of development. In support of this suggestion, Litovsky and Dusek found that junior high students found their parents less accepting than younger students. Similarly, other studies suggest that family conflicts over autonomy and independence are common during the early adolescent period, especially for boys.

The papers in this symposium use this basic hypothesis to explore the dynamics of early adolescent development.

Numerous studies have documented the decline in student's academic motivation and self-perception during the junior high school period (see Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984). Junior high school teachers report increases in misbehavior and disrespect during this same period and delinquency studies document an increase in out-of-school misbehavior. We have argued elsewhere (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984) that some of these changes may reflect a mismatch between the students' needs and desire for increased autonomy and the opportunities for autonomy and independence provided by their school and home environments. These papers explore this hypothesis.

The first paper, by MacIver, Klingel and Reuman, documents the relationship between student motivation, self-perception and behavior and the congruence between student's desires for decision-making opportunities and their perceptions of the existence of such opportunities in their classroom. The predicted relationships clearly exist. Students' who feel that they are getting as many opportunities for classroom decision-making as they desire have more positive attitudes toward math, are more self-confident, and engage in less misbehavior.

But is there any evidence of a decline in the congruence between students' desire for decision-making opportunities and the existence of these opportunities as the students move from elementary school to junior high school? The paper by Carol Midgley and Harriet Feldlaufer addresses this issue by comparing students' and teachers' perceptions of the decision-making opportunities in sixth and seventh grade classrooms. They find clear evidence for a decline in the congruence students' think exist between their opportunities within their math classes, leading to poorer person-environment fit among seventh graders than among sixth graders.

The issue is further complicated by the developmental level of the child. To the extent that increasing incongruence is a function of the increasing desire for autonomy on the part of maturing adolescents, then more developed students ought to experience greater incongruence than less developed students. The paper by Christy Miller addresses this issue. She relates pubertal development to students' sense of incongruence in their classrooms. In support of our developmental perspective, she finds that early maturing girls report more incongruence between the level of decision-making opportunities they would like and the existence of such opportunities in their math classrooms.

Taken together these three papers suggest that classrooms may not be optimally responsive to the developmental changes at early adolescence. But what happens at home? Certainly, decision-making opportunities exist at home as well as at school. Early adolescent development should be influenced by the availability of such opportunities. The literature reviewed earlier suggests that higher levels of involvement in family decision-making should be associated with more positive outcomes for early adolescents. And in fact, decision-making opportunities in the home may compensate for the rarity of such opportunities at school. The paper by Doris Yee addresses both of these issues. Her results provide clear support for the importance of decision-making opportunities in the home.

The final paper, by Constance Flanagan, focuses on the dynamics that lead parents to provide their early adolescent children with increasing decision-making opportunities. As discussed earlier, parents must decide how much autonomy to provide their children and must

decide the rate at which they will increase the opportunities they provide their child with for autonomy and active involvement in family-decision making. Such decisions are not made in a vacuum. Good parenting should involve being sensitive to both the child's increasing desire for autonomy and the child's capacity to handle such opportunities responsibly. One cue parents can use in gauging the "appropriate" amount of autonomy is their assessment of the child's maturity. Ms. Flanagan's paper explores this prediction.

Together these papers document the importance of decision-making opportunities for early adolescent development. Even more significantly, to document the importance of taking a development perspective on the issue of person-environment fit. They point out the dynamic interplay between growth in the child and adaptive change in the environment. Two intriguing questions arise from these papers: First, should the environment take the lead in development by providing the early adolescent with more opportunities for autonomy than the child desires or should the environment play a more reactive role by responding to pressures from the child for increased autonomy with increased opportunities for autonomy? These papers also raise the issue of possible developmental mismatches between the needs of children and the opportunities provided by the environment. What happens when the environment is not responsive to the child's growing desire for more autonomy? Even more troublesome, what happens when the environment changes in a direction at odds with the normal developmental course?