

# The Role of Autonomy Support and Job Crafting in Interest Incongruence: A Mediated Moderation Model

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## Abstract

Interest incongruence, or the mismatch between employees' vocational interests and their work environments, tends to induce negative work attitudes and behaviors among employees. Combining conservation of resources theory and person–environment fit research, we propose a mediated moderation model explaining how autonomy support and job crafting mitigate the detrimental effects of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism. Using data collected across two time periods from a sample of 428 Chinese employees from diverse occupations, we found that autonomy support buffered the relationships between interest incongruence and job satisfaction and interest incongruence and absenteeism. Moreover, job crafting also had a buffering effect on these relationships and further mediated the moderating effect of autonomy support. We discuss theoretical and practical implications for employees coping with interest incongruence in organizations.

## Keywords

interest incongruence, autonomy support, job crafting, job satisfaction, absenteeism, Chinese employees

The concept of fit or congruence is central to Holland's (1973a) theory of vocational interests, which is the most widely used theory in the vocational literature. Research on interest congruence (i.e., the fit between employees' vocational interests and their work environments) has also received much attention within the field of industrial–organizational psychology. Meta-analyses conducted by two independent teams (Nye et al., 2012, 2017; Van Iddekinge et al., 2011) have associated interest congruence with critical organizational outcomes such as employee performance and turnover. Interest congruence has also been found to have incremental validity for predicting career success beyond

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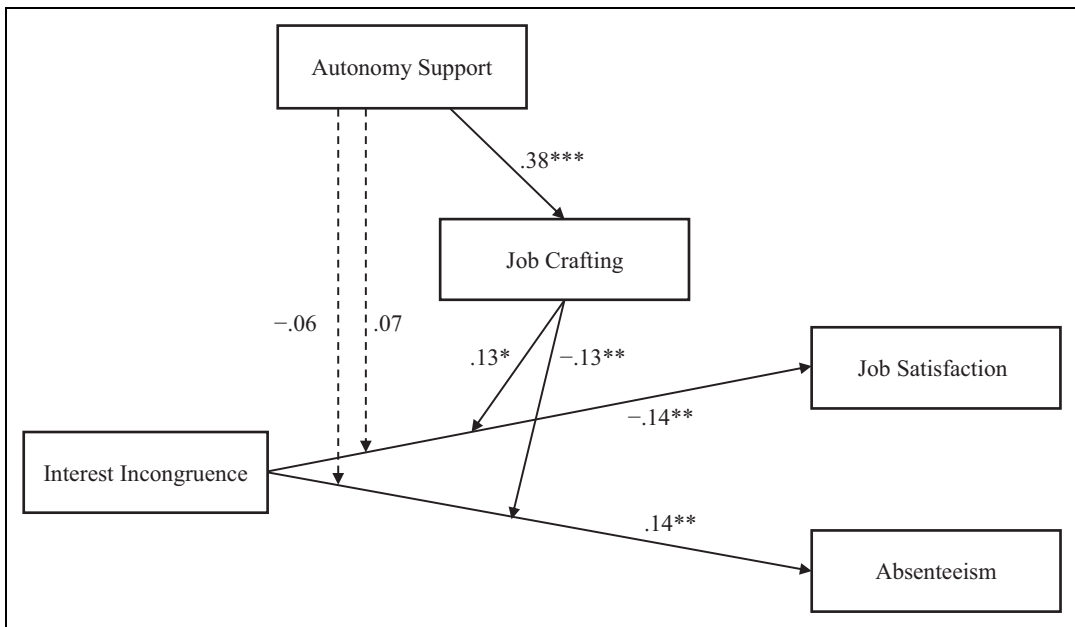
education and academic achievement (Neumann et al., 2009). This growing evidence of the validity of interest congruence for predicting workplace behaviors highlights the importance of interest congruence for understanding employee behaviors at work.

Unfortunately, more and more employees are experiencing a mismatch between their vocational interests and work environments due to the inaccurate initial perceptions of interest congruence before accepting a job offer (Dickson et al., 2008). Employees often realize that the occupations they thought they were interested in are not what they expected after entering the organizations (Nye et al., 2012). As a result, the experience of *interest incongruence*, or the lack of fit between employees' vocational interests and work environments, can be stressful and is related to negative work attitudes and behaviors. Indeed, employees with interest incongruence have stronger intentions to leave their organizations and are more likely to report lower job satisfaction and performance (Iliescu et al., 2015; Nye et al., 2017; Tsabari et al., 2005). However, most employees choose to live with interest incongruence instead of quitting, due to a lack of alternatives (Wheeler et al., 2007), the high costs of leaving a job (Mitchell et al., 2001), or a connection to the environment (Hom et al., 2012). But even when interest incongruence occurs, not all employees are destined to suffer an uncomfortable work experience. Meta-analytic evidence has found that there is considerable variability in the effects of interest congruence on work attitudes and behaviors (Nye et al., 2017; Tsabari et al., 2005), indicating that there might be factors that counteract the negative effects of interest incongruence. Uncovering these factors could enhance our understanding of how to deal with interest incongruence in organizations. Thus, in this study, we attempt to shed light on the interest incongruence and coping mechanisms.

We develop a resource-based model of interest incongruence by integrating conservation of resources theory (COR) with the person–environment (P-E) fit perspective (Wheeler et al., 2013). In doing so, we extend our knowledge in three ways. As Kristof-Brown and Guay (2011) noted, misfit has been largely ignored by researchers, and we know little about how misfit, such as interest incongruence, influences employees. Research on this is important due to the potential detrimental effects of interest incongruence on employees' work attitudes and behaviors. To address this gap, our first purpose is to examine the link between interest incongruence and employee outcomes from two different aspects. According to COR theory, the detrimental outcomes we typically link with interest incongruence occur because the threatening or actual loss of interest congruence-based resources leads to strain (Wheeler et al., 2013). We focus on job satisfaction (work attitudes) and absenteeism (work behaviors) as outcomes which we consider to be critical in the work context because of their close association with employee performance (Judge et al., 2001; Viswesvaran, 2002).

The second purpose of our study is to offer increased insight into the first phases of coping with interest incongruence. Although those employees who experience incongruence tend to be highly motivated to relieve incongruence-induced tension, many work environments do not allow them to shape their jobs (Follmer et al., 2018). The malleability of the environment is thus necessary for employees to improve their current work experiences. However, there is limited research looking at the role of environmental factors in shaping employees' reactions to incongruence. To address this, we examine the moderating role of autonomy support. We focus on this variable because environments supporting autonomy encourage employees' self-initiation and positive adjustment behaviors (e.g., Baard et al., 2004). According to COR theory, a primary way that individuals strive to gain and protect their resources to meet job demands is through relying on the pools of resource support available to them (Wheeler et al., 2013). We propose that autonomy support acts as an environmental resource that could provide the preconditions for employees to cope with job demands and thus compensate for the resource depletion that results from interest incongruence.

Our third purpose is to explore how job crafting mediates the combined roles of interest incongruence and autonomy support as predictors of employee outcomes. We focus on job crafting because it enables employees to balance the demands of their jobs with their personal resources (Tims et al., 2012). As COR theory suggests, individuals can utilize resource investment strategies to shape the



**Figure 1.** Model with standardized parameter estimates of path coefficients. Note.  $N = 428$ . Path coefficients came from Model 2. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

environment in a way that provides returns on those investments (Wheeler et al., 2013). We propose that employees under high levels of autonomy support may actively invest their resources into their environment through job crafting to better fit their environment to their interests and skills, which helps to enhance their work meaningfulness and improve their stressful work situation. Including job crafting as an additional moderator, which transmits the beneficial impact of autonomy support, enables a deeper understanding of how autonomy support is behaviorally enacted and how it helps employees better manage situations of interest incongruence. The overall model that is tested in the current study is presented in Figure 1.

### Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

**Interest incongruence and employee outcomes.** Holland (1973a) proposed that both individuals' interests and work environments could be categorized into six types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional. A situation of interest incongruence occurs when employees' vocational interests are mismatched with their work environments (e.g., an investigative type in an enterprising environment) and is generally considered to have negative consequences (Furnham & Walsh, 1991; Holland, 1973b; Iliescu et al., 2015). In our study, we use COR theory to examine the adverse impact of interest incongruence.

Wheeler et al. (2013) identified COR theory as a theoretical groundwork for P-E fit and proposed a new approach to explain the negative effects of P-E misfit, emphasizing the role of both personal and environmental resources. They defined P-E fit as the presence of personal resources that individuals need to meet their job demands and also described fit as the result of individuals' assessment of their current resource situation. As COR's resource loss principal suggests, individuals experience more harm when they lose resources than the relief that they experience when gaining the same resources (Hobfoll, 2001). The lack of adequate resources may thus affect employees' assessment of P-E fit and

subsequent work attitudes and behaviors. When applied to interest incongruence, the assessment could be negative if individuals realize that they do not possess sufficient resources to satisfy the demands of the work environment in a way that is in line with their underlying interests. In the beginning, experiencing interest incongruence is uncomfortable and disadvantageous to employees. This misfit situation may be experienced as stressful and can continue to have a reciprocal relationship with resource loss. That is, if this experience of interest incongruence is not reduced, the resource drain could result in resource loss spirals, meaning that employees are further losing personal and environmental resources.

Based on this explanatory approach, we posit that interest incongruence leads to detrimental effects on work attitudes and behaviors in the form of job satisfaction and absenteeism. Job satisfaction is one of the most important attitudinal outcomes in the workplace. It is defined as employees' emotional attitudes toward their jobs and is maintained with cognitive and emotional resources (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). As noted above, interest incongruence is accompanied by the related resource depletion, which can reduce employees' ability to maintain their positive attitudes toward work (Wright & Hobfoll, 2004). Employees may be disappointed and have the feeling of not being supported by the work environment, so their overall sense of job satisfaction may be reduced. There is also empirical evidence that interest congruence influences individuals' satisfaction in both work and education domains (e.g., Fu et al., 2019; Tsabari et al., 2005).

Furthermore, interest incongruence is seen as the root of negative outcomes such as turnover intention and actual turnover, and a congruence index has been found to be a stronger predictor of turnover than other forms of P-E fit (Nye et al., 2017). However, as discussed earlier, quitting is often not a wise option because of a lack of alternatives. In this case, employees may engage in other types of undesired behaviors, such as absenteeism; the strain associated with interest incongruence may trigger psychological and physical symptoms (e.g., anxiety and sleep disturbances; Darr & Johns, 2008), leading employees to fail to report for the scheduled work. By being absent from work, employees might escape resource depletion and pressure-filled work situations in the short term (Doblhofer et al., 2019). Therefore, we hypothesize

**Hypothesis 1:** Interest incongruence will be (a) negatively related to job satisfaction and (b) positively related to absenteeism.

*Moderating effect of autonomy support.* According to the COR's resource investment principal, individuals should invest resources to gain new resources and to protect against or recover from losing resources. Those with more resources are better positioned to invest resources in the process (Hobfoll, 2001). Following this line of reasoning, we propose that autonomy support is an essential environmental resource that encourages employees to actively invest resources to cope with unsatisfying resource situations such as interest incongruence. Specifically, autonomy support is defined as an interpersonal orientation used by managers involving acknowledging and understanding employees' perspectives, providing opportunities for choice, and encouraging self-initiation (Deci et al., 1994). Autonomy support from supervisors provides employees with alternative resources, better enabling employees to decide when and how to respond to their work demands (Slemp et al., 2015). Employees in an autonomy-supportive environment can engage in self-initiated and discretionary behavior and experience a heightened sense of ownership (Deci et al., 2017). Indeed, a high level of autonomy support makes the job more stimulating and gratifying (Deci et al., 1994), which may lead employees to gain new resources and decrease resource depletion when they confront interest incongruence.

On the contrary, employees who perceive low levels of autonomy support in their work environment believe they lack harmonizing resources (Ryan et al., 2006). Non-autonomy-supportive environments reduce available resources, and employees in this climate are more likely to be vulnerable to a lack of freedom to choose to do things that are interesting or personally meaningful to them. Through this process, a low level of autonomy support may reduce employees' freedom to decide which tasks to

perform and decrease their sense of value at work. Therefore, they may feel worthless to maintain resources and lack the motivation to gain more resources, so that it may reinforce the effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism. Taken together, we hypothesize

**Hypothesis 2a:** The negative effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction will be weaker when autonomy support is high than when it is low; and

**Hypothesis 2b:** The positive effect of interest incongruence on absenteeism will be weaker when autonomy support is high than when it is low.

*Role of job crafting.* We propose that an autonomy-supportive environment provides opportunities for job crafting. Job crafting describes an employee's proactive behaviors to shape their job to improve the experience of work (Berg et al., 2013). Wrzesniewski and Dutton (2001) posited that job crafting occurs when employees have the reasons (i.e., misfit) as well as the discretion (i.e., autonomy) to alter their jobs. In their conceptual model, autonomy is as a critical precursor for job crafting as it gives individuals more freedom to determine their work procedures and to schedule their tasks, which stimulates employees to rethink their work, and makes it more likely that they alter their cognitive representation of their job. In a situation with a high level of autonomy support, employees who perceive that they have more freedom, opportunities, or available resources to schedule and determine the ways to craft their jobs are more likely to proactively alter their jobs. Conversely, employees who lack freedom in their work environments are less likely to craft their work. There is also empirical evidence showing the positive association between autonomy support and job crafting (e.g., Slemp et al., 2015). Therefore, we hypothesize

**Hypothesis 3:** Autonomy support will be positively related to job crafting.

We further propose that job crafting, in turn, will mitigate the effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism. The goal of job crafting is to change one's job boundaries to suit personal interests and skills (Berg et al., 2013). When employees engage in job crafting, they can change the tasks and social relationships that constitute their job and rethink how they view the job as a whole (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Such changes enable employees to feel competent and autonomous when engaging in tasks and experience supportive and reciprocal interpersonal relationships, thereby enhancing the overall meaning and identity of the job (Berg et al., 2013). Job crafting may constitute a way by which employees experiencing incongruence are better able to align the job with their interests and expectations.

According to Wheeler et al.'s (2013) theorizing, crafting one's job to activate and generate new resources such as work meaningfulness could enhance employees' expectation that they will benefit from investing resources into their work and make them feel more confident and comfortable at work. By utilizing job crafting to build a resourceful and motivating work environment to manage job demands, employees are more likely to perceive themselves as having more resources to control over their actions and are less likely to be vulnerable to the misfit between their interests and the work environment. The result of these crafting activities can be a positive alignment between the employees' interests and skills and the demands of the job (Tims et al., 2012), which allows employees to gain new resources and stem future resource loss spirals resulting from interest incongruence. This should be constructive for high levels of job satisfaction and low levels of absenteeism. Therefore, we hypothesize

**Hypothesis 4a:** The negative effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction will be weaker when job crafting is high than when it is low; and

**Hypothesis 4b:** The positive effect of interest incongruence on absenteeism will be weaker when job crafting is high than when it is low.

Our preceding hypotheses propose that autonomy support may increase job crafting (Hypothesis 3) and that job crafting may mitigate the effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism (Hypotheses 4a and 4b). Together, these hypotheses predict that job crafting may mediate the moderating effect of autonomy support on the relationships between interest incongruence and job satisfaction and between interest incongruence and absenteeism (Hypotheses 2a and 2b). These relationships constitute a case of Type II-mediated moderation indicated by Liu et al. (2012): Autonomy support could weaken the effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism by encouraging job crafting. Therefore, we propose the formal hypothesis of mediated moderation:

**Hypothesis 5:** Job crafting will mediate the direct moderating effect of autonomy support on the relationships (a) between interest incongruence and job satisfaction and (b) between interest incongruence and absenteeism.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedures*

We collected data through online surveys across two time points. Participants were recruited in China, through postings on WeChat (a popular social network). The postings directed interested participants to a link that included general information about the purpose of the study and a QR code to join a WeChat group. We distributed the link to our questionnaires to participants in the WeChat group. At Time 1, 547 participants responded to the survey which measured vocational interests, autonomy support, job crafting, and control variables. Three months later, at Time 2, a total of 453 participants completed a survey which measured job satisfaction and absenteeism. Participants provided an identification code to match responses. In total, we received 428 valid responses (a response rate of 67.0%) from Times 1 and 2.

Among the participants, 44.6% were male, the average age was 33.66 years ( $SD = 8.86$ ), and the average organizational tenure was 9.29 years ( $SD = 9.29$ ). Most of the participants had a relatively high education level: 32.5% held a bachelor's degree and 29.2% held a master's degree or above. The participants represented various industries, and the five most common were information technology, finance, sales, education, and real estate. The occupational distribution of the participants comprised 133 different occupations and 55 different Holland codes.

### *Measures*

Unless otherwise indicated, all measures used a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*).

**Vocational interests.** We used a 60-item scale (Rounds et al., 2010) to measure Holland's six types of vocational interests. Respondents were asked to rate how much they would like (1 = *strongly dislike*, 5 = *strongly like*) to do the career-related activities. Sample items include "Test the quality of parts before shipment" (realistic) and "Give career guidance to people" (social). Rounds et al. (2010) reported Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s ranging from .78 to .90 and convergent validity with an established interest scale (Interest-Finder; Wall & Baker, 1997) ranging from .74 to .82. The reliability of the six subscales in this study ranged from .80 (Enterprising) to .90 (Investigative and Artistic).

**Interest incongruence.** Consistent with previous research, we conceptualized interest incongruence as the negative end on the fit-misfit spectrum (e.g., Furnham & Walsh, 1991). We adopted the first-letter hexagonal distance method (Holland, 1973b) to assess the incongruence index. Individual interest scores were generated by the interest measure scores. The interest scores for the work environments

were assessed based on a respondent's declared occupation and O\*NET occupational data. An incongruence index was computed based on the most dominant type of interests for both individuals and their work environments, ranging from 1 (the types are identical) to 4 (the types are opposite). Previous studies have shown that the computation of this index was related to satisfaction, frustration, and counterproductive work behavior (Fu et al., 2019; Iliescu et al., 2015).

**Autonomy support.** We used a 6-item scale (Baard et al., 2004) to assess the perceived autonomy support from one's most immediate manager. A sample item is "I feel that my manager provides me choices and options." Baard et al. (2004) reported satisfactory reliability and validity. Scale scores were positively related to intrinsic need satisfaction, performance evaluation, and adjustment (Baard et al., 2004). The coefficient  $\alpha$  was .91 for this study.

**Job crafting.** We assessed job crafting using a 15-item scale (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). A sample item is "Introduce new work tasks that you think better suit your skills or interests." Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *almost never*, 5 = *very often*). Slemp and Vella-Brodrick (2013) provided support for the factorial and convergent validity. Dimensions of job crafting related positively to job satisfaction and work enthusiasm, and Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s ranged from .83 to .89 (Slemp & Vella-Brodrick, 2013). The coefficient  $\alpha$  was .92 in this study.

**Job satisfaction.** We used a 3-item scale (Cammann et al., 1979) to measure the overall job satisfaction. A sample item is "In general, I like working here." Cammann et al. (1979) in the original study reported the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of this scale was .77. A prior meta-analysis has consistently reported high internal reliabilities (Bowling & Hammond, 2008). Scale scores correlated as expected with work-related variables (Bowling & Hammond, 2008), providing validity evidence. In the present study, the coefficient  $\alpha$  was .87.

**Absenteeism.** We measured absenteeism by the number of sickness-related absence days in the last 12 months (Jenkins, 2014). We used self-reported absenteeism, as recent meta-analytic evidence suggests that self-reported data are as valid as objective data and that the tendency of participants to under-report absence does not affect their ranking order (Johns & Miraglia, 2015). Jenkins (2014) reported a significant correlation coefficient of .47 between self-reported and objective measures, and both measures functioned similarly to predict health outcomes.

**Control variables.** We controlled for sociodemographic variables of age (in years), gender (1 = male, 2 = female), educational level (1 = below bachelor's degree, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's degree or above), and organization tenure (in years), since previous research linked these variables to job satisfaction and absenteeism (Bedeian et al., 1992; Harrison & Martocchio, 1998). We also controlled for the perceived person–job misfit considering its negative effects on work attitudes and behaviors (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Person–job misfit was measured with six items (Cable & DeRue, 2002). A sample item was "The match is very good between the demands of my job and my personal skills." All items were reverse scored. Cronbach's  $\alpha$ s ranged from .84 to .93 in different samples (Cable & DeRue, 2002) and was .89 in this study.

## Analysis Plan

To test our hypotheses, we applied path analyses using Mplus 7.0. To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we regressed job satisfaction and absenteeism on the control variables (age, gender, education level, organizational tenure, and person–job misfit), interest incongruence, autonomy support, and the Incongruence  $\times$  Support interaction term. To test Hypotheses 3 and 4, we regressed job crafting on the control variables, interest incongruence, autonomy support, and the Incongruence  $\times$  Support interaction term,

**Table 1.** Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among the Study's Main Variables.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Age	33.66	8.86	—									
2. Gender	1.55	0.50	.02	—								
3. Educational level	1.91	0.82	-.54**	-.08	—							
4. Organizational tenure	9.29	9.29	.79**	-.03	-.44**	—						
5. Person–job misfit	2.61	0.73	-.10*	.01	.01	-.12*	(.89)					
6. Interest incongruence	2.43	1.02	-.02	-.02	-.06	-.03	.04	—				
7. Autonomy support	3.50	0.77	-.02	.03	.03	-.05	-.45**	-.06	(.91)			
8. Job crafting	3.36	0.64	.01	-.09	.02	-.02	-.33**	-.08	.45**	(.92)		
9. Job satisfaction	3.54	0.84	.18**	-.01	-.09	.16**	-.52**	-.18**	.48**	.41**	(.87)	
10. Absenteeism	10.97	19.48	.07	.07	-.22**	.08	.04	.15**	-.05	-.06	-.12*	—

Note.  $N = 428$ . Coefficient  $\alpha$ s are on the diagonal in parentheses. For gender, 1 = male, 2 = female; for educational level, 1 = below bachelor's degree, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's degree or above.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

and job satisfaction and absenteeism on the control variables, interest incongruence, autonomy support, job crafting, and the Incongruence  $\times$  Support and Incongruence  $\times$  Crafting interaction terms. To test Hypothesis 5, we adopted the procedure introduced by Liu et al. (2012) to further assess the Type II-mediated moderation. This approach uses bootstrapping procedures to build confidence intervals to examine the statistical significance of the indirect moderating effects.

## Results

### Screening Data

Data screening was conducted with SPSS 23.0 across 547 cases. Little's missing completely at random test suggested that data were missing completely at random,  $\chi^2(999) = 917.36, p > ns$ . We used mean imputation for participants who skipped one item on a scale but had available data for other items on that scale (Bernaards & Sijtsma, 2000) and excluded the cases of 113 participants who skipped more than one item on a scale from the analysis. We further conducted the univariate and the multivariate analyses (Navarro et al., 2019), and 6 cases were identified as potential outliers and deleted. Finally, we screened the remaining 428 cases for normality. The skewness ( $-.91$  to  $+.29$ ) and kurtosis ( $-1.12$  to  $1.08$ ) values of the scale scores did not exceed thresholds of  $\pm 2$ , indicating the variables were deemed as normally distributed (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). The  $t$  tests revealed no significant differences for the Time 1 variables between participants who completed all follow-up surveys and those who did not continue. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables in this study.

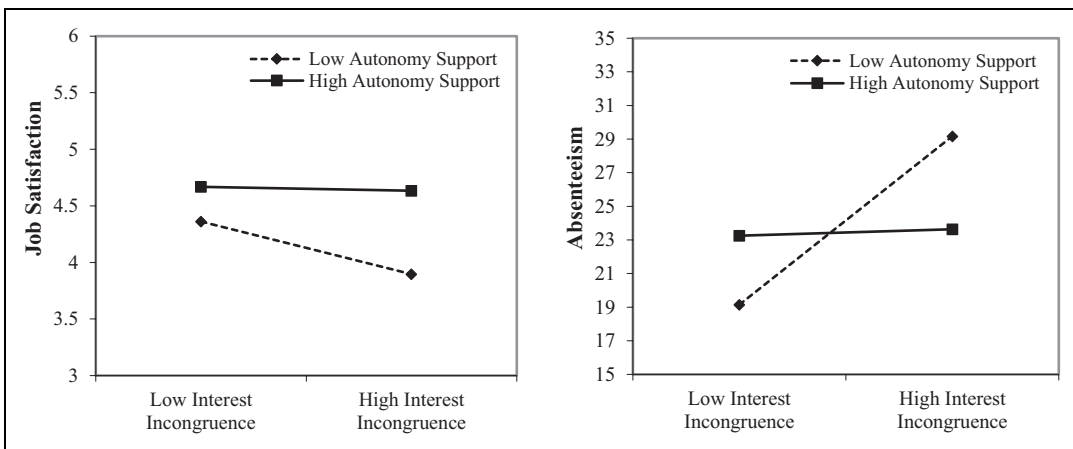
### Hypotheses Tests

As shown in Table 2, interest incongruence significantly related to job satisfaction ( $\beta = -.14, p < .01$ ; see Model 2) and absenteeism ( $\beta = .14, p < .01$ ; see Model 2), supporting Hypotheses 1a and 1b. Regarding Hypothesis 2, interest incongruence and autonomy support interacted significantly to predict job satisfaction ( $\beta = .12, p < .05$ ; see Model 1) and absenteeism ( $\beta = -.12, p < .01$ ; see Model 1).

**Table 2.** Regression Analyses.

Predictor variables	Model 1		Model 2		
	Job satisfaction	Absenteeism	Job crafting	Job satisfaction	Absenteeism
Age	.12 (.01)	-.13 (-.29)	.06 (.00)	.11 (.01)	-.13 (-.29)
Gender	-.03 (-.05)	.08 (2.92)	-.10* (-.12)	-.01 (-.02)	.07 (2.76)
Educational level	-.04 (-.04)	-.24*** (-5.81)	.01 (.01)	-.04 (-.04)	-.24*** (-5.79)
Organizational tenure	.01 (.00)	.09 (.18)	-.07 (-.01)	.01 (.00)	.10 (.21)
Person–job misfit	-.36*** (-.41)	.02 (.64)	-.15* (-.13)	-.34*** (-.40)	.04 (.94)
Interest incongruence	-.15*** (-.12)	.13** (2.54)	-.05 (-.03)	-.14** (-.12)	.14** (2.57)
Autonomy support	.31*** (.34)	-.02 (-.47)	.38*** (.32)	.24*** (.26)	-.01 (-.29)
Incongruence × Support	.12* (.14)	-.12** (-3.07)	-.02 (-.02)	.07 (.08)	-.06 (-1.52)
Job crafting				.18** (.23)	-.01 (-.39)
Incongruence × Crafting				.13* (.18)	-.13** (-4.14)
R <sup>2</sup>	.40***	.09***	.24***	.44***	.11***
F (df)	34.79***	5.31***	16.31***	32.53***	4.94***

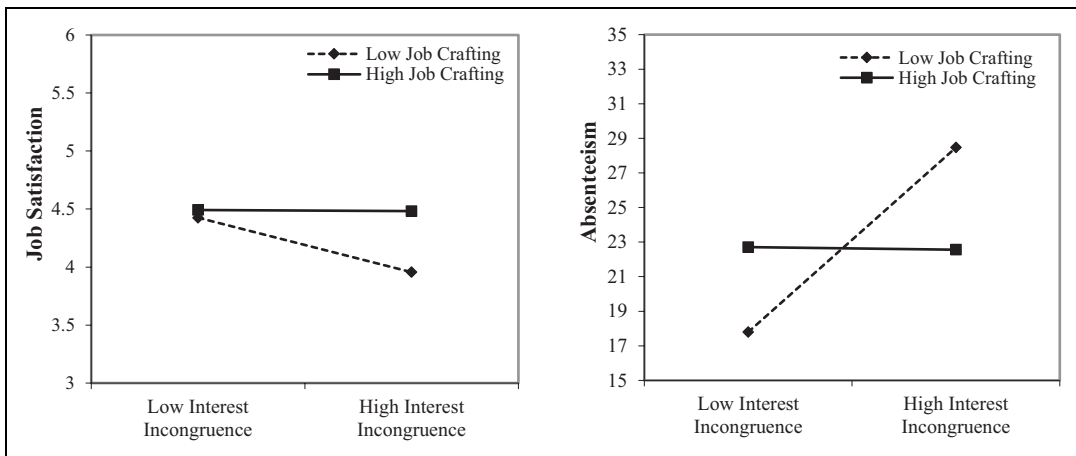
Note. N = 428. Standardized coefficients are reported, and unstandardized coefficients are reported in the parentheses. \**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\* *p* < .001.



**Figure 2.** The interaction of interest incongruence and autonomy support on employees' job satisfaction and absenteeism.

We used Aiken and West's (1991) procedure to plot the interaction effects (see Figure 2) and calculated simple slopes for low (1 *SD* below the mean) and high levels (1 *SD* above the mean) of the moderator. When autonomy support was low, interest incongruence was significantly related to both outcomes (job satisfaction:  $\beta = -.23, p < .01$ ; absenteeism:  $\beta = 4.90, p < .001$ ). When autonomy support was high, interest incongruence was not related to the outcomes (job satisfaction;  $\beta = -.02, p > ns$ ; absenteeism:  $\beta = .19, p > ns$ ). Thus, Hypotheses 2a and 2b were supported.

We then tested Hypotheses 3 and 4. In support of Hypothesis 3, autonomy support was significantly associated with job crafting ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ; see Model 2). In support of Hypotheses 4a and 4b, interest incongruence and job crafting interacted significantly to predict job satisfaction ( $\beta = .13, p < .05$ ; see Model 2) and absenteeism ( $\beta = -.13, p < .01$ ; see Model 2). We plotted the interaction effects in Figure 3. Simple slope analyses suggested that the relationships between interest incongruence and both outcomes were stronger when job crafting was low (job satisfaction:  $\beta = -.23, p < .001$ ;



**Figure 3.** The interaction of interest incongruence and job crafting on employees' job satisfaction and absenteeism.

absenteeism:  $\beta = 5.22, p < .001$ ) and weaker when job crafting was high (job satisfaction:  $\beta = -.00, p > ns$ ; absenteeism:  $\beta = -.07, p > ns$ ). In the analyses for both job satisfaction and absenteeism, the moderating effect of autonomy support became nonsignificant when we included the moderating effect of job crafting ( $\beta = .07, p > ns, \beta = -.06, p > ns$ ; see Model 2), lending preliminary support for Hypotheses 5a and 5b.

To further test the significance of the indirect effect (in moderating the relationships between interest incongruence and job satisfaction as well as absenteeism) via the mediator of job crafting (Hypotheses 5a and 5b), we followed the approach recommended by Liu et al. (2012). By drawing 1,000 random samples with replacement from the full sample, we found that the sizes of the indirect effects were 0.06 for job satisfaction and  $-1.31$  for absenteeism, and these effects were significant as the 95% confidence interval excluded zero (95% CI for job satisfaction [.01, .13], 95% CI for absenteeism  $[-2.84, -.43]$ ), thus fully supporting Hypotheses 5a and 5b. Path coefficients of our proposed model are reported in Figure 1.

## Discussion

Building on COR theory (Hobfoll, 2001) and P-E fit research, we examined the detrimental impact of interest incongruence between employee interests and work environment on employees' work attitudes and behaviors to better understand how employees cope with the stressful situation of interest incongruence. Consistent with our hypotheses, our results showed that interest incongruence was negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to absenteeism. Furthermore, findings indicated that autonomy support mitigated the detrimental impact of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism through promoting job crafting, which buffered the relations between interest incongruence–job satisfaction and interest incongruence–absenteeism.

### Theoretical Implications

Our findings have important theoretical implications for COR theory and P-E fit theory. First, recent P-E fit researchers tend to direct their attention toward the themes related to competence, life–work balance, and work relationships, at the cost of specific investigations of vocational interests (e.g., Chuang et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2012). However, the negative consequences of interest incongruence

(Iliescu et al., 2015; Nye et al., 2017) and the prevalence of interest incongruence in organizations (Dickson et al., 2008) require us to pay attention to employees who experience interest incongruence with their organizations. Integrating a resource perspective with P-E fit theory (Wheeler et al., 2013), our findings demonstrated a distinct role of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism. Thus, our study enriches past findings that linked interest incongruence with negative outcomes such as frustration and counterproductive work behavior (Furnham & Walsh, 1991; Iliescu et al., 2015) and, more broadly, enriches the P-E fit literature. Moreover, our study offers a rationale for how employees can compensate for interest incongruence and responds to the call for more research on experiencing and coping with misfit (Su, 2020).

Second, we examine contextual boundaries for the effect of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism concerning the perception of autonomy support. Recent P-E fit literature focused merely on the role of individual coping strategies in explaining misfit and its impact on employee outcomes (e.g., Doblhofer et al., 2019). Our study extends prior studies by demonstrating that autonomy support is an essential environmental condition that can buffer the adverse effects of interest incongruence. This finding is consistent with the results of Follmer et al. (2018) that showed the importance of a flexible environment in coping with P-E misfit in organizations. We extend this line of research and suggest that the environmental factor of autonomy support can be considered as an intervention that allows employees who experience interest incongruence to increase job satisfaction and decrease absenteeism. Ultimately, this research presents a broader insight into the existing interest congruence literature and provides evidence on the critical role of the work environment that researchers can further explore to better understand how interest incongruence can affect employees.

Third, we further explore the explanatory mechanism of the moderating role of autonomy support. From a resource perspective, our research helps to explain how autonomy support encourages employees who experience misfit to invest resources in job crafting. This finding offers empirical evidence to show the crucial role of autonomy as a requisite condition for promoting job crafting (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) and is in line with previous research suggesting that an autonomy-supportive environment can foster employee's inner motivational resources and result in increased job crafting (Slemp et al., 2015). Moreover, our findings show that job crafting, as promoted by autonomy support, can suppress the negative consequences of interest incongruence on job satisfaction and absenteeism. This implies that when the work environment permits, employees will actively shape their environment according to their interests and skills, whereby employees can create the opportunity to overcome the downsides of misfit situations and build better and more meaningful work experiences. As such, our research emphasizes the active role of both the manager and employee actions to understand the relationship between interest incongruence and employee outcomes.

### ***Practical Implications***

This research provides practical implications for organizations and career counseling. The findings that interest incongruence is associated with lower job satisfaction and higher absenteeism suggest that organizations should improve selection systems to maximize the degree of match between new employees' interests and organizations. This might involve providing specific information about work activities and work environments in recruitment advertisements to attract applicants with aligned interests (Feldman et al., 2006). Job interviewers should also be trained to evaluate applicants' likelihood of interest incongruence to help managers make informed hiring decisions. Meanwhile, organizations should also actively help employees experiencing interest incongruence to improve their work experiences. Related to this, our findings emphasize that organizations need to make some changes, which can be transformed into beneficial behaviors for both the individuals and the organizations. Effective practices include educating managers on using more autonomy approaches to supervise their followers and educating employees on ways to craft autonomy support into their jobs (Slemp et al., 2015). In

such an autonomy-supportive way, managers can create a climate that facilitates employees' job crafting behaviors, which in turn may make employees more adaptive to the misfit situations. Finally, to address the concerns of career development, career counselors can promote job crafting behaviors (e.g., changing the tasks or relationships according to personal interests and skills) rather than direct individuals' attention to career alternatives (Esteves & Lopes, 2017).

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This research has several limitations. First, we conceptualized the interest incongruence as one end of the fit–misfit spectrum. Even though we adopted this method from previous research in misfit literature (e.g., Furnham & Walsh, 1991), there is also some speculation that a lack of interest congruence may be qualitatively different from interest incongruence (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011). However, to our best of knowledge, there are no suitable scales to assess interest incongruence or misfit. We encourage future research to concentrate on the development of misfit measures that can separate low congruence from incongruence. Second, the measure of interest incongruence used in this study captures “objective fit” but fails to reflect employees' subjective perceptions. Thus, future research could replicate the current study using a measure to assess perceived interest incongruence, which might improve the model's predictive validity relative to work attitudes and behaviors. Additionally, future research can explore the direct reducing effects of autonomy support and job crafting on employees' subjective interest incongruence. Third, we adopted a self-assessment method for all variables. In fact, it is virtually impossible to attain record-based absenteeism data from a mixed sample of employers. Although self-reported measures from a single source are subject to common method bias, our design with a time-separated measure of employee outcomes helps to reduce this risk. Nevertheless, future research could use objective absenteeism data to achieve a higher generalization of our results. Finally, although we collected data from multiple industries and occupations, all participants were from China, and this limits the generalization of our research findings to other cultural contexts. Even though the basic principle of the P-E fit theory is considered to be generalizable across cultures, interest congruence shows a stronger effect on job satisfaction in individualistic cultures (e.g., Western countries) than in collectivistic cultures (e.g., Asia countries; Tsabari et al., 2005). As individualistic cultures give greater legitimacy to independent thinking and personal choice, the same attitude may also hold true toward occupational choice and job satisfaction. Therefore, we recommend that future research replicate our study to explain cross-cultural differences that may emerge.

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