A Discourse Perspective on the Meaning of PO Fit

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Introduction

PO Fit is a theoretical paradigm which has been primarily investigated from a positivist perspective. This primarily quantitative approach to the study of fit has limited our understanding of what fit means to the individual; how they construct their concept of fit; the influencing factors that underpin their perceptions of fit and differences between individual's experiences of fit. This paper will examine PO fit research from a discourse perspective including an exploration of existing discourses within PO fit research and the limitations of existing conceptualizations of PO fit. The paper will suggest how a adopting a discourse perspective to the study of fit can deepen our understanding of "a syndrome with many manifestations" (Schneider, 2001) and will put forward the suggestion that in order to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of PO fit, it is necessary to understand how individuals construct the meaning of fit. This paper will offer a new way of conceptualising PO fit to enhance our understanding of what fit means to the individual which is based within a career's context, where the individual's sense of career fit with the organisation will be explored based on their career needs.

Discourse analysis

In order to examine existing discourses relating to the concept of PO fit it is firstly necessary to define the concept of discourse analysis.

Alvesson and Karreman (2000:1129) suggest that "quite often discourse does not seem to signal any particular interest in language, but refers to conceptions, a line of reasoning, a theoretical position or something similar". Potter (1997:146) suggests that it is "the medium for interaction; analysis of discourse becomes, then, analysis of what people do". It is important to note that discourse analysis is not just another methodological tool composed of various practices and of data collection and analysis but it is also a set of meta-theoretical and theoretical assumptions (Potter, 1997).

Therefore a discourse perspective on PO fit enables us to examine how the study of PO fit has been conceptualized. Potter and Wetherell (1987) have identifies a number of key assumptions regarding discourse analysis which differ from accepted conventions. They suggest that rather than making a distinction between talk and action that in fact talk is action. Secondly, that discourse itself is a focus as opposed to using features of discourse to explain behaviour. Thirdly rather that than viewing variability as an abnormality, to viewing variability as a valuable investigation both within and between people. Taking these theoretical assumptions which underpin discourse analysis and applying them to the concept of PO fit means adopting a different perspective to the study of PO fit. By studying how people actually speak about fit we may gain a greater understanding of how people actually experience fit. Examining how people speak about fit may also help us to develop an understanding of how the individuals self affects their fit experience. Thirdly in examining

how people vary in how they discuss the concept of PO fit will enable a greater understanding of the subtle variations between and within individuals with regard to PO fit.

It should also be noted that discourse analysis can employ its own methods of data collection such as interviewing, the use of archives and the use of experiments for example. The analysis then of the discourse essentially consists of a detailed and repeated reading of the discourse against the background of the discourse analytic perspective. There are various analytical tools which can be used for assessing and analyzing discourse (Wood & Kroger, 2000) which include amongst others narrative analysis including story telling, the use of metaphors and footing. Other analytical tools are used in specific forms of discourse analysis such as the use of social language, discourses, situated meanings and cultural models. Narrative analysis as an analytical tool can be defined according to Creswell (2007) who makes reference to Pinnegar & Daynes (2006) as a study of stories or narratives or descriptions of a series of events that account for human experiences in particular.

Existing conceptualizations of PO fit

Most PO researchers accept the proposition that when characteristics of the person and their organizational environment are alike or fit together then positive individual level outcomes are likely. Kristof (1996) has defined PO fit as; ''the compatibility between people and organisations that occurs when: (a) at least one entity provides what the other needs, or (b) they share similar fundamental characteristics, or (c) both'' (Kristof, 1996: 4-5). This definition of fit provides us with a representational focus of how PO fit has been defined in the PO literature to date. The difficulty with this definition of fit is that it focuses on defining the conditions under which fit occurs i.e. the person and the organisation are similar based on some dimension or when one entity meets the needs of the other, and it explains the concept of fit as simply the compatibility between the individual and the organisation that occurs under these conditions. Although useful in terms of defining the conditions under which fit may occur it fails to capture the complexity of the meaning of PO fit.

In attempting to deconstruct the concept of PO fit most researchers have discussed the differences between complementary and supplementary forms of fit; whether PO fit is viewed as objective, perceived or subjective fit and the various dimensions along which fit has been examined. Muchinsky and Monahan (1987) have suggested that PE fit research can be divided into two separate research traditions which have progressed in parallel but separate streams. Supplementary fit is said to exist when the person and the environment possess similar or matching characteristics (Cable and Edwards, 2004). Complementary fit occurs when when a person or the environment can provide what the other wants (Cable and Edwards, 2004).

This way of conceptualizing fit also gives us an understanding of the various dimensions along which fit has been investigated. Research on supplementary fit has included studies on value congruence (Judge & Cable, 1997; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991), goal congruence (Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991), needs-structure fit (Bretz, Ash, & Dreher, 1989), and personality-climate congruence (Ryan & Schmitt, 1996). The supplementary fit tradition is typically used in research examining fit between employees and organisations (Piasentin and Chapman., 2006). Within the complementary fit tradition, fit is most often examined as needs-supply fit or demand-ability fit (Cable and Derue, 2002) and is most often examined within the context of person-job fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman and Johnson, 2005; Piasentin et al., 2006).

From a conceptual perspective fit can be examined as objective, subjective or perceived fit. Objective fit is primarily based on the actual match between the person and objective characteristics of the environment. Subjective fit is based on the person's subjective perception of the actual fit between themselves and their environment. Perceived fit is based on how the person perceives themselves and their environment.

The above discussion demonstrates some of the consistencies in how fit research has been conceptualized and should not be discounted when suggesting an alternative theoretical paradigm to the study of fit research as the above can provide boundaries when exploring the meaning if fit. It is important that the researcher acknowledges the perspective from which they are exploring the concept of fit.

Expanding PO fit discourse

However if fit research is to progress to a deeper understanding of the concept of fit, discourse is needed as to what the concept of fit actually means, what are the factors that influence individuals perceptions of fit etc. Schneider (2001:142) has stated that "there is no reason to suspect that all ways of conceptualizing fit are not equally valid given certain questions". Existing qualitative studies investigating the meaning of fit have made valuable contributions to enhancing our understanding of PO fit. Billsberry, Ambrosini, van Meurs, Coldwell, Marsh and Moss-Jones (2007) found that organizational members sense of fit is influence by different domains. These researchers also discovered that the concept of fit and the concept of misfit are different states.

Existing discussions of PO fit have not accounted for subtle variations that may exist between individuals in terms of PO fit (Lindholm (2003). Lovelace and Rosen's (1996) study is one of the few studies which explores differences between individuals in perceptions of PO fit and they employed both a quantitative and qualitative approaches in their research.

One further fundamental flaw in existing PO fit discourse is the failure to explore the meaning of fit from the individual's perspective. One of the few exceptions to this is the work of Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones and March (2005) who have suggested that causal mapping and story telling as suitable techniques to explore individuals sense of fit.

Understanding the meaning of fit

This paper takes on board the comment by Billsberry, et al., (2005: 556) that one of the limitations of existing PO fit research is that researchers have yet to explore the individuals' own sense of fit. A specific form of PO fit research is needs-structure fit (Bretz, Ash & Dreher, 1989). Verquer, Beehr and Wagner (2003) suggest that needs-structure fit examines the interaction between the needs of the person and the organization in terms of processes such as pay, promotion, and decision making. However this paper suggests that needs structure fit can also be conceptualized as a means of exploring an individuals experiences and understanding of PO fit. In conceptualizing fit in this way, fit is conceptualized as complementary fit where the environment can provide for the individuals needs. Furthermore fit is seen as a subjective experience.

The needs of the individual can be conceptualized in various ways but this paper is interested in a careers context. The needs under investigation in the current paper are based upon the career parameters of the individual as defined by the kaleidoscope career model (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2006). Essentially this model suggests that career stages are divided into

parameters which are similar to the mirrors in a kaleidoscope. These parameters shift in importance depending on the career stage the person is at. The three parameters are authenticity, balance and challenge. Career parameters determine how individuals direct the decisions that they make regarding their career. By conceptualising the individual in term of their career needs an understanding of how the individual actually experiences fit within a careers context can be investigated. Conceptualising fit in this manner also allows the researcher to explore differences between individuals in terms of PO fit and furthermore enables the researcher to investigate the factors that have influenced the individual's experiences of fit. The organisation or structure element of PO fit can be described in terms of its career management activities. Career management activities can be defined as the organisation carrying out activities relevant to the career development of its employees (Baruch & Peiperl, 2000:349). Various authors have developed categorizations of these types of career management activities (Gutteridge, Leibowitz, & Shore, 1993). When conceptualizing the structural element of needs structure fit it may be beneficial to focus on one particular form of career development activities as this may enable an in-depth focused examination of PO fit from the individual's perspective. The above section highlights the context in which discourse analysis will be applied.

It is beyond the remit of this paper to suggest how discourses within the above context could be examined however it should be noted that a case study using interviews and the use of narratives as an analytical tool would potentially be useful in an exploration of the individuals experience of PO fit from a careers perspective. The approach to narrative analysis in this context is one "in which the emphasis is on the role of the narrative in making sense of experience and constructing the self" (Wood and Kroger, 2000: 104). Within the context of careers the individual's stories of their interaction with the organisation's career management process or activities could be explored in order to develop an understanding of their experiences of PO fit and how this is tied to their sense of self.

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