

Comparing and Contrasting Person-Environment Fit and Misfit

Danielle L. Talbot
Coventry University

Jon Billsberry
Coventry University

Abstract

For previous Fit e-Conferences, we have presented various aspects of our research on how person-environment (PE) fit and misfit compare. We have argued that because so little is known about how individuals experience fit and misfit at work, qualitative, exploratory research was called for (Talbot & Billsberry, 2007; 2008). Last year, our e-conference contribution detailed how using causal mapping in PE fit research would enable individuals' experiences of fit and misfit to be captured and, as well as generating rich idiographic data, would further be amenable to nomothetic analysis (Talbot, Ambrosini & Billsberry, 2009). This paper briefly reviews why we set out to research employees' fit and misfit perceptions, how we used causal mapping and discusses the main findings from our research.

Research on Misfit

The PE fit literature has, on the whole, been concerned with the detailed study of individuals' fit with particular aspects of their working environment and how this results in outcomes for both the person and the organisation. High levels of PE fit are generally assumed to have positive outcomes (Edwards & Shipp, 2007) such as job satisfaction and commitment. Occasionally, misfit is also directly addressed. For example, Schneider (1987), in his attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model, theorised that people who misfit would leave an organisation and that having employees who are not similar to others in the organisation may have organisational (if not individual) benefits as it may avoid group-think and the inability to adapt to new situations (Schneider, et al., 1997). Misfit has been linked to turnover, but perhaps the most studied consequence of misfit is stress in individuals. Le Fevre, Matheny and Kolt (2003) studied PE fit and organisational stress and found that misfit increased stress levels, resulting in physiological or psychological symptoms and that misfits may employ coping or defence mechanisms in order to increase their fit.

Edwards and Shipp (2007) similarly showed that the misfit between individuals' needs and what the environment supplies can lead to people experiencing stress, "such that stress exists when supplies fall short of the person's needs" (Edwards & Shipp, 2007, p. 226). However, McGrath's (1976) model of stress and performance posits that stress results from an imbalance between what the organisation demands and what the individual is able to contribute in terms of their abilities. Stress, in the PE fit view, therefore results when there is a lack of complementary fit, particularly demands-ability or needs-supply fit, between the individual and the organisation (Edwards, 2008).

What has been shown to date is that people may erroneously join organisations where they do not fit and then leave when their misfit becomes apparent (Schneider, 1987) but empirical studies have shed doubt on whether all misfits leave (e.g. Wheeler, et al., 2007). It

is has been suggested that changes in the organisation cause individuals to reappraise whether they fit (Wheeler, et al., 2005), but there no empirical evidence to show what causes people to misfit. Misfit has been shown to result in stress (e.g. Edwards, 2008) and low levels of job satisfaction (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005) which suggests that misfit is a negative state and thus to be avoided, at least from the individual's perspective.

However, compared to the extensive work that has gone into clarifying the conceptualisation of PE fit, relatively little is known about misfit. Misfit is generally assumed to be a lack of fit, where P is not equal to E (Harrison, 2007). It is known however, that sometimes, optimum affective outcomes result where there is not an exact congruence between the P and E variables (Edwards & Cable, 2009), for example where what is supplied by the organisation exceeds what the individual needs. How misfit may be conceptualised is therefore unclear. Further, it is also unclear how employees experience organisational fit and misfit (Piasentin & Chapman, 2007) and whether they experience fit with different facets of the organisation simultaneously (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). One thing is clear however: that "at present we know very little about the process of becoming a misfit" (Billsberry, et al., 2006, p. 12). Wheeler et al (2007, p. 215) concur, recognizing that "the area of misfit is wide open to researchers" and Kristof-Brown and Guay (2010) also propose misfit as a rich area for PE fit research.

Methods

As noted in the introduction, causal mapping was considered to be a particularly appropriate tool for an exploratory study of employees' fit and misfit perceptions firstly, because finding out about people's experiences of their fit at work is essentially a causal question and secondly, because causal mapping helps individuals "to surface tacitly held thought processes in an explicit manner"(Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, et al., 2005, p. 560) without imposing the interviewer's preconceived ideas. This method also helps people to clarify their thinking on complex matters, especially if negative emotions are making it difficult for the person to see the situation clearly (Bryson, Ackerman, Eden & Finn, 2004).

Thirty-eight employees holding a wide range of jobs (including factory floor staff, accountants and a managing director for example) took part in the research and, in one-to-one sessions with the researcher, put together causal maps to show how they had come to fit or misfit at work. The causal maps were analysed by their content and structure. A realist perspective was taken, using extant measures from the PE fit literature to form the basis of a coding schedule. As well as person-job (PJ), person-organisation (PO), person-supervisor (PS), person-group (PG), person-vocation (PV) and person-individual (PI) forms of fit, the coding schedule also included demographic factors (e.g. age, tenure, gender and race (Jackson & Chung, 2008; Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly, 1992)) and job embeddedness measures (Mitchell et al, 2001). The job embeddedness measures were included because we found that the participants talked about these broader themes during the course of the interviews. The reason that all of the PE fit dimensions were included was to test whether the participants experience multi-dimensional fit and misfit and whether similar or different dimensions were cited by the employees as affecting their fit versus their misfit at work.

The structure of the causal maps was analysed by assessing the relative complexity of the causal chains leading to fit and misfit and whether these chains comprised concepts of one or more code. This analysis was to determine whether the participants spoke about the PE fit dimensions as being independent as suggested by the literature (e.g. Kristof-Brown et al, 2002; Wheeler et al, 2005)

Findings

The main objective of our study was to identify how employees' experiences of fit and misfit differed and in what ways they shared similarities. As noted above, fit and misfit are theoretically opposites: when one is present, the other is absent. This study sought to explicate whether similar factors, or the lack thereof, explained individuals' fit and misfit perceptions.

We found that the majority of the participants' causal map concepts could be coded using the PE fit dimensions, with 69.5% of the causal map concepts overall, 67.7% of the concepts on the fit chains and 72.2% of the misfit concepts being coded with the PE fit codes. This broad analysis showed that fit and misfit were similarly perceived to result primarily from interactions with the organisation, job and groups of co-workers, with person-supervisor, person-individual and person-vocation fit seemingly being less important.

A further similarity was that demographic factors were infrequently cited, either in relation to fit or misfit perceptions. This suggests that neither fit nor misfit results from people being similar or different in race, age, gender, religion, education or socio-economic background. This is in line with both Elfenbein and O'Reilly (2007) and Jackson and Chung's (2008) work suggesting that a person's fit or misfit in an organisation is not due to people being similar or dissimilar at a superficial level but rather that whether one fits or not is a deeper, psychological construct.

The causal maps shared another commonality in that the majority of participants gave examples of factors which led them both to fit and to misfit at work, although one area tended to dominate. This is an interesting finding because fit and misfit tend, in the literature, to be considered in absolute terms. People's values, skills, knowledge, abilities and personality are theorised to either match those of the organisation or to meet a need and if they do not, then the individual misfits (Harrison, 2007). The experiences of the individuals who participated in this research did not bear this out, showing instead that it is possible to perceive misfit with some areas of the environment yet to fit strongly in other areas. This finding is relevant to the ways in which PE fit is measured and backs Edwards' (2002) and Harrison's (2007) concerns that combining various fit measurements into an overall fit score may give misleading results.

A further commonality across the participants' maps was that there were causal chains consisting of one fit dimension but there were also chains where a number of different organisational and home-life factors combined. This suggests that there may be more interplay between the dimensions of fit than is suggested by the literature which tends to posit that different dimensions of fit are "relatively independent" (Ostroff & Schulte, 2007, p. 49). However, the findings lend support to Kristof-Brown and Jansen's (2007) theory that 'spillover' and 'spirals' may operate to affect individuals' fit perceptions. Spillover is said to occur where one dimension of fit is particularly salient and strong and this has a compensating influence on the other, less salient, fit dimensions, so that these are bolstered. Kristof-Brown and Jansen (2007) propose that spiralling occurs where individuals get into a vicious or virtuous cycle, so that once an individual perceives that he misfits, he will selectively perceive other environmental factors to support this view. It therefore appears from the causal maps that the fit dimensions are not wholly independent and that people note that different aspects of work and family life inter-link and affect each other.

There were therefore a number of similarities between fit and misfit but there were also differences. It was noted above that the PE fit dimensions dominated in coding the causal chains leading to both fit and misfit. There were however differences between the PE fit dimensions as each of these was not cited equally in relation to fit and misfit. For example, PJ fit was used to code over a quarter (25.9%) of the concepts on the causal chains leading to fit

and how individuals fitted with their jobs appeared to be particularly important as a factor for those people who considered themselves to fit well at work. PO fit was most frequently used (19.7%) to code the concepts on misfit chains and organisational and group factors were of particular importance in misfit perceptions. Therefore, although organisational, job and group factors were frequently cited in relation to both fit and misfit, positive job factors were emphasised in relationship to people's fit at work, whereas negative organisational and group factors were emphasised by participants when talking about their misfit perceptions.

There was also a qualitative difference in the way that participants spoke about PO fit. Poor organisational practices, mismanagement and imposed, petty bureaucracy were shown to cause strong perceptions of misfit. In contrast, alignment and subscription to the organisation's values lead to perceptions of fit, but at lower levels. A misfit with the organisation appeared to produce a more pronounced negative effect than did fit with the organisational values. PO fit tends to be conceptualised as values congruence, where individuals are said to fit if their values match the espoused organisational values or the aggregate values of the organisation's employees (Chatman, 1989). The findings from this study hint that PO fit may be a thoughtful calculation or cognition whereas misfit is a felt experience or emotion, but this is just a tentative early conjecture and we need to conduct additional analyses.

A further difference between fit and misfit was found when analysing the number of times that the job embeddedness (JE) codes had been used for the causal map concepts. Those people who perceived that they fitted well at work more often cited JE dimensions, particularly links to their communities, than did the people who considered themselves to be misfits. This is in keeping with the job embeddedness literature which posits that the dimensions of JE combine to predict employee retention (Holtom et al, 2006). However, factors outside of work are beyond the boundaries of PE fit, despite calls in the literature to consider these (see Edwards & Rothbard, 1999; Kristof-Brown et al, 2005).

A further fundamental difference between fit and misfit perceptions was identified through the analyses of the structure of participants' maps. In analysing the positive versus negative concepts on these maps it was found that the participants, whether they perceived themselves to fit or misfit at work, tended to speak about misfit perceptions in the negative whereas fit concepts were positively phrased. This supports the view that misfit is a negative experience (e.g. Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005) and potentially stressful to individuals (see Le Fevre et al, 2003; Edwards & Shipp, 2007; Edwards, 2008). There was also evidence to suggest that individuals who are misfits leave (Schneider, 1987) as three of the participants who stated that they misfitted at work were known to have subsequently changed jobs. Schneider (1987) suggested that employing people who misfit may have positive organisational outcomes as it prevents the organisation from becoming unduly 'ingrown' but this study's findings suggest that individuals recruited specifically because they do not fit in may find it a stressful experience.

Conclusion

This is necessarily a brief précis of a study which sought to understand employees' experiences of organisational fit and misfit. It was found that the extant PE fit measures explained fit and misfit well and that person-group, person-organisation and person-job fit (arguably the dimensions of organisational fit most often studied) are most frequently reported as being relevant and important. However, the participants also stated that the connections and obligations they had to others in their communities affected their fit at work, with 26 out of the 38 participants mentioning their families and other social networks. The

participants were concerned with maintaining a level of work-life balance that was appropriate or desirable to their individual circumstances. Although such concepts were coded with the job embeddedness links-community dimension, it could equally be argued that complementary PO fit could encompass individuals' work-life balance needs. People seem to fit and stay in organisations not only because they have similar values and personalities to others but also because the organisation provides the individual with the rewards, opportunities for development and the ability to meet the needs of significant others in their families or communities.

Criticism has been levelled at PE fit research for being too broadly conceptualised and being too all encompassing (see Harrison, 2007) but this study's findings suggest that individuals experience fit and misfit in broad terms, not only encompassing those aspects of the organisational environment captured by the PE fit dimensions but additionally incorporating factors from their experiences and lives outside of the organisation.

References

- Billsberry, J., Ambrosini, V., Moss-Jones, J., & Marsh, P. J. G. (2005). Some Suggestions for Mapping Organizational Members' Sense of Fit. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 19*, 555-570.
- Billsberry, J., Van Meurs, N., Coldwell, D. A., & Marsh, P. J. G. (2006). *The Dynamic Dual Interest Model of Fit: A Metatheory for Understanding the Complexity of Fit*'. Paper presented at the Academy of Management.
- Bryson, J. M., Ackerman, F., Eden, C., & Finn, C. B. (2004). *Visible thinking: Unlocking causal mapping for practical business results*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons.
- Chatman, J. A. (1989). Improving Interactional Organizational Research: A Model of Person-Organization Fit. *Academy of Management Review, 14*(1), 333.
- Edwards, J. R. (2002). Alternatives to Difference Scores: Polynomial Regression Analysis and Response Surface Methodology. In F. Drasgow & N. Schmitt (Eds.), *Measuring and Analyzing Behavior in Organizations: Advances in Measurement and Data Analysis*. (pp. 350-400). San Francisco, CA US: Jossey-Bass.
- Edwards, J. R. (2008). Person-Environment Fit in Organizations: An Assessment of Theoretical Progress. *Academy of Management Annals, 2*(1), 167-230.
- Edwards, J. R., & Cable, D. M. (2009). The Value of Value Congruence. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 94*(3), 654-677.
- Edwards, J. R., & Rothbard, N. P. (1999). Work and Family Stress and Well-Being: An Examination of Person-Environment Fit in the Work and Family Domains. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 77*(2), 85-129.
- Edwards, J. R., & Shipp, A. J. (2007). The Relationship between Person-Environment Fit and Outcomes: An Integrative Theoretical Framework. In C. Ostroff & T. A. Judge (Eds.), *Perspectives on Organizational Fit* (pp. 209 - 258). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Elfenbein, H. A., & O'Reilly, C. A., III (2007). Fitting In: The Effects of Relational Demography and Person-Culture Fit on Group Process and Performance. *Group & Organization Management, 32*(1), 109-142.
- Harrison, D. A. (2007). Pitching Fits in Applied Psychological Research: Making Fit Methods Fit Theory. In C. Ostroff & T. A. Judge (Eds.), *Perspectives on Organizational Fit* (pp. 389 - 416). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Holtom, B. C., Mitchell, T. R., & Lee, T. W. (2006). Increasing human and social capital by applying job embeddedness theory. *Organizational Dynamics, 35*(4), 316-331.
- Jansen, K. J., & Kristof-Brown, A. L. (2005). Marching to the Beat of a Different Drummer: Examining the Impact of Pacing Congruence. *Organizational Behavior & Human Decision Processes, 97*(2), 93-105.

- Jackson, S. E., & Chung, Y. (2008). The People Make the Place Complicated. In B. D. Smith (Ed.), *The People Make the Place: Dynamic Linkages Between Individuals and Organizations* (pp. 37 - 62). London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Jansen, K. J., & Kristof-Brown, A. (2006). Toward a Multidimensional Theory of Person-Environment Fit. *Journal of Managerial Issues*, 18(2), 193-212.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., & Guay, R. P. (2010). Person-Environment Fit. In S. Zedeck (Ed.), *APA Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (Vol. 3): American Psychological Association.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., & Jansen, K. J. (2007). Issues of Person-Organization Fit. In C. Ostroff & T. A. Judge (Eds.), *Perspectives on Organizational Fit* (pp. 123 - 153). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., Jansen, K. J., & Colbert, A. E. (2002). A Policy-Capturing Study of the Simultaneous Effects of Fit with Jobs, Groups, and Organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(5), 985-993.
- Kristof-Brown, A. L., Zimmerman, R. D., & Johnson, E. C. (2005). Consequences of Individuals' Fit at Work: A Meta-Analysis of Person-Job, Person-Organization, Person-Group and Person-Supervisor Fit. *Personnel Psychology*, 58(2), 281-342.
- Le Fevre, M., Matheny, J., & KoIt, G. S. (2003). Eustress, Distress, and Interpretation in Occupational Stress. *Journal of Management Psychology*, 18, 726-744.
- McGrath, J. E. (1976). Stress and Behavior in Organizations. In M. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology* (pp. 1361 - 1395). Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Mitchell, T. R., Holtom, B. C., Lee, T. W., Sablinski, C. J., & Erez, M. (2001). Why People Stay: Using Job Embeddedness to Predict Voluntary Turnover. *Academy of Management Journal*, 44(6), 1102-1121.
- Ostroff, C., & Schulte, M. (2007). Multiple Perspectives of Fit in Organizations Across Levels of Analysis. In C. Ostroff & T. A. Judge (Eds.), *Perspectives on Organizational Fit* (pp. 3 - 69). New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Piasentin, K. A., & Chapman, D. S. (2007). Perceived Similarity and Complementarity as Predictors of Subjective Person-Organization Fit. *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 80(2), 341-354.
- Schneider, B. (1987). The People Make the Place. *Personnel Psychology*, 40(3), 437-453.
- Schneider, B., Kristof-Brown, A. L., Goldstein, H. W., & Smith, B., D. (1997). What is This Thing Called Fit? In N. Anderson & P. Herriot (Eds.), *International Handbook of Selection and Assessment*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
- Talbot, D., Ambrosini, V. and Billsberry, J. (2009). Mapping Fit: Maximising Idiographic and Nomothetic Benefits. Paper presented at the 3rd Global e-Conference on Fit.
- Talbot, D. and Billsberry, J. (2008). Square Pegs and Round Holes. Paper presented at the 2nd Global e-Conference on Fit.
- Talbot, D. and Billsberry, J. (2007). Employee Fit and Misfit: Two Ends of the Same Spectrum? Paper presented at the 1st Global e-Conference on Fit.
- Tsui, A. S., Egan, T. D., & O'Reilly Iii, C. A. (1992). Being Different: Relational Demography and Organizational Attachment. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 37, 549-579.
- Wheeler, A. R., Buckley, M. R., Halbesleben, J. R., Brouer, R. L., & Ferris, G. R. (2005). "The Elusive Criterion of Fit" Revisited: Toward an Integrative Theory of Multidimensional Fit. In J. Martocchio (Ed.), *Research in Personnel and Human Resource Management* (Vol. 24). Greenwich, CT: Elsevier.
- Wheeler, A. R., Coleman-Gallagher, V., Brouer, R. L., & Sablinski, C. J. (2007). When Person-Organization (Mis)Fit and (Dis)Satisfaction Lead to Turnover: The Moderating Role of Perceived Job Mobility *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22(2), 203-219.