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ABSTRACT

A study examined the extent to which demographic factors predict rural values in Kentucky public school district hiring officials. Among the demographic factors considered were school district metropolitan classification, school district size, community racial composition, decision makers' position in the organizational hierarchy, and decision makers' background. Rural values were identified as community centrism, traditionalism, primary group preferences, and social conservatism. Surveys were conducted with 214 Kentucky school district superintendents and principals, of whom 77 percent were from nonmetropolitan districts, 64 percent were from small districts, and 75 percent were from racially homogeneous communities. Findings indicate that in each case, individuals who were in rural areas, had rural backgrounds, were from small, racially homogeneous school districts, and held a superintendency were more likely to possess rural values than their demographic counterparts. Moreover, individuals who fit each of the rural profiles were more likely to harbor rural values than individuals who fit only some of the categories. In fact, it seems that the combination of the variables, as much as any singular factor, contributed to the values formation. Implications are discussed for the person-organization fit model of influences on teacher hiring decisions. (Contains 56 references) (TD)

SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSONNEL SELECTION PRACTICES:
EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF DEMOGRAPHIC FACTORS ON
RURAL VALUES WITHIN A PERSON-ORGANIZATION FIT MODEL

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SCHOOL DISTRICT PERSONNEL SELECTION PRACTICES:
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Person-Organization Fit

Interactionist psychologists have for many years advocated the study of behavior and decision-making as an interplay between personal and situational characteristics (Bowers, 1973). A direct extension of interactionist psychology is the theory of person-environment fit, which developed around Kurt Lewin's programmatic formula, behavior is a function of the person and the environment, $B = f(P,E)$ (Caplan & Harrison, 1993). Expanded upon by numerous researchers, the theory of person-environment fit suggests that individuals are more likely to choose environments that match their own personalities and values. Individuals, furthermore, are more likely to be productive and successful in congruent environments.

An outgrowth of person-environment fit theory, person-organization fit theory takes the theoretical concepts of fit considered from the individual perspective and applies them to the domain of organizational behavior. The field of person-organization fit is a growing trend in national management literature, extending the traditional concept of person-job fit to define fit broadly as congruence of personality traits, values, and beliefs of the employee with the needs, norms, and values of the organization (Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994; Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991; Bretz, Ash, & Dreher, 1989; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). To date, person-organization fit has been applied to such diverse organizational issues as applicant attraction to organizations (Judge & Bretz, 1992), employee satisfaction and performance (Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989), socialization (Chatman, 1991), organizational entry (Cable, 1995), and worker attrition (O'Reilly,

Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

Person-organization fit theory, then, provides a solid foundation for the basic tenets of this study. A plethora of existing studies not only validate the existence of person-organization fit, but also chronicle its influence on decision-making. Most significantly, nonveridical fit has been shown to have an even more pronounced effect than veridical fit on hiring decisions (Cable, 1995). With a new focus on the importance of fit in selection decisions, models hypothesizing the influence of fit on both applicants and organizations are indeed becoming more and more prevalent.

Teacher Selection

Understanding the dynamics of personnel selection is crucial if schools are to make good on the promise of school reform. This is particularly true for teachers since professionalism and quality of instruction remain the primary means of influencing student learning. But the research on teacher education (cf. Darling-Hammond, 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2001; Wayne & Youngs, 2003) assumes that the best teachers are being hired to work in the schools. This may not be the case, however, if the findings from person-organization fit theory hold true. What if selection of teachers is based on local norms and values instead of characteristics validated by educational research? Unfortunately, educational researchers may not know the answer to that question. In general little research has been conducted to extend the findings of the person-organization fit model to education.

Little (1998), building on Bowes Fremont-Smith's (1984) work on the hiring practices of organizations for entry level positions, notes that, in the field of education, even less is known about the reasoning behind hiring decisions which result in

employment for some aspiring teachers and rejection for others. Traditional beliefs and human capital theories have propounded notions that individuals are hired based upon objective qualifications. In reality, however, there is little evidence that verifies the selection of personnel based upon objective criteria. Bowes Fremont-Smith postulates in her study that the entire hiring process acts as a rampart, screening out those individuals who are not perceived to fit with organizational norms.

Word of mouth and personal networks become the chief methods of establishing fit and, ultimately, influencing hiring decisions. If perceptions of fit are more important than actual fit in determining organizational entry (Cable, 1995), it is logical to assume that hiring officials could be using applicant background as an indication of value similarity and fit. If so, the implications of such behavior have tremendous ramifications for educators. Clearly, selecting personnel by these methods could result in the hiring of less objectively qualified personnel, the maintenance of low minority employment, and the perpetuation of a homogenized faculty.

Rural Schools

The practice of giving hiring preference to those individuals with established ties to school or community is so ingrained as to be common knowledge to most hiring officials in Kentucky rural school districts (Little, 1995). Because such an attitude does not jibe with current perceptions of political correctness, however, it is not widely trumpeted nor usually even openly admitted. The presence of rural values may well be the deciding factor in determining the hiring preferences of school district officials, whose values not only convince them to choose known entities, but whose perceptions of fit may do likewise. Little and Miller (2001) found in a study of Kentucky school districts that rural

values correlated strongly with the different personnel selection practices of a person-organization fit model--credential preferences, district hiring perceptions, recruitment efforts, community fit perceptions, and candidate fit factors.

It may also be the case that those individuals making the hiring decisions who have personal experience limited to a monocultural setting may be unaware of their own feelings and reactions to cultural diversity (DeSensi, 1995). In effect they emphasize other motives without overt reference to these deep-seated tacit values. Because rural values are highly influential within the context of the person-organization fit model, it is worth asking what factors are related to the possession of strong rural preferences among those who make hiring decisions about teachers. Left unanswered by the Little and Miller (2001) study is the source of the rural values. Whatever the case, the fact remains that inhabitation of rural school districts by personnel with predominantly rural backgrounds is an area ripe for more investigation. This is particularly the case since staffing rural schools has been and continues to be problematic (see Ciscell, 1990; Herbster, 1982).

The Conceptual Model

Usually a fluid and comprehensive process, hiring encompasses more than the many small fragments that have heretofore been studied. Models which focus exclusively upon the employment interview (Stone, 1994) and recruiter visits (Tschirgi, 1973; Weslowski & Feild, 1987), for example, risk overlooking significant data by possessing an overly narrow focus. In an exploratory study such as this one, a broader focus was necessary.

Studying specific hiring procedures across school districts, moreover, was ineffectual for a study of this type, as there exists considerable variation in selection processes across districts (Schmitt & Schechtman, 1990). Musella and Lawton (1986) found procedures

ranging from a single brief interview with a hiring official to very elaborate procedures that might include mandatory participation in locally-sponsored courses or attendance at assessment centers. Tremendous variation also exists in terms of the decision mechanisms found at varying points in the process. Elkins (1987) found that the vast majority of candidates were screened out early in the process, never advancing beyond application submittal. The current conceptual model, therefore, emphasizes components of personnel selection that would not only be applicable to all school districts, but would also be integral factors in decision-making.

Figure 1 presents the theoretical model, an adaptation of person-organization fit theory that incorporates rural values into the selection of teachers in rural school districts. The model encompasses four layers of influence, from the broader socio-demographic environment to the tacit fit filters that underlie the person-organization fit model. All of these levels are hypothesized to impinge on the actual hiring decision.

The Socio-Demographic Environment

The first layer of influence is the set of demographic factors that represent the influence of social factors on an individual's beliefs and values, in this instance as mediated through those school district personnel responsible for hiring teachers. The literature supports the use of demographic data to investigate potential variables that could affect personnel selection. Differing from many of the other studies that explore fit from the level of personality psychology, organizational demography literature focuses upon characteristics such as age, race, background, and other elements that could influence culture and shared values. Using demographic data to define homogeneity and fit, researchers discovered that management teams are relatively homogenous in their

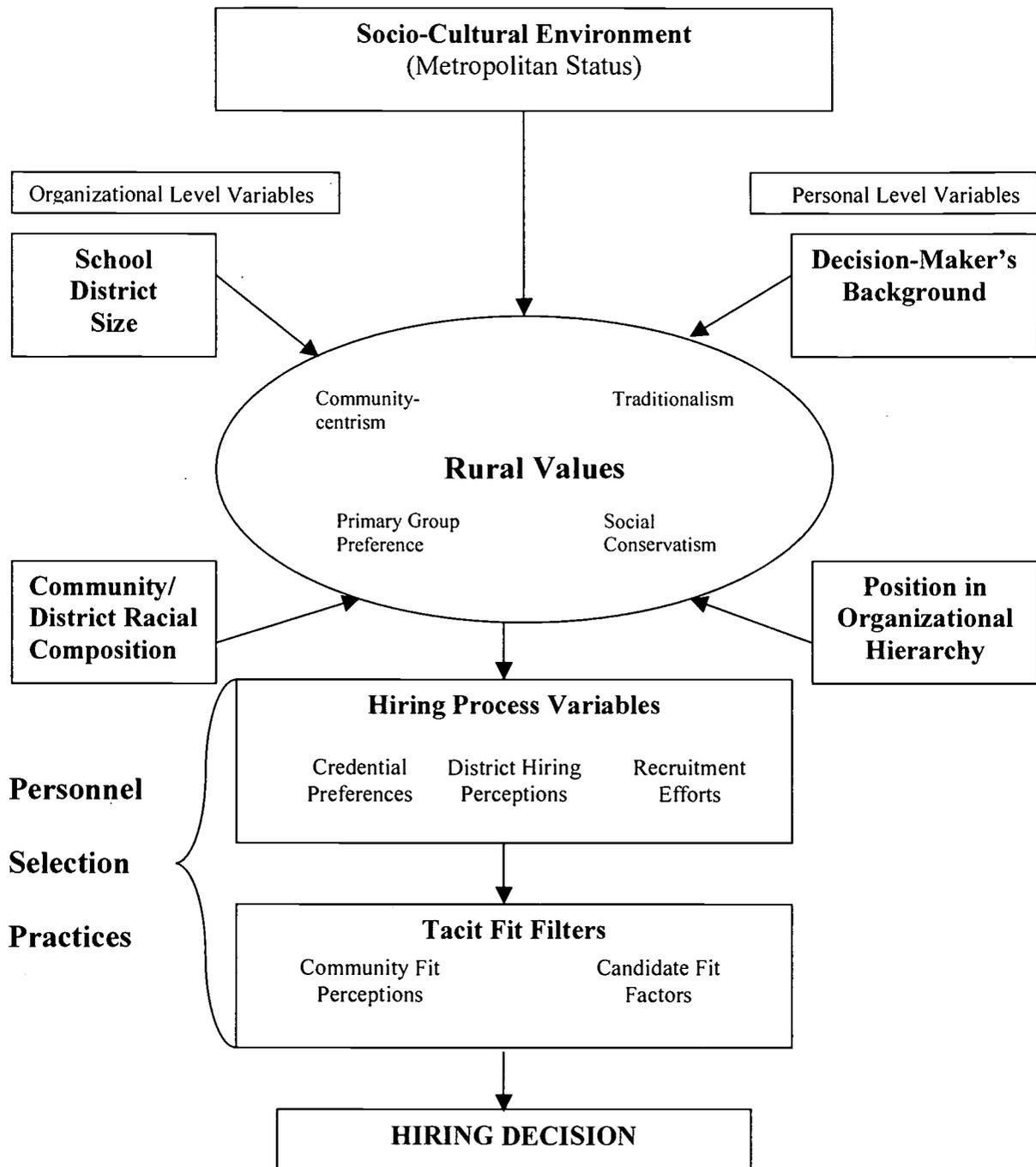


Figure 1. The relationship between demographic factors, rural values, and personnel selection practices.

demographic composition (Jackson, Brett, Sessa, Cooper, Juhn, & Peyronnin, 1991).

Moreover, promotion or hiring decisions that led to new team members tended to favor those persons who fit with the present group.

Kirchmeyer (1995) conducted a longitudinal study of managers at the early career stage. Comparing the job experiences and demographic characteristics of 141 Canadian business school graduates, the author concluded that dissimilarity to one's workgroup in terms of age, education, and lifestyle meant decreased job challenge and poorer workgroup fit. Although not groundbreaking, her research did call more attention to the study of demographic similarity in organizational composition.

Evidence on the analogy between demographic data and personality characteristics, however, is far from conclusive. A study by Posner (1992) extended the research of person-organization fit by investigating the impact of selected demographic factors on work attitudes. Data from over 1,600 study participants revealed that demographic factors did not moderate the relationship between person-organization values congruence and work attitudes. Other works, conversely, continue to emphasize the significance of demographic diversity in organizations and its relation to overall organizational health (Herriott & Pemberton, 1995). Certainly, if nothing else, the literature points to a need for more investigation into the phenomenon of fit using demographic data.

The Demographic Factors

Five factors comprise the school district demography in the current model. First, the Socio-Cultural Environment is represented by Metropolitan Status. In general the urban context constitutes greater freedom and diversity in association (Straus, 1955) as well as being oriented toward a more cosmopolitan outlook with respect to reference groups, as

opposed to a more local frame for rural life (Flango & Brumbraugh, 1986).

In addition, there are two Organizational Level Variables--School District Size and Community/District Racial Composition. The size of an organization certainly has an impact upon the values and goals of the organization. Generally, the larger an organization becomes, the more its flexibility increases. Studies on personnel selection practices of school districts have shown that smaller districts, because of fewer resources, often select teachers with less education or fewer additional certifications (United States Department of Education, 1994). Usually blessed with greater financial resources, larger school districts may also be more inclined to experiment and willing to take chances on new employees that smaller districts could not.

Kaufman (1971) posits that the large size of some organizations permits greater exposure to new ideas from a wider variety of employee specialties. With an employee composition that tends to be more heterogeneous, larger organizations have an increased tolerance of and receptivity to that which deviates from the accepted norm. For school districts, this inclination could lead smaller districts to rely more heavily upon fit factors to make hiring decisions, preferring to stave off change if at all possible. The importance of conformity in small organizations, according to Kaufman, leads to great efforts to "weed out" potential disruptive forces.

Size, then, has the potential to affect personnel selection practices. For the purposes of this study, Kaufman's (1971) conclusions are especially salient:

The impersonality of large organizations, whatever its vexations, constitutes what Talcott Parsons has called achievement norms as against descriptive norms (that is, recognition for accomplishment and competence rather than status) and universalistic

rather than particularistic norms. The result is that accidents of birth are less imprisoning; doors are opened to many who would otherwise be prevented from impressing themselves upon the system. (p. 106)

To use language more familiar to the confines of this study, it seems that larger school districts are more likely to hire based upon universal, or similar to ideal, fit, while smaller districts are more likely to use an idiosyncratic fit, i.e., similar to “my” values. Buttressing this conclusion is a recent study by Alsbury (2003) in which school board and superintendent turnover was examined. One of the striking findings focused on superintendent stability and achievement trends on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), a criterion-referenced accountability instrument for the state. For small districts (0-500 students), political stability of the school board and the superintendency over an eight-year period (1993-2000) resulted in declining achievement trends. This negative trend occurred only for small districts where there was 0 turnover in the superintendency (associated with little or no turnover in the school board). As Alsbury notes:

Place-bound superintendents in very small districts are more likely to exercise peace-keeping measures than engage in the messy and conflict producing business of the type of school reform that leads to student achievement gains. Considering the proclivity for small school superintendents to protect their position by avoiding conflict, it is not surprising that a long term superintendency would have a negative influence on student achievement, as seen in this study. (p. 21)

Community Racial Composition is the other Organizational Level Variable. The importance of the environment in which an organization resides has been posited in many

instances in the literature. The racial composition of the community in which a school district is located, to continue the line of reasoning, could certainly influence organizational behavior. If, for example, hiring officials are looking for applicants who will “fit,” how well can a minority candidate be expected to fit into a racially homogeneous community? Simpson and Gilliland (1992) bring this very idea to the fore by asserting that ideas of fit inhibit diversity.

The third aspect of the demographic milieu is the personal background of the decision maker. In the current model, there are two of these Personal Level Variables: Decision-Maker’s Background and Position in Organizational Hierarchy.

It seems logical to assume that the background of a decision maker might affect the decisions he/she makes. Personal values are developed and individual preferences determined based upon the background and life experiences a person possesses. In this instance, whether or not the decision makers are originally from the area or have been brought into the system from elsewhere should make a difference in the types of personnel selection practices they choose to utilize and the degree to which they embrace rural values. Conversely, decision makers who have been limited to a monocultural setting will show a strong hesitation to import diversity through personnel selection (DeSensi, 1995).

The second variable here, the position of the decision maker in the organizational hierarchy, also plays a role in determining the types of personnel selection practices that gain prominence with that individual. The higher the centralization in an organization, the lower the rate of program change (Hage & Aiken, 1970). In other words, when power is concentrated in the hands of an elite few, preservation of the status quo becomes

a decisive factor behind actions.

Such knowledge is especially relevant to this exploration of Kentucky public school districts. With the advent of school-based decision-making councils since the inception of the Kentucky Education Reform Act, school districts now have personnel selection decisions made at both the district and individual school level. Whether personnel are selected by superintendents at the district level or by principals as chairpersons of school-based councils at the school level, the types of decisions made could easily be affected. Evidence from a multi-site case study supports this belief (Little, 1996). Principals who were interviewed indicated a far greater willingness to select teachers without previous ties to the community than did superintendents, who preferred to hire individuals with a local background and perceived value similarity. The principals, overall, were far more inclined to hire individuals to foster school effectiveness, while superintendents sought to maintain district stability.

Rural Values

Values, it has been shown throughout the literature, influence the decisions that individuals make (cf. Rokeach, 1973; Shockley-Zalabak, 1988). A body of literature also exists to document a number of values born of the socio-cultural circumstances of rural life. Thus, it is quite probable that rural values will affect personnel selection practices in school districts. Based upon a review of the literature, the following four factors have been chosen to represent rural values in this study: community-centrism, traditionalism, primary group preference, and social conservatism.

For the purposes of this study, it was necessary to have clear, explicit definitions of each of these variables. Ethnocentrism is the attitude or tendency of people to view their

own race, religion, culture, group, or nation as superior to others and to judge others on that basis (Leone, 1986). However, for this study, the ethnocentric emphasis is eschewed in favor of feelings of community loyalty and superiority, and the value is renamed community-centrism. Traditionalism is defined as not only the sense of clinging to an earlier heritage, but also the exaltation of resistance to change (Ford, 1967). Primary group preference refers to the meeting of associational needs by primary type contacts with family and neighbors, as opposed to secondary groups (Straus, 1955). This is highly related to Alvin Gouldner's inner-outer reference group orientation or part of the local-cosmopolitan typology (see Flango & Brumbaugh, 1986). Finally, social conservatism is defined as an uneven appreciation for mankind across genetic, cultural, regional, and socio-economic expressions, as well as a discomfort with democratic processes in certain forms. It entails avoiding that which is different from oneself and preferring a strong, central authority in control of situations.

Clearly, the literature (e.g., Ayalon, 1995; McFaul, 1989; Straus, 1955) supports these values as representative of individuals from rural areas. These values were chosen because they seem most likely to explain certain personnel selection practices often found in rural school districts. It is significant to note, however, that just because these values are referred to collectively as rural values, rurality is by no means defined by them nor have rural inhabitants exclusive license to their possession.

Although the ways in which rural values affect certain aspects of personnel selection may seem clear enough, in other instances, the relationship is not so apparent. Exactly what leads to the presence of rural values in a hiring official also must be determined. What if, for example, the school district is located in an area categorized as extremely

rural, but the hiring official has a background and experience unrelated to a rural way of life? Would that official retain those earlier personal values, adopt instead the local community mores, or settle into a combination of both? Conversely, what would be the values of an individual with a rural background hired to make decisions for a large, metropolitan school district?

Personnel Selection Practices

These Personnel Selection Practices can be thought of as having two distinct layers which operate as a dual filtering system: three Hiring Process Variables and two Tacit Fit Filters. They are described in turn.

Hiring Process Variables

Credential Preferences. Regardless of how a hiring official determines desired qualities, there are certain factors which are considered as more important than others in employees. This component of personnel selection gets to the very core of a hiring official's value system and philosophical base. The types of personnel selected by a decision maker who values previous experience and high involvement in leadership activities might be quite different from those selected by a decision maker who prefers an applicant with community familiarity and local ties. These core value preferences should be reflected by the type of teacher credentials favored by district personnel.

District Hiring Perceptions. The second essential hiring component focuses on the ways in which personnel officials perceive their own roles and responsibilities. These pressures, both internal and external, play a key role in determining the direction of their decisions. Studies, from Thomas's classic study of Polish peasants (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918-1920/1984) to Cable's (1995) exploration of person-organization fit,

have shown again and again that it is perceptions, more so than reality, which affect behavior and guide choices.

Recruitment Efforts. The final component of hiring processes in this conceptual model is Recruitment Efforts. According to Kristoff (1996), more work needs to be done researching the recruitment portion of personnel selection. Although often overlooked as a factor in personnel selection, recruitment efforts quite clearly affect the types of applicants who are funneled into the applicant pool. The absence of recruitment or the vigor with which it is pursued speaks volumes about the personnel beliefs that school districts hold dear. Based upon what is known about rural values, it would seem likely that decision makers with rural values would do little or no recruitment, preferring instead the local applicants and known individuals from whom the district is most likely to receive applications.

Tacit Fit Filters

The second layer of Personnel Selection Practices (the fourth level of the model) is the final implicit fit of the candidates. Even after the being screened through the three hiring process variables, the teachers who would be hired must be perceived as meeting community standards. There are two aspects to this fit.

Community Fit Perceptions. Little and Miller (2001, p. 10) describe these as follows: ... the perceptions of the hiring officials regarding the importance of the “match” between the district and the teacher candidate. Officials who have a greater sense of Community Fit Perceptions would likely be more stringent in screening for employees who mirror the districts’ values and identity. The emphasis is on obtaining employees whose background is similar to the districts’.

Candidate Fit Factors. Again Little and Miller (2001, p. 10) describe this succinctly: As opposed to Community Fit Perceptions (decision makers' valuing of compatibility in the hiring process), Candidate Fit Factors constitute an assessment of the extent that applicants actually are compatible. These are the intangible qualifications of an individual. They operate in a local network: do the teacher candidates actually possess the fit factors that will enable them to blend in, to be "at home," to be an insider, to "relate" to students and community.

Methodology

This paper tests empirically a portion of a theoretical model based on person-organization fit theory. The model was developed by Little (1998) to investigate how rural values impinge on the hiring process through their effect on the perceptions and practices of school district personnel in the selection of teachers. Specifically, the report here is part of the larger project by Little (1998); it is an extension of the analysis presented in Little and Miller (2001). The research is guided by the theoretical model (Figure 1).

Research Question

The portion of the person-organization fit theory tested in this study is the relationship of the demographic factors to the rural values, the first and second layers of the conceptual model. Central to the entire theory is the set of rural values. The entire model postulates that local officials who have stronger rural values are "more likely to ascribe to personnel practices that represent idiosyncratic fit (need to match employees to prevailing local conditions) as opposed to universal fit (trying to find the superior candidate, regardless of background)" (Little & Miller, 2001, p. 10). But what factors

contribute to the possession of rural values? That issue is the focus of the research question.

To what degree do demographic factors such as

- a. school district metropolitan classification
- b. school district size
- c. community racial composition
- d. decision-makers' position in organizational hierarchy
- e. decision-makers' background

predict rural values in Kentucky public school district hiring officials?

The Survey

This study utilized survey techniques to elicit data to test the theoretical model. The survey followed Dilman's (1978) Total Survey Method. After the surveys were returned, the data were checked for accuracy and missing data (none). Data were then subjected to analysis, including descriptive statistics and psychometric properties of rural values scales, plus a correlation matrix and multiple regression for inferential questions.

Data Sources

The population included all superintendents (or their designee) in Kentucky and a sample of principals from the same districts. Of the 354 questionnaires sent, 214 were returned for a response rate of 60%. Of those participating in the study, 23% represented metropolitan school districts, while 77% represented non-metropolitan districts. Of all those who responded, 138 or 64% were from small districts with a student population of less than 3,000 students. The remaining 76 or 36% were from large school districts with a population of 3,000 or more students. Frequencies also showed that 75% of the

respondents represented communities characterized as racially homogenous with only 25% representing racially diverse communities. Of course, it should be noted that the terms “small” and “large,” as well as “homogenous” and “diverse” are relative, but for the purpose of this study conducted in a largely rural, mostly Caucasian state, they are appropriate. Superintendents and other administrators were 56% and principals 44% of respondents.

Instrumentation

The instrumentation contained within the full survey included demographic data on districts and individual respondents (5 variables), the 40-item rural values scale, and sections representing the elements of person-organization fit in Figure 1--the two layers of Personnel Selection Preferences. The first layer contains three types of hiring processes: Credential Preferences, 8 variables; District Hiring Perceptions, 6 variables; and Recruitment Efforts, 6 variables. In addition the second layer, Tacit Fit Filters, has two components: Community Fit Perceptions, 4 variables; and Candidate Fit Factors, 7 variables. The variable definitions and codings are given below only for the sections of the larger survey addressed in this analysis.

Demographic Variables

The following variables represent the demographic factors likely to impact school district personnel selection practices:

School District Size (SIZE) was the total student population of the district. Districts with a population of fewer than 3,000 students were considered small; those with 3,000 or more, large. This information was obtained from the Kentucky Department of Education. Coding was 1 = small; 2 = large.

Community Racial Composition (CRC) was the degree of homogeneity present in target communities. A community with 90% or more of its residents categorized in one racial group was classified as racially homogenous; those with under 90% so

categorized were considered racially diverse. This information was obtained from the United States Census. Coding was 1 = homogeneous; 2 = diverse.

Decision-Maker's Position (DMP) referred to the hiring officials' position in the organizational hierarchy. Decision makers were classified according to their job titles, which were self-reported. Coding was 1 = superintendent; 2 = principal; 3 = other central office.

Decision-Maker's Background (DMB) measured whether a decision maker considered him or herself to be from a primarily rural or primarily urban background. Coding was 1 = rural; 2 = urban; 3 = other (suburban or both).

Metropolitan Classification (MC) measured the degree of rurality of the school district. The information on classifying school districts as metropolitan or non-metropolitan was obtained from the United States Department of Education using the Office of Management and Budget's definition of metropolitan. Coding was 1 = non-metropolitan; 2 = metropolitan.

Rural Values

The four rural values are defined below. Each is based on a 10 item scale with all responses based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree.

Community-centrism (COM). Ethnocentrism is the attitude or tendency of people to view their own race, religion, culture, or group as superior to others and to judge others on that basis. For this study, ethnocentrism was narrowed to community superiority. Community-centric individuals would, for example, feel secure in believing their community values were superior to the remainder of the world's.

Traditionalism (TRA) was the sense of clinging to an earlier heritage. It involved heavy resistance to change. An example of traditionalism would be avoiding changing an educational program until it was mandated. An individual possessing traditional values would believe that the conventional way of accomplishing goals was always preferable.

Primary Group Preference (PGP) focused on the meeting of associational needs by primary type contacts with family and neighbors. An individual who rarely attends meetings where he/she knows few people and who discusses school district plans with family members before colleagues exhibits characteristics of primary group preference.

Social Conservatism (SC) entailed a discomfort with different races, religions, classes, and other forms of humanity, as well as a preference for a strong, central

authority. A social conservative, for example, would have difficulty relating to persons of either a much higher or a much lower social class. He/she would have few friends of a different race and feel that special interest groups have gone too far in demanding their rights.

(Appendix E in Little, 1998, contains an item map associating specific Rural Values Scale questions with the variables they represent.)

The four rural values scales--Community-centrism, Traditionalism, Primary Group Preference, and Social Conservatism--were developed specifically for this work. Description/analysis of the scales are presented in Little (1998); however each of the four 10-item scales has coefficient alpha equal to .92, the combined coefficient alpha is .95, and the inter-scale correlations range from .38 to .62. Psychometrically, these four scales have textbook quality. A variety of steps were taken to assure the validity of the rural values scales. A discussion of these issues can be found in Little.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that all four of these separate factors were collapsed into one overarching variable known as Rural Values. In the analysis that follows, the Rural Values factor constitutes the dependent variable.

Data Analysis

The methodological approach of this study and the identification of variables were based on the application of a conceptual model, the genesis of which sprang from a research-based understanding of the significance of the selected variables and the manner in which they fit together.

A first step in data analysis is the computation of frequencies and all descriptive variables. The research question, which examined the influence of the demographic factors on the Rural Values dependent variable, was analyzed using multiple regression. This also required the prior computation of a correlation matrix.

The multiple regression analysis was conducted with the entire sample ($n = 214$). In an effort to avoid missing relevant relationships, the researchers choose an α level of $p < .10$ for inclusion in the equation. Using this relaxed test of significance is consistent with an exploratory study and minimizes the likelihood of a Type II error.

The type of regression analysis performed was the stepwise method, a variation on the forward method of multiple regression. According to Kerlinger and Pedhazur (1973), “in the stepwise solution, tests are performed at each step to determine the contribution of each variable already in the equation if it were to enter last. It is thus possible to discard a variable that was initially a good predictor” (p. 290). This reshuffling of the variables after the entrance of each new one also explains why the variables may not be listed on the SPSS printouts in the exact order in which they were entered, as the variables appear in the order of the variance they explain.

The stepwise method of multiple regression has some of the advantages of both the forward and backward methods (Kerlinger & Pedhazur, 1973). Because this research question seeks to isolate a subset of predictor variables that will yield an optimal prediction equation, yet not include any variable which fails to meet the pre-selected statistical criteria, the stepwise method is appropriate for this analysis.

Results

Preliminary Statistics

Data for response rates and frequencies are given under *Data Sources* above. Table 1 gives means and standard deviations for both independent and dependent variables. Of note is the generally small value for the means of the demographic factors. All except Decision-Maker’s Position are less than 1.5 on a 2-point scale (3-point for Decision-

Maker's Background). This means that the respondents were predominantly from small, non-metropolitan school districts with a homogeneous racial makeup (white), and the decision makers were primarily from rural backgrounds. The higher mean score for Decision-Maker's Position is explained by the fact that the combination of principals (coded 2) plus other central office personnel (coded 3) was greater than the number of superintendents (coded 1).

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Rural Values Dependent Variable and Demographic Independent Variables

Variable	Mean	SD
RV	2.90	.90
SIZE	1.36	.48
MC	1.23	.42
DMB	1.35	.64
DMP	1.78	.86
CRC	1.25	.44

Note. RV = Rural Values; SIZE = School District Size; MC = Metropolitan Classification; DMB = Decision-Maker's Background; DMP = Decision-Maker's Position; CRC = Community Racial Composition.

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix for the dependent and independent variables. The table reveals generally low correlations among the predictors, with the highest reaching .43 between Metropolitan Classification and Decision-Maker's Background. Even a correlation at this level is well below any ordinary cut-off point for suspecting serious collinearity (Berry & Feldman, 1985). Correlations are higher between the dependent variable and the predictor variables, ranging between -.34 and -.56.

The negativity of all the correlations between rural values and the demographic predictor variables is noteworthy. The data clearly indicate that the lower one's level of the predictor variable, the higher one's level of rural values. Thus, the profile of the individual most likely to possess rural values becomes crystallized. Individuals most likely to possess rural values are superintendents with a rural background who work in small, non-metropolitan, racially homogenous school districts.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix for Rural Values Dependent Variable and Demographic Independent Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. RV	--	-.56	-.53	-.50	-.34	-.48
2. SIZE	--	--	.42	.38	.25	.22
3. MC	--	--	--	.43	.25	.24
4. DMB	--	--	--	--	.21	.23
5. DMP	--	--	--	--	--	.11*
6. CRC	--	--	--	--	--	--

Note. RV = Rural Values; SIZE = School District Size; MC = Metropolitan Classification; DMB = Decision-Maker's Background; DMP = Decision-Maker's Position; CRC = Community Racial Composition.

*denotes a significance level of $p < .05$. All other correlations were significant at $p < .01$.

Multiple Regressions

The separate steps of the complete stepwise regression are shown in Tables 3 – 7. These separate tables demonstrate the unique contribution of each variable and the R^2 added to the effect size, as ordered by the overall contribution of the five variables to the dependent variable, Rural Values. As noted above for the stepwise method, the order of

predictor variables based on strength of B can change from one step to the next. In the steps that are shown below, that pattern is found. These changes occur because of the considerable intercorrelations among the independent variables and Rural Values, thus affecting the unique variance explained by each demographic factor as new predictors are added.

School District Size

The first variable entered into the equation was school district size (SIZE). This variable accounted for 32% of the variance in rural values scores. The multiple R was .56 ($F[1, 212] = 99.13, p < .001$). The results showed that school district size was a significant factor in predicting rural values in hiring officials. Table 3 shows the results of the regression using school district size as the independent variable. The negative values indicates that rural values are stronger for the smaller districts, consistent with the correlation matrix in Table 2.

Table 3

Regression Analysis for School District Size on Rural Values

Variable	B	$SE B$	Beta	t
SIZE	-1.06	.11	-.56	-9.96*

Note. SIZE = School District Size.

* $p < .001$.

Community Racial Composition

For the next step in the analysis, Community Racial Composition (CRC) was added to the equation. The multiple R was .67 ($F[2, 211] = 87.01, p < .001$). Adding CRC to the equation produced an R^2 change of .13. CRC was also a significant factor in predicting rural values. Taken together, SIZE and CRC accounted for 45% of the

variance in rural values scores. Table 4 shows the results of the multiple regression using both SIZE and CRC as independent variables. The negative sign for CRC demonstrates that homogeneous districts are associated with stronger Rural Values.

Table 4

Regression Analysis for School District Size and Community Racial Composition on Rural Values

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>
SIZE	-.90	.10	-.48	-9.22*
CRC	-.77	.11	-.37	-7.17*

Note. SIZE = School District Size; CRC = Community Racial Composition.

* $p < .001$.

Metropolitan Classification

On the third step, Metropolitan Classification (MC) was added to the equation. In this instance, MC entered as the second most potent predictor ($B = -.68$) while Community Racial Composition, which had been the second independent variable introduced in step 2 falls to third influence ($B = -.62$). Regressing for SIZE, MC, and CRC, the multiple R was .72 ($F[3, 210] = 76.42, p < .001$). Adding MC to the equation produced an R^2 change of .07. According to these results, a decision-maker's metropolitan classification was significant in predicting his/her rural values, in this case non-metropolitan status being associated with higher Rural Values. The three variables together accounted for 52% of the variance in rural values scores. The results of the multiple regression using SIZE, MC, and CRC can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Regression Analysis for School District Size, Metropolitan Classification, and Community Racial Composition on Rural Values

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>
SIZE	-.69	.10	-.38	-6.92*
MC	-.68	.10	-.33	-6.64*
CRC	-.62	.11	-.30	-5.54*

Note. SIZE = School District Size; MC = Metropolitan Classification; CRC = Community Racial Composition.

* $p < .001$.

Decision-Maker's Background

The variable Decision-Maker's Background (DMB) was entered during step 4 of the stepwise analysis. With four predictors, the order of these variables changes again. Community Racial Composition had been the second variable entered in step 2, fell to the third entered in step 3, but now enters first ($B = -.63$) in step 4. School District Size and Metropolitan Classification enter as second and third in influence on rural values scores. Regressing for CRC, SIZE, MC, and DMB, the multiple R was .75 ($F[4, 209] = 65.44, p < .001$). For DMB, the R^2 change was .03. Probability levels showed that DMB was also a significant predictor of rural values; the negative signs indicate that a rural background is associated with higher Rural Values. Taken together, CRC, SIZE, MC, and DMB accounted for 56% of the variance in rural values scores. Table 6 shows the results of this step in the multiple regression.

Table 6

Regression Analysis for Community Racial Composition, School District Size, Metropolitan Classification, and Decision-Maker's Background on Rural Values

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>
CRC	-.63	.10	-.31	-6.38*
SIZE	-.60	.10	-.32	-6.06*
MC	-.49	.11	-.23	-4.25*
DMB	-.30	.07	-.21	-4.01*

Note. CRC = Community Racial Composition; SIZE = School District Size; MC = Metropolitan Classification; DMB = Decision-Maker's Background.

* $p < .001$.

Decision-Maker's Position

The final variable entered into the equation was Decision-Maker's Position (DMP). The order of predictors entered remains unchanged from step 4 with Community Racial Composition again having the strongest influence on Rural Values. Regressing for all five demographic variables in the conceptual model produced a multiple R of .76 ($F[5, 208] = 56.42, p < .001$). Adding DMP resulted in an R^2 change of .02. Thus, although the change was small, DMP was still significant in predicting rural values. The negative signs indicate that the superintendency, as opposed to the principalship or other central office positions, is associated with higher Rural Values. The five demographic variables from the model accounted for a total effect size of .58 for the rural values scores. Table 7 shows the results of the entire multiple regression including all five independent variables.

Table 7

Regression Analysis for Community Racial Composition, School District Size, Metropolitan Classification, Decision-Maker's Background, and Decision-Maker's Position on Rural Values

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Beta	<i>t</i>
CRC	-.62	.10	-.30	-6.42**
SIZE	-.56	.10	-.30	-5.80**
MC	-.44	.11	-.21	-3.90**
DMB	-.28	.07	-.20	-3.82**
DMP	-.15	.05	-.15	-3.10*

Note. CRC = Community Racial Composition; SIZE = School District Size; MC = Metropolitan Classification; DMB = Decision-Maker's Background; DMP = Decision-Maker's Position.

* $p < .005$. ** $p < .001$.

Combined Results

The overall results of the multiple regression indicate that the five demographic variables are indeed significant predictors of rural values. Considering the many organizational and personal variables that could influence the development of values, the fact that only five variables could account for 58% of the variance is remarkable. All five targeted demographic variables were significant at or beyond the .005 level. Of the five demographic variables, Community Racial Composition was most predictive of rural values ($B = -.62$), followed by Size ($B = -.56$), Metropolitan Classification ($B = -.44$), Decision-Maker's Background ($B = -.30$), and Decision-Maker's Position ($B = -.15$). Of the five demographic variables, Decision-Maker's Position was clearly the least predictive of rural values. A possible explanation for this finding is the wide variety of

positions held by decision makers. In addition to principals and superintendents, central office administrators with a diversity of job titles responded to the personnel selection questionnaire. This dilution of response groups would seem likely to affect the subsequent findings of the study.

Once again, just as with the correlations among variables, the Beta and *t* scores for the demographic variables indicated, without exception, the existence of a negative relationship. For the purposes of this study, that relationship is of great import. It indicates that the stronger the rural values a decision maker possesses, the more likely he/she is to be a member of a demographic category coded as a "1" rather than a "2" or "3." The likelihood is, therefore, that the specific school district size contributing to rural values is small, the community racial composition is homogenous, the metropolitan classification is non-metropolitan, the decision-maker's background is rural, and the decision-maker's position is superintendent.

Discussion

The research question considered to what extent membership in various demographic groups could predict rural values. Basically, the answer to this question constituted a positive judgment concerning the legitimacy of the proposed conceptual model which served as the foundation for the study. The analysis revealed that, in each instance, membership in the targeted demographic group was a significant predictor of the possession of rural values by hiring officials.

The results of this study confirm the inclusion of each of the specific organizational and personal variables in the conceptual model. These results also corroborate other researchers' findings. Kaufman (1971), for example, posited that the importance of

conformity in small organizations leads to great efforts to “weed out” potentially disruptive forces; his conclusions were born out by this study. Similarly, Childs and Melton’s (1983) research, which concluded that an individual’s background was a particularly sensitive variable in the formation of a rural values system, seems to have been validated.

Findings in the area of hierarchical position within the organization are especially worthy of discussion. The negative correlation between rural values and the decision-maker’s position seems to indicate that superintendents tend to possess stronger rural values than either principals or central office administrators. This result confirms Little (1996) who found that superintendents were much more likely to support hiring teachers according to their “fit” with the local community, whereas principals, heavily involved in the push to meet Kentucky’s accountability standards, were more likely to hire the teacher with the best academic credentials as a boost to instructional effectiveness.

In a different sense this result seems to contradict the Hage and Aiken (1970) finding that the higher the centralization in an organization, the lower the rate of program change. The Hage and Aiken axiom suggests that all central office administrators, as compared to the more decentralized principals, would be more susceptible to factors that preserve stability, in this instance stronger rural values that support tacit fit in personnel selection. But this was not supported in this study; rather the axiom was supported for superintendents, but not for other central office personnel.

But, the data here do partially support Hage and Aiken’s (1970) thesis, i.e., the superintendent, at the highest level of centralization, did hold stronger rural values. However, there are reasons to be wary of this result. First, the small number of central

office administrators represented in the study could have skewed the results. Second, although the cover letter expressively requested that the survey be completed by the individual making the final hiring decisions, some surveys could have been completed by central office administrators who did not fit the description but who had been delegated the assignment by their superior anyway.

Despite these caveats, however, this finding suggests a reality of school districts. Central office administrators share a certain element of job security not enjoyed by superintendents. While superintendents may be hesitant to introduce change for fear of reprisal by school board members, most central office administrators have tenure. Perhaps the central office administrators, much like principals, can afford to be less conservative, or rural, in their values. This conclusion is strongly supported by a recent study on school board and superintendent turnover. Alsbury (2003) found that only small districts with 0 superintendent turnover spanning an eight year period were associated with declining achievement trends on Washington state's accountability assessment. This suggests that, for long term incumbents, safe policies and "not rocking the boat" are preferable to aggressive policies to change curriculum and instruction in order to raise achievement, efforts that inevitably produce conflict as the status quo is challenged (cf. Miller, 1981).

Alsbury's (2003) work suggests that superintendents' higher levels of rural values are due to the selective pressure to hire a safe candidate for the most important position in a small district. As long ago as 1972, Carlson noted two distinct types of superintendent mobility pattern--place-bound and career-bound. Since place-bound or internal promotion, not external recruitment, seems to be practiced in many rural districts, then

the individuals hired to be superintendents may rise through the ranks based upon their high level of rural values. In other words, the higher and more visible one's position within the organization, the more he/she would have to be acceptable or safe to the community. Thus, more cosmopolitan types could be weeded out as subsequent promotions occur. Conversely, the same selective pressures might operate in the opposite direction in a more liberal or cosmopolitan milieu. Political candidates, for example, must sometimes become more conservative or liberal in order to be safe enough to win their parties' primaries (see Domhoff, 1975, 1979-1980). It does not seem irrational to assume that other positions could be governed by these same tendencies.

Future Research

The results of this study provide intriguing evidence regarding the influence of demographic factors on the possession of rural values. Likewise the larger study of which this research is a part (Little, 1998; Little & Miller, 2001) demonstrated the centrality of those rural values to the personnel selection practices of the person-organization fit model (cf. Bowes Fremont-Smith, 1984) which guided the study. But, like most research, these findings raise a series of related questions that subsequent research should address. The issues noted here focus on the nexus between the socio-demographic environment and rural values. For suggestions on the relationship of rural values to personnel selection practices, see Little and Miller.

The data for the current study came from a survey, a snapshot in time, which limits its usefulness for causal conclusions. Data gathered over time would permit investigation of the causal directions hypothesized in the theoretical person-organization fit model.

The Alsburry (2003) study indicates that length of incumbency of the superintendent

can be a crucial factor especially in small districts. This factor should be included among the personal level variables in the model in future research.

Data from the current study were collected in 1998, eight years into Kentucky's reform legislation. In the years since then, the pressures for accountability have continued to ratchet upward. The results of the current study showed that principals and other central office staff had "gotten the message" about the need to improve performance while the superintendents were much more likely to be the possessors of strong rural values that safely fit the mores of the local district. In the ensuing years, have superintendents also heard, and responded to, the cry for value-added achievement gains over time? A replication of the study would have important implications for the effects of statewide accountability mandates.

In the current study, the unit of analysis was the district. But how stable are the rural values across a district? Are there variations from school to school? Do demographic factors have a different effect on rural values at the school vs. the district level? Data collected at the school level would allow such comparisons to be made.

The rural values construct examined in the current study was a single measure with all four of the rural values collapsed to produce this result. While the psychometric properties of the rural values certainly justify this step, a related question is whether the four different Values--Community-centrism, Traditionalism, Primary Group Preferences, and Social Conservatism--have differential influence within the model. That question is true both for the influence of the demographic factors on the rural values and for the relationship of the rural values to the remainder of the personnel selection practices in the person-organization-fit model.

Finally, how immutable is the relationship between demographic factors and values? What would be the effect of staff development and in-service on the possession of rural values? Values are deeply imprinted into the human psyche, but so is the desire to help children. Investigation of the efficacy of such programs to change the level of human capital in school districts is clearly warranted.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of this study demonstrate strong empirical support for the conceptual model. The theory of person-organization fit would seem to have tremendous potential for use in exploring the influences leading to hiring decisions, especially in rural areas. The data go beyond just the significance of each of the demographic factors in predicting rural values. Looking at the direction of the relationships gives a more exact indication of the specific demographic background of individuals with rural values. In each case, individuals who were in rural areas, had rural backgrounds, were from small, racially homogenous school districts, and held a superintendency were shown by the data to be more likely to possess rural values than their demographic counterparts. Moreover, individuals who fit each of the expressly identified “rural” profiles were more likely to harbor rural values than individuals who fit only some of the categories. In fact, it seems that it was the combination of the variables, as much as any singular factor that contributed to the values formation.

In summary, it was the confluence of many elements, rather the presence of any one, which led to possession of rural values. As Little and Miller (2001) demonstrate, these rural values, in turn, strongly influenced the five different components of the two layers of Personnel Selection Practices, the essence of the person-organization fit model that

of Personnel Selection Practices, the essence of the person-organization fit model that guided this study (Figure 1). Thus, many of the hiring idiosyncrasies that have heretofore been ascribed to rural school districts may deserve reexamination. In other words, the presence of certain personnel selection practices may have more to do with alterable factors (the set of rural values) than with immutable geography (see Bloom, 1980).

This distinction is clearly policy-relevant and important. Policymakers, who are responsible for personnel decisions at the local school board level and for setting policies at the state and federal levels, must understand that they can influence student outcomes by their actions. For while geography cannot be changed, values can be. Values, and educational practice, can be influenced by the choices that school districts make regarding staff development and the cultivation of human capital. We all take on the values of our upbringing. But those values, whether rural or otherwise, do not have to constitute destiny.

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