Round Pegs, Square Holes

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Introduction

Who are the round pegs in square holes in organisations and what has made them that shape? All of us have at some time felt like misfits or have worked with people who didn't fit in. According to the Concise Oxford Dictionary (Sykes, 1982, p. 647), a misfit is "a person unsuited to his environment, his work, etc." Colloquially, people use the term 'misfit' quite broadly to denote a person who differs from the social or organisational norm. However, despite the common usage of the term, there is little research in the organisational behaviour domain to define misfit – in terms of what it means for organisations, individuals or both.

Focusing specifically on research within the person-organisation fit (PO fit) field, this paper identifies that a gap exists with regards to defining misfit and outlines one way of furthering our understanding of this concept.

Literature

The PO fit literature is in a state of flux, with conflicting views on the conceptualization of fit, its measurement and its boundaries. In the recent book, *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, David Harrison (2007, p. 389) notes, "There is direct and indirect assessment of perceived and actual fit. Fit comes in supplementary or complementary flavors… Fit can be similarity, congruence, alignment, agreement, composition, compilation, configuration, matching and interactionist." This lack of consensus means that there is no readily available, universally accepted definition of fit, let alone misfit.

Fit research has tended to be based on the principle that it is a 'good thing', with Pervin (1968, p. 56) noting "a 'match' or 'best-fit' of individual to environment is expressing itself in high performance, satisfaction, and little stress in the system whereas a 'lack of fit' is viewed as resulting in decreased performance, dissatisfaction, and stress in the system." Good fit has long been associated with positive outcomes for the organisation and the individual whereas misfit has been seen as undesirable and to be avoided (Kristof, 1996).

One area of agreement and convergence for fit researchers is in the use of Schneider's (1987) seminal attraction – selection – attrition (ASA) theory which hypothesises that similar people are attracted to organisations, are selected by them and then remain there unless they leave (attrition) due to not fitting in. Chatman, Wong and Joyce (2008, p. 64) note that, "Because a lack of congruence is aversive, "misfits" are unlikely to remain with that organization." However, Schneider (1987) speculates that this may not be in the organisation's best interest: there is the possibility that the organisation becomes so 'ingrown' due to its recruits' like-minded thinking and behaviour that it is incapable of adapting to new situations. Schneider and his colleagues (Schneider, Kristof-Brown, Goldstein, & Smith, 1997, p. 399) went on to propose that although good fit might be positive for the individual,

organisationally too much fit or homogeneity may lead to "organizations incapable of adapting to environmental changes". Argyris (1958) similarly argued that having an organisation staffed with too many people of 'one type' led to a lack of innovation. This led Schneider and his colleagues to reflect that "perhaps selecting for good P-O fit is not such a good idea" (Schneider et al., 1997, p. 400).

Interestingly however, little research has investigated misfit and its effect on individuals and organisations, although this seems to be an area that is becoming of increasing interest to fit researchers. Wheeler, Buckley, Halbesleben, Brouer and Ferris (2005) outlined a proposed process of misfit in their model of multidimensional fit (MDF). Organisational changes or 'shocks', the authors argued, induce individuals to re-assess whether they still fit within the organisation. If they perceive that they do not fit, individuals will consider whether they were willing to adapt to the new situation. If they are unwilling to adapt, Wheeler et al (2005) suggested that misfits will appraise whether they can find alternative jobs and, if so, they will exit the organisation as Schneider (1987) forecast. However, in the event that individuals perceive there to be no viable alternative to their current job, they will do nothing (inaction), express their concerns (voice) or pretend that they fit by putting up a façade (impression management).

Billsberry, Ambrosini, Marsh, Moss-Jones and Van Meurs (2005) similarly found that misfits do not necessarily leave. In their study they identified that, rather than leaving the organisation, misfits stayed, "acting as centres of rebellion, disaffection and malcontent" (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Marsh et al., 2005, p. 12).

Several papers which mention misfit assume that it is diametrically opposite to fit. In Billsberry, van Meurs, Coldwell and Marsh's (2006) theory paper however, they suggest that misfits are not polar opposites to individuals who fit and they propose that it is not necessarily the case that when the factors which cause fit are absent, misfit occurs. Misfits they argue, are conscious of their misfit, having either been wrongly appointed or becoming misfits during the course of their employment. Billsberry et al define misfit as occurring "when the compatibility [between the individual and the organisation] is detrimental to both parties" (Billsberry et al., 2006, p. 10).

At present, we know precious little about misfit. Billsberry et al have started to explore how misfit may be conceptualized but they acknowledge 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." Timothy Judge (2007, p. 423), in looking to the future of fit research asks "What do organizations do with employees who do not fit their culture or intended goals? What do individuals do when they are embedded in a job or organization that misfits them? The ASA model discusses selecting in and selecting out strategies, but it does not consider the question of what happens when these forces are blocked (for whatever reason)". And Chatman, Wong and Joyce (2008, p. 81) lend their weight to a call for more misfit studies: "Though a marked increase in research that highlights misfits has begun to emerge, it may still not go far enough."

If so little is known about misfit and it is recognised that more research is needed, how can we go about conducting studies that address the gap?

Methods

In order to investigate misfit it would be possible to use a variety of research methods. Researchers looking at the concept of 'fit' have studied the subject from a number of

different angles and have used a wide variety of research methods including large scale surveys, causal mapping and storytelling, case studies, critical incident technique, the OCP instrument and the repertory grid technique.

These different approaches and methods not only reflect the different research questions that have been addressed but also the differing epistemological positions from which researchers have approached the concept of fit. Most PO fit studies have been approached from a positivist stance (e.g. Cable & Judge, 1996; Chatman, 1991; Judge & Cable, 1997), where the researcher remains neutral whilst testing theories and hypotheses on large samples with the aim of generating generalizable findings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Lowe, 2002). Such studies have been based on the assumption that fit is a measurable reality, where it is possible to take a measure of the organisation (e.g. its values) and the individual (e.g the individual's values) and compare the two to give a measure of fit (e.g. Chatman, 1991). The organisational culture profile (OCP) tool (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) is perhaps the most widely used instrument for measuring objective fit.

Other fit studies have focused on how people perceive themselves to fit at work. Subjective fit, or people's fit perceptions, can be measured directly by asking an individual to "report an overall assessment of the fit between themselves and the organization" (Kristof-Brown & Jansen, 2007, p. 133). Some studies, such as Kristof-Brown's (2000), take a relativist epistemological view, attempting to triangulate the findings from both quantitative and qualitative studies. Very few, (an exception being Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones and Marsh (2005)), seek to expose how fit is socially constructed.

Because misfit is under-researched (Billsberry et al., 2006; Chatman et al., 2008; Judge, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2007), and we do not know what misfit means to people, qualitative methods would seem to offer a way of gaining new insights. Cooper and Schindler (2006, p. 196) argue that qualitative research is particularly useful "to understand the different meanings that people place on their experiences often requires research techniques that delve more deeply into people's hidden interpretations, understandings, and motivations." According to Parasuraman (1986, p. 240), "Qualitative research techniques are most appropriate in situations calling for exploratory research." Such an approach may give a better understanding of *how* individuals perceive their misfit with the organisation and what they believe the causes of misfit are.

Although ethnographic observation, focus groups and interviews would all elicit rich data, they have potential limitations. For example, participant observation runs the risk that no 'misfits' are amongst the population being observed and focus groups could encourage individuals to conform to others' views, potentially leading to socially desirable responses (Meglino and Ravlin, 1998).

An alternative method for exploring individuals' perceptions of misfit is the causal mapping approach developed by Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones and Marsh (2005). The use of causal mapping means that interviewees are not presented with pre-conceived ideas about fit, which contrasts sharply with the OCP instrument developed by O'Reilly et al (1991). Billsberry et al (2005, p. 560) propose that because there are different definitions of 'fit' and because it may be something that individuals are not consciously aware of, using causal mapping allows "respondents to surface tacitly held thought processes in an explicit manner" without imposing the interviewer's preconceived ideas. Bryson, Ackerman, Eden and Finn (2004) contend that causal mapping 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.

Conclusion

In order to further our understanding of misfit, new approaches must be taken to explore what misfit means to people and what factors are seen to be causing this state in individuals. It is anticipated that by interviewing people who perceive themselves not to fit in at work and mapping their perceptions of misfit, an initial understanding and tentative taxonomy of misfit may be developed. Further research will be based on this underpinning understanding, such as 'do misfits leave?' and 'is misfit necessarily negative?' Accordingly, an initial qualitative exploration may pave the way for future large scale, quantitative studies.

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