Personality Style and the Process of Work Adjustment

The theory of work adjustment (Dawis, England, and Lofquist, 1964; Dawis, Lofquist, and Weiss, 1968; Lofquist and Dawis, 1969) provides a model for individuals and work environments. The major sets of variables used in the theory are abilities and needs to describe work personalities, ability requirements to describe work environments, and satisfactoriness, satisfaction, and tenure to describe outcomes of the interaction. Prediction of the work adjustment outcomes utilizes the concept of correspondence between work personalities and work environments. The theory thus formalizes the matching model that psychologists have used in guidance, vocational counseling, and personnel selection. The theory does place added emphasis on needs, reinforcers, and the outcomes of satisfaction. Nevertheless, these aspects of the theory, taken alone, would seem to present work adjustment as a fixed state of affairs that does not accommodate change. They deal solely with work environment structure.
In the theory of work adjustment, the concept of correspondence extends beyond a simple static matching of the work personality with the work environment. This is, individuals and environments are described in terms of their mutual responsiveness to each other. The concept of work adjustment is a continuous and dynamic process by which the individual seeks to achieve and maintain correspondence with his or her work environment. Proposition VIII of the theory states that "work environment correspondence increases as a function of tenure" (Dawis et al., 1968).

These concepts of co-rresponsiveness and change over time lead to the necessity for conceptualizing both the work personality and the work environment. Inasmuch as co-rresponsiveness is a function of the interaction between the work personality structure and the work environment structure, it is necessary to describe the work personality structure and the work environment structure in terms of abilities and needs, that is, in psychological terms.

Individuals may be expected to differ in the amount of dissonance they will have in their work environment. In other words, individuals vary in the amount of correspondence they require of the work environment structure to remain in it. Tolerance of dissonance may be described as a dimension of flexibility.

As an example of flexibility, if two individuals prefer to work in a room with 70-degree temperature, the more flexible individual will tolerate a 5-degree change, say, 85 degrees, or dropped to 60 degrees. The less flexible individual would interrupt work to take some action to adjust the temperature to an effect psychological situation might be that of two individuals who have a strong preference for working alone. The more flexible individual would tolerate it because he or she works best when isolated. The less flexible individual would do something about the situation to achieve aloveness. The description of minimal dissonance knowledge of an individual’s flexibility.

In the examples of flexibility cited above, the less flexible individuals, if they adopted the active mode of adjustment, might (1) readjust the thermostat, (2) open or close windows, (3) move to another room, (4) complain about the presence of other workers, (5) move to a solitary location, or (6) request transfer to another job. On the other hand, if they adopted the reactive mode of adjustment, might (1) drink hot or cold liquids, (2) remove or put on clothing, (3) endure and suffer through, (4) concentrate on the work to exclude the perception of others, (5) use daydreams and fantasies to escape from others, or (6) rationalize the situation to themselves in order to endure the presence of others. Although these examples focus on possible behaviors, the less flexible individual’s typical rate of movement toward increased correspondence may be measured along a personality style dimension called re-activeness. It is not expected that individuals would limit themselves exclusively to either the active or the reactive mode of adjustment but that both modes would be used.

When an individual responds to the work environment by changing the expression or manifestation of the work personality structure to increase correspondence, the mode of adjustment may be described as active. Individual differences in the likelihood of using this mode of adjustment may be described on a personality style dimension called activeness.

When an individual acts on the work environment to increase correspondence, the mode of adjustment may be described as active. When this kind of adjustment is used, the individual is described as reactive. Individual differences in the likelihood of using this mode of adjustment may be described on a personality style dimension called re-activeness.

In the examples of flexibility cited above, the less flexible individuals, if they adopted the active mode of adjustment, might (1) readjust the thermostat, (2) open or close windows, (3) move to another room, (4) complain about the presence of other workers, (5) move to a solitary location, or (6) request transfer to another job. On the other hand, if they adopted the reactive mode of adjustment, might (1) drink hot or cold liquids, (2) remove or put on clothing, (3) endure and suffer through, (4) concentrate on the work to exclude the perception of others, (5) use daydreams and fantasies to escape from others, or (6) rationalize the situation to themselves in order to endure the presence of others. Although these examples focus on possible behaviors, the less flexible individuals, the same kinds of behaviors, indicative of activeness or re-activeness, might be observed for the more flexible individuals.

It is also expected that individuals will differ in the speed with which they move to increase correspondence. Individuals who typically move speedily, that is, have a high rate of movement toward increased correspondence, may be measured along a personality style dimension called celerity. In other words, how quickly or slowly an individual responds (actively or reactively) to a dissonant situation.

It would seem that these four dimensions of flexibility, activeness, re-activeness, and celerity represent a minimal set of dimensions by which personality style can be described. Individual differences in the likelihood of using these dimensions may be described as a personality style dimension called flexibility.

Since the personality style dimensions discussed above are developed and exhibited over time, appropriate sources of data for the assessment of any of these dimensions include biographical data, cumulative records, school and work history information, and psychometric data over a time period. Clinical observation of current behavior in a variety of settings and situations may also be utilized. Ratings of specific behaviors by persons who have observed the individuals over extended periods of time may supplement the available data. Literature of vocational psychology and psychometrics has not attended to the development of measures of these specific personality style dimensions. Therefore, it is necessary to clone the constructs themselves and to develop instruments to measure them. Illustrations of how this might be accomplished.

In the assessment of flexibility we may hypothesize that an individual who has a history that includes such things as participation in a wide range of work experiences, a successful work history over a wide range of jobs, and a heterogeneous group of friends will have a high level of flexibility. Conversely, an individual who has a homogeneous group of friends, a narrow range of successful jobs or other activities, and exposure to a very narrow range of situations will have a low level of flexibility.

We may hypothesize that the activeness of an individual is at a high level if there is evidence of, as examples, having held positions of leadership, having developed new ways of doing things, and of taking the initiative in school, work, or community activities. Low-level activeness, on the other hand, is indicative of being shaped by the work environment and maintaining a high level of correspondence with it.

We may hypothesize that a high level of re-activeness is indicated by a history that includes abiding by the rules, carrying out assignments according
satisfaction in highly structured situations and groups, and loyal and continued participation in groups as a member rather than as a leader. Low-level reactivity would be evidenced by inability to participate in group situations, difficulty in following rules and prescribed procedures, and other evidences of isolationist tendencies.

We would expect the highly celeritous individual to have a history that shows prompt or early completion of assignments, almost impulsive behavior, and tendencies toward emphasizing speed of response even at the expense of accuracy. Low celerity should be indicated by deliberateness of response, seeming procrastination, and longer latencies of response.

Obviously the illustrations described above provide only a few examples of the kinds of historical data that may be useful in the assessment of these personality style dimensions. Data from such conventional psychometric instruments as interest or personality inventories and ability tests may also be useful for the assessment of personality. The Strong Vocational Interest Blank (Strong, Campbell, Berdie and Clark, 1966) may be one indicator of high flexibility; preferences for activities involving high-level activeness; flat ability or need profiles may indicate high re-activeness; and rapidity in completing self-report inventories or attitude scales may be an indicator of high celerity.

If personality style can be assessed as suggested, there are a number of implications for the practice of vocational counseling and career planning: The ability of the counselor and the client to predict the likelihood of work adjustment should be enhanced. The usefulness of the correspondence (matching) model in choosing careers or jobs should be improved. Finally, counselor knowledge of the client's unique style of behaving in the work setting from day to day should be improved. Finally, counselor knowledge of the client's unique style of behaving in the work setting from day to day should be improved.

At its present stage of development, the concept of personality style obviously has its limitations and requires additional research. Research is needed to explore such questions as: Can personality style dimensions be considered as traits (that is, as generalizable across situations)? What role does measurement play in determining the apparent features of personality style dimensions (for example, is the apparent stability of measured personality style due to the conceptualization or to the techniques used in its measurement)? How amenable is personality style to change (for example, to training or to unusual experiences)? Are personality style and personality structure independent or are they correlated in some manner? Questions like these need to be explored before the concept of personality style can be considered to contribute significantly to the explication of the process of work adjustment.

The present article has extended the theoretical description of work adjustment as given in the propositions of the theory of work adjustment. Hopefully, it also demonstrates the capability of a trait-and-factor matching model to address the dynamic aspects of work adjustment.