Employee Fit and Misfit: Two Ends of the Same Spectrum?

Danielle Talbot and Jon Billsberry
The Open University

Theoretical Background

Within PO fit research, the question of how individuals fit with organisations has been studied from a number of different angles. Many studies draw on Schneider's attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) theory (1987: 445) which proposes that similar people are attracted to organisations and then remain in those settings. If people erroneously join organisations where they do not fit, they will leave (attrition). Several PO fit studies have looked at attraction to organisations, focusing on job seekers' fit (e.g. Cable and Judge, 1996; Chatman, 1991; Judge and Cable, 1997), and recruiters' perceptions of fit (e.g. Bowen, Ledford and Nathan, 1991; Cable and Judge, 1997; Kristof-Brown, 2000). In Cable and Judge's (1997) study of interviewer's perceptions of fit, they brought together previous research by "defining PO fit as the congruence between individuals' and organizations' values" (Cable and Judge, 1997: 547).

How fit is defined and conceptualized was refined by Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson who published a meta-analysis drawn from 172 'fit' studies. In addition to PO fit, Kristof-Brown et al (2005) identified person-vocation (PV), person-job (PJ), person-supervisor (PS) and person-group (PG) fit from the literature, which she found were "only moderately related to each other" (Kristof-Brown et al, 2005: 315). Billsberry, Ambrosini, Marsh, Moss-Jones and Van Meurs (2005) questioned whether in fact these were the only possible types of fit and identified thirteen sub-types of fit.

Much PO fit research has concentrated on identifying the many guises of organisational fit, but recently the subject of misfit has come to the fore. Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2005) studied the effects of employees being in and out of 'sync' with the general pace of their work environment. They found that those individuals who kept pace with their co-workers tended to experience greater satisfaction and display more helping behaviours. A mismatch between the individual's pace and the hurriedness of the group resulted in lower levels of satisfaction. As well as lower satisfaction, misfit could potentially cause stress. Le Fevre, Matheny and Kolt (2003), in their study of Person–Environment (PE) fit and organisational stress, found that the concept of 'eustress' (what has been commonly termed 'good' stress) was redundant and that being a 'misfit' increased stress levels, resulting in physiological or psychological symptoms. The authors suggested that individuals may employ coping or defence mechanisms in order to increase their fit and asserted that "Good PE Fit may …. confer positive health benefits" (2003: 733).

Practitioner studies by Bittel and Ramsey (1983) and Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk (2005) revealed that it is possible that there are trigger events which may cause misfit at work. They identified that promotion and a change of career were the impetus for individuals feeling that they did not fit. As such, these findings raise the question of whether there are other trigger events causing people to experience misfit and if so, what they are. A further question is whether misfits are impelled to leave as a study by Billsberry et al (2005), identified that, rather than leaving the organisation under study, as Schneider (1987) had theorised in his

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ASA model, misfits stayed, "acting as centres of rebellion, disaffection and malcontent" (Billsberry et al, 2005: 12).

Towards a Definition of Misfit

Thus far therefore, there have been a number of studies investigating how individuals fit in organisations and there have been relatively few investigating what it means to be a misfit at work. What has not been answered by these studies is what causes misfit nor how misfit can be conceptualized. It is possible that misfit may be the opposite to fit and that there is a scale with perfect fit at one end and misfit at the other. This view of fit and misfit seems to underpin many PO fit studies, particularly those that measure fit using the Organisational Culture Profile (OCP), a 'deck' of 54 value statements which need to be sorted by the participants (recruits and organisation representatives) into being "most representative" to "least representative" of the organisation or the individual (Cable and Judge, 1996: 299). Measuring fit as a continuous variable would suggest that misfit is its opposite.

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. Billsberry et al define misfit as occurring "when the compatibility [between the individual and the organisation] is detrimental to both parties" (2006: 10) although they acknowledge that "at present we know very little about the process of becoming a misfit" (2006: 12).

Methods

The data on individuals' perceptions of fit and misfit were collected using in-depth interviews within which causal mapping was used following the suggestion of Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones and Marsh (2005). To complement this approach, a projective device, namely the 'Blob Tree' (Wilson, 1988), was used as a way of encouraging interviewees to identify how they perceive themselves in relation to their employer (appendix A). Projective techniques are useful in that individuals may "reveal hidden levels of their consciousness" (Easterby-Smith et al, 2002: 102).

The research participants were 10 members of the Open University's Human Resources (HR) Department. The study attracted a fairly representative number of female (90%) and male (10%) volunteers, although with 50% of the sample being secretarial and clerical staff and 50% being managerial/professional, the university's HR staff population was not reflected. As the study was not aiming to generate findings for this particular population, having a mixture of male and female participants from the largest two staff groupings was felt to be adequate for a study of this type.

Results

The data gathered from the in-depth interviews comprised ten Blob Trees, causal maps and audio recordings of each of the interviews which were transcribed. The data provided by the Blob Trees was not used in the overall analysis for this study as it was designed to stimulate thought and conversation rather than being seen as a data gathering tool in its own right. The ten causal maps contained many similarities, despite having used the individuals' verbatim comments. For example, in saying how they felt that they fitted, seven of the interviewees mentioned that having flexibility in their role and their hours of work helped

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them to fit. In looking at causes of *not* fitting, participants again identified some common factors. In this area, seven out of the ten participants identified that 'frustration' caused them to feel that they did not fit although this was not always caused by the same stimuli. Lack of feedback and decision making, meetings, others' negative behaviour, unfair treatment and politics were cited by more than one participant as causing them not to fit. The maps were coded by looking for such similar concepts across all maps. Subsequently the antecedents of misfit and fit were categorised according to whether they originated from organisational or managerial factors, the individuals themselves, their colleagues, the job, the environment or whether they were psychological states or emotions.

The data were analysed to identify the root causes of both fit and misfit: the primary causes given at the origin of each causal chain. Sixty three root causes of fit were identified and as can be seen in table 1, 27% of these related to individuals' jobs (e.g. enjoying the job and the nature of the role), whilst 25% were to do with the organisation's culture, policies and working practices (e.g. benefits such as leave entitlement). The job and the organisation therefore accounted for 52% of the root causes of people's perceptions of fit at work but fitting in also stemmed from the individuals themselves. For example, participants reported that their previous experience, long term plans and even their religious faith were prime reasons for them fitting in. One factor which was mentioned by participants as causing organisational fit was the working environment and this was never associated with misfit. In comparison, of the 44 root causes of misfit identified from the causal maps, the majority related to either the organisation's culture, policies and procedures or originated from managerial action or inaction (e.g. lack of support), which jointly accounted for 61% of the root causes of misfit.

Root Cause	Misfit (N = 44) %	Fit (N = 63) %
Organisational	36	25
Managerial	25	8
Individual	18	16
Colleagues	11	11
Job	9	27
Environment	-	11
Psychological States	-	2

Although the root causes described above are the prime causes for the individuals under study fitting or not fitting at work, they are not the only causes. There are chains of causes leading to people feeling that they fit or not and within these chains the research participants cited 168 causes of fit and 141 causes of misfit. A summary of these is given in table 2 below.

Cause	Misfit (N = 141) %	Fit (N = 168) %
Organisational	33	27
Managerial	26	8
Individual	9	11
Colleagues & Team	11	10
Job	3	29
Environment	-	5
Work-Life Balance	-	4
Psychological States	18	6

Interestingly, when looking at the entire causal chains, 18% of the causes of misfit related to emotions or psychological states. The most commonly cited emotion was one of 'frustration', mentioned by 70% of the participants. Such feelings were never the root cause of misfit. To a lesser degree, participants mentioned emotions and psychological states when talking about what made them fit at work, however such positive emotions constituted only 6% of the total number of antecedents of fit. Although the nature of the individuals' work was most often referred to in relation to fit, this was an infrequently cited cause of misfit. Equally, although the agreeable work environment was mentioned as causing people to fit at work, this was not a cause of misfit and neither was work-life balance.

Fit and Misfit Compared

An analysis of the data shows that seven causes were mentioned both in relation to fit and misfit. Taking 'dress code' as an example, one participant said that the informal dress code made her feel uncomfortable as she preferred to wear a suit for work in keeping with her professional status. Two other participants conversely said that being able to dress informally made them feel that they fitted.

As well as there being common causes of fit and misfit, there were also eighteen clear opposites. For example, whereas 'training and development' was given by five participants as helping them to fit at work, 'lack of training' was mentioned by one person in relation to not fitting. Similarly 'feedback' appeared as a 'fit' concept whilst 'lack of feedback' was attributed to not fitting.

Out of the 141 concepts given as causes for individuals not fitting at work, 7 were also cited as factors contributing to 'fit' at work and 18 were polar opposites. The remaining 116 concepts (82%) were mentioned only in relation to misfit. In relation to fit, out of the 168 causes, 143 were only mentioned in relation to fit (85%) and did not feature as causes of misfit.

Discussion

One finding of this study is that the antecedents of both fit and misfit are complex and numerous, confirming Billsberry et al's (2006) findings. However, fit and misfit seem to both be complex *and* different. It is clear from this study that organisational factors influence both people's perceptions of fit and misfit, as do colleagues. However, job factors have a strong influence on fit perceptions and a negligible influence on misfit. The working environment and work-life balance also affect fit but seem to have little or no impact on misfit. Managers it seems have a limited role in generating feelings of fit in individuals (accounting for 8% of the root causes of fit and 8% of the total causes) but play a far more significant role in generating misfit perceptions.

The different domains of fit, identified by Kristof-Brown et al (2005) and Billsberry et al (2005) are evident in the results of this study. What is interesting however is that not all of the domains of fit relate to misfit and that individuals report largely different causes for fit and misfit, suggesting that the two are separate states. If misfit is indeed a different construct, then fit and misfit are not opposite ends of a spectrum. This would suggest that people do not 'slip' from fit to misfit (or vice versa) along a continuum but rather that misfit is categorical. Fit and

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misfit may therefore be more like adjoining webs than a continuum, with some shared points leading to very different paths.
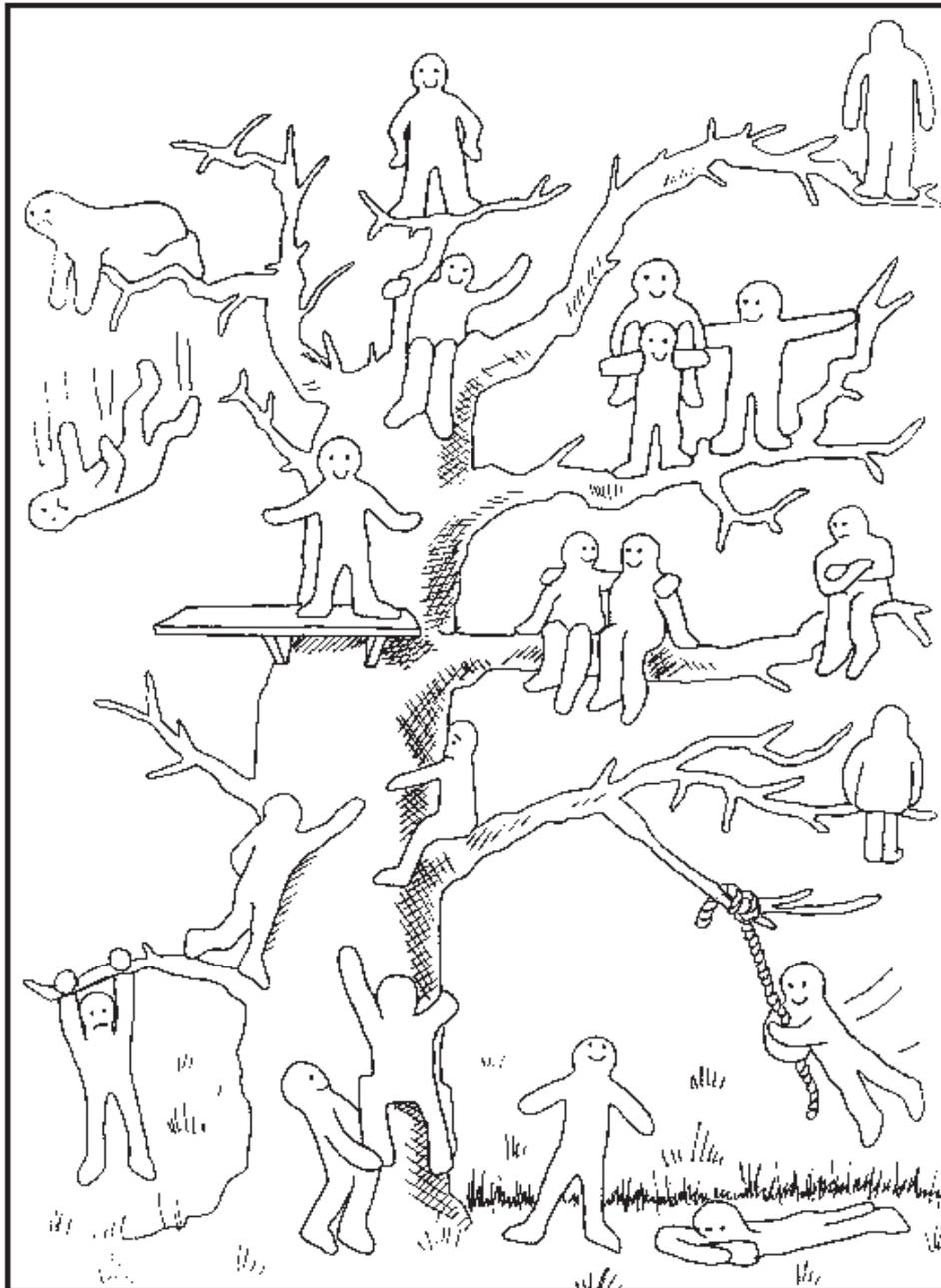
The finding that fit and misfit are not two ends of one continuous variable is important for the PO fit literature in that much emphasis in this field has focused on identifying how organisations can recruit people who fit (e.g. Cable and Judge, 1996; Cable and Judge, 1997, Bowen, Ledford and Nathan, 1991) and several have used the OCP instrument to measure fit (Chatman, 1991, Judge and Cable, 1997). However, it is possible, and even likely, that even those employees who fit well have elements of misfit. Furthermore, it is possible that this is desirable in employees: perhaps the people who are able to look critically at organisational behaviours, policies, procedures and others' behaviour are the best fit. Another possibility is that some people are able to 'put things in perspective', 'accept it and move on' or have a 'positive mindset', (which were all mentioned by participants) so although they see that there are ways in which they do not fit, they are able to deal with it positively.

Although this study has started to investigate the causes of misfit at work and its relation to fit, further research could be conducted to further understanding and the associated literature. One key question arising from this study seems to be: is an element of misfit desirable? Future research could also substantiate that fit and misfit are different constructs by using a larger, representative sample, possibly from a range of different organisations.

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Appendix A   The Blobtree

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