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# Intrinsic work value–reward dissonance and work satisfaction during young adulthood <sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that discrepancies between work values and rewards are indicators of dissonance that induce change in both to reduce such dissonance over time. The present study elaborates this model to suggest parallels with the first phase of the extension-and-strain curve. Small discrepancies or small increases in extension are presumed to be almost unnoticeable, while increasingly large discrepancies are thought to yield exponentially increasing strain. Work satisfaction is a principal outcome of dissonance; hence, work value–reward discrepancies are predicted to diminish work satisfaction in an exponential fashion. Findings from the work and family literature, however, lead to the prediction that this curvilinear association will be moderated by gender and family roles. Using longitudinal data spanning the third decade of life, the results suggest that intrinsic work value–reward discrepancies, as predicted, are increasingly associated, in a negative curvilinear fashion, with work satisfaction. This pattern, however, differs as a function of gender and family roles. Females who established family roles exhibited the expected pattern while other gender by family status groups did not. The results suggest that gender and family roles moderate the association between intrinsic work value–reward dissonance and satisfaction. In addition, women who remained unmarried and childless exhibited the strongest associations between occupational rewards and satisfaction.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper elaborates a model of the work value system, which posits that the discrepancy between work values and work rewards influences the salience of both values and behavior over time (Porfeli, 2007, 2008; Porfeli & Vondracek, 2007). In this paper, the relationship between intrinsic work value–reward discrepancies and work satisfaction is tested using longitudinal data at two occasions spanning the third decade of life. During this period of life, families are typically formed and careers are established. Intrinsic work value–reward discrepancies are presumed to become increasingly detectable and aversive in a curvilinear manner; hence, the association between these discrepancies and work satisfaction are predicted to be curvilinear as well. Once the nature of the relationship between intrinsic work value–reward discrepancy and satisfaction is established,

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the potential moderating influence of the onset of family roles on this relationship is tested. Specifically, literature suggests that males and those who are married may perceive work as being more of a duty that fulfills the needs and desires of others than as an entitlement that fulfills personal needs and desires (MOW International Research Team, 1987). Gender and the establishment of family roles may, therefore, moderate the relationship between intrinsic value–reward discrepancies and work satisfaction.

The difference between what people have and want has been a topic of ongoing study inside and outside the field of vocational psychology for many years (for a review of social psychological literature, see Mortimer & Lorence, 1995). Within the field of vocational psychology, the Theory of Work Adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) is a primary foundation of such investigation. Extensive research, typically framed within the broad concept of person–environment fit, finds that a better fit, or a smaller discrepancy between personal work orientations (e.g., interests and values) and job characteristics (e.g., job rewards and demands), is predictive of subjective satisfaction and satisfactoriness (Bizot & Goldman, 1993; Breiden, Mohr, & Mirza, 2006; Bretz & Judge, 1994; Chiochio & Frigon, 2006; Feij, van der Velde, Taris, & Taris, 1999; Hesketh, McLachlan, & Gardner, 1992; Rounds, Dawis, & Lofquist, 1987), job tenure (Bretz & Judge, 1994), and turnover intentions (Lyons & O'Brien, 2006) with some variation across subpopulations (e.g., Chiochio & Frigon, 2006; Lyons & O'Brien, 2006; Melchiori & Church, 1997).

During the process of vocational exploration, individuals discover their own interests and abilities and their work values and preferences (Patton & Porfeli, 2007; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). As adolescents make the transition to adulthood and acquire more intensive and stable employment, their growing understanding of what they value in work, coupled with their actual work experiences, presumably promote an increasing coordination (or association) between values and rewards (see Porfeli and Vondracek (2007) for an elaboration of this logic and a review of the pertinent literature). This process of becoming aware of one's values and coordinating them with behaviors and rewards may be more extended in recent cohorts. As education is prolonged, individuals take longer to find a good match between their work orientations and their jobs, and to settle into stable full-time work. The extension of this highly formative period supports the utility of further study of person–environment discrepancies longitudinally, during the transition to adulthood, within the field of vocational psychology.

In a closely related field, I/O Psychology generally finds that discrepancy or congruence, variously defined, is associated with job satisfaction, organizational tenure and commitment, and the intent to leave an organization (Ostroff & Judge, 2007; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Argyris (1957) has been credited with bringing the concept of person–environment fit to I/O psychology (Verquer et al., 2003), but clearly such a model was beginning to take shape in Munsterberg's work several decades earlier (Porfeli, 2009). Pertaining specifically to values, the fit (or lack of discrepancy) between personal and organizational values is associated with work satisfaction and tenure within an organization, and such value congruence tends to be a stronger predictor than other indicators of person–organization fit (Verquer et al., 2003).

Outside the field of vocational psychology, Multiple Discrepancies Theory (MDT; Michalos, 1985; Michalos, 1991) is among the most prominent in the study of life satisfaction (Beckie & Hayduk, 1997; Cohen, 2000; Jacob & Brinkerhoff, 1999; Schulz, 1995). Michalos (1991) cites an extensive body of empirical research and theory from several literatures, including mental health, marital relationships, values, subjective well-being, education, economics, friendships, person–environment fit, and race- and sex-based equity studies to support MDT. This complex theory of discrepancies asserts that general and domain-specific life satisfaction is principally predicted by a host of perceived discrepancies with the self being the primary referent. These perceived discrepancies include those between the self and others, present and past self, present self and expected self, and between present self and what one believes s/he deserves or needs. The discrepancy between what one has and what one wants (e.g., work values and rewards) in the present moment is believed to have the greatest direct influence on satisfaction and behavior, and to exhibit a negative linear relationship with satisfaction. This study is a test of this assertion.

## 2. Intrinsic value–reward discrepancy, dissonance and work satisfaction

The discrepancy between a work value and reward is believed to produce dissonance or strain (Festinger, 1957). In this study, such discrepancy is conceptualized as an indicator of dissonance that becomes increasingly detectable and aversive. Small discrepancies between intrinsic values and rewards will yield no detectable dissonance (i.e., no relationship between the two), while larger discrepancies are predicted to be increasingly detectable and aversive (i.e., quadratic relationship between the two). Altogether, these predictions suggest that a quadratic function best explains the relationship between value–reward discrepancies and work satisfaction. This model, derived in part from a control theory of human behavior, is supported in empirical research (Kluger, Lewinsohn, & Aiello, 1994).

This predicted relationship can be illustrated with a common rubber band. The discrepancy between a value and obtained reward is akin to the extension of a rubber band and dissonance is indicated by the strain in the band. Small discrepancies or band deflections yield almost unnoticeable dissonance or strain, while larger discrepancies or deflections become increasingly noticeable and discomforting and are, therefore, predicted to yield *exponential* increases in dissonance or strain. When the presumed relationship is conceived in terms of discrepancies moving in positive (rewards exceeding values) and negative (values exceeding rewards) directions, the relationship conforms to a positive quadratic, *u*-shaped relationship. Presuming that dissonance and work satisfaction are inversely associated, the relationship between work value–reward discrepancies and work satisfaction is hypothesized to conform to an *n*-shaped (negative quadratic) function.

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