Tracking Down Misfits

Brenda Hollyoak
Coventry University

Preface

I have recently registered for my PhD. I am interested in the subject of misfit, which was sparked by the cognitive-based Transactional Analysis approach to personality disorders and group interaction disharmony. My initial thought is that ideas from this area may be relevant to studies of organisational fit, especially misfit.

I am interested in doing a narrative study of misfit, with the purpose of explaining how people define the psychological construct of misfit when they are 'suffering' from this condition (Billsberry, 2009). To do this, I need to identify misfits and then interview them. I'm hoping that colleagues will be able to help me work out where I might be able to locate misfits, and also point me in the direction of any literature on misfit that you think I should read.

Introduction

My interest is in misfit. In this paper, I explain why there is a need for research into misfit and I identify a key research question that I am going to base my PhD study around. Namely, what are the characteristics of 'misfit'? Answering this question will create a definition of misfit that can be used to structure future research around.

Organizational Fit PO fit is generally understood to be a process by which people select environments in which the norms and values fulfil their needs (Diener, Larsen, & Eammons, 1984; Pervin, 1978) and that people select organizations to work for where the goals are aligned to personal characteristics ((Cable & Judge, 1994); (Chatman, 1989, 1991); Judge & Bretz, 1992). Put simply, according to Tom (1971), "people prefer organizations that have the same personality as they do, where "PO fit is the congruence between individuals' and organizations' values" ((Cable & Judge, 1997)).

In the field of PO fit, Schneider's (1987) ASA framework is one of the most cited theories. It says that people are attracted to, selected by, and retained in organizations when they are similar to other people in the organization. One of the key processes in the cycle is the idea that when people find that they do not 'fit', they leave the organization (attrition), thereby creating a more homogeneous organization with regard to the people working there. This state of homogeneity Schneider theorizes is good for the organization because it allows and facilitates coordination, communication and team working amongst the people there. However, with regard to the person who does not fit in within this homogenous 'pot', little is said about the negative effects upon the misfit or the organisation.

At any stage of an organization's life cycle for people who do not fit, there is little evidence to demonstrate, one way or the other, that they always leave (attrition), even when the organization for which they work goes through (major) changes or 'shocks', causing value sets to change ((Wheeler, Buckley, Halbesleben, Brouer, & Ferris, 2005)). Such a situation

brings about negative stress, dissatisfaction and frustration. This new state of low (negative) person-organization fit may result in sabotage or dissent (Graham, 1986). Billsberry, Ambrosini, Marsh, Moss-Jones, & van Meurs (2005) are more forceful in their opinion of the actions of the misfit, because in their study they found that people instead of leaving the organization (attrition) as theorized by Schneider (1987) they stayed, possibly "acting as centres of rebellion, disaffection and malcontent."

If one moves beyond Schneider's main ASA theory in his seminal paper of 1987 and the update by Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith (2005), it can be seen that he talks about the very important feature of organizational socialization, and how this process forms a critical role in establishing and enhancing fit. However, only certain socialization activities enhance PO fit, being those that facilitate interactions with mentors, role models, and co-workers (Dickson, Resick, & Goldstein, 2008), but even so they look to have the strongest relationship to increased fit. And, most importantly as far as explanations for misfit go (Cooper-Thomas, van Vianen, & Anderson, 2004) and (Resick, Baltes, & Shantz, 2007) there is a link between structured socialization and people's perceptions of fit. The HR driven approach is to bring on board people's values and personalities to match those of the organisation in which they are now employed. There is evidence from the socialization literature (e.g., Alwin, Cohen, & Newcomb, 1991) that shows that lasting and deep changes to values can be made as a result of organizational membership. Indeed, one study by Chatman (1991) shows that socialization experiences have "*three times more influence on recruit adjustment than does their initial personality upon entering the organization.*" Despite this strong driver for change and reinforcement, 'misfits' still occur and are noticeable either at a public or private level.

We know quite a lot about fit, but very little about misfit.

Are people who 'do not fit' in the PO sense just people who would not fit anywhere or are they something more than this? Are they what one may call, 'misfits'? That is, not just people who have an absence of fit, but an actual misfit. Regrettably, the literature on the nature of people who do not fit and misfits is only in its infancy (Talbot & Billsberry, 2007). One crucial step forward is to explore the nature of misfit and how it might be defined. Once done, the challenge is to look at the causes of misfit. So the next step that needs to be taken to move this literature forward is to answer the question of 'what is a misfit?' This will be the overarching question framing my study.

As has already been said, people who do not fit, or who have experienced a trigger point so causing a state of misfit, will not always leave an organization but stay on "acting as centres of rebellion, disaffection and malcontent" (Billsberry et al, 2005). This state of course has a negative effect on co-workers, customers and potentially goals of the organisation. Or, is it a set of behaviours which arise after time, reflecting a collection of underlying beliefs that do not sit well in the organization (Hay, 1993)? Another way of putting it is to consider that, someone defined as a misfit may just have a different 'frame of reference'; the way a person views the world (Hay, 1992) which does not fit with the employers' perceptions (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006).

According to (Smith, 2008) some misfits may go as far as to trying to change the organization's values. The extent to which this is successful one could assume, is linked to the level of formal and informal power (French & Raven, 1959) and control that they have. Furthermore, it had been identified (Schneider, Salvaggio, & Subirats, 2002) in their later paper, organizations have what the authors identify as 'climate strength', ranging from the

weak (which could be changed by a misfit?) to strong (where the misfit looks at other options as well as attrition?).

Smith (2008) presents another scenario for the employee who has either low fit, or is deemed to be a misfit; the person seeks to adapt his or her behaviour to fit that of the situation. Talbot & Billsberry (2008) however suggest other approaches that the misfit might adopt (especially when there is no other job available) in order to avoid attrition from the organization. These are:

- do nothing (inaction)
- express their concerns (voice) or,
- pretend that they fit by putting up a façade (impression management).

I am inspired by the work of Billsberry and his colleagues (2004, 2005, 2008, 2009; Bilsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005, 2006) who bring to the fore the subject of 'misfit' in the context of it being a detrimental state, perhaps even a psychopathology? Is it a disease or illness? People so far, who perceive themselves as misfits would, one assumes, want to cure themselves of this state (Billsberry, 2008) because it has negative consequences for the person, such as stress, (Le Fevre, Matheny, & Kolt, 2003), frustration, nervous breakdown, promotion sidelining, no career fulfilment, loss of job (Talbot & Billsberry, 2007 Billsberry, 2008). The ultimate 'cure', in order to rid themselves of these symptoms, is to exit the organization and find work elsewhere – organizational exit (Schneider, 1987), despite the consequences of "dislocation, disruption and uncertainty caused by organizational change" (Billsberry, 2008).

Summary

My interest is in the topic of misfit. My initial reading of this literature suggests that this is an important topic, but one which has received very little attention. Those that have looked at misfit have not yet produced a definition of misfit, which is important, because without a definition of what misfit is, the field will struggle to move ahead. This is the task I would like to take on in my doctoral study. Namely, I want to conduct a study that has the aim of defining the psychological construct of misfit.

At this stage of my studies, I can only offer some first thoughts about how I might study the question. It seems likely that I will have to take an exploratory approach, i.e. one that listens to 'sufferers' and does so without a theory or conceptual structure. This is simply because the literature doesn't have a definition of misfit to confirm or disconfirm. So, allowing people to describe what misfit feels like for them seems the most logical way to go.

In terms of gathering the data, I need to use a method or methods that encourage people to speak and tell me their perceptions and feelings. The most natural option seems to be interviews with a relatively loose (or no) structure. However, as noted by Billsberry et al. (2005), people quickly dry up when talking about their fit, and they do benefit from tools and techniques to encourage them to speak and to reveal unconsciously-held thoughts. One such technique is cognitive mapping. Another is storytelling. And another is critical incident mapping. Repertory Grid Analysis might also work. All of these work in one-to-one sessions, so it seems likely that I will need to conduct one-to-one sessions with a number of people.

In terms of who I might involve as participants, it seems important to get people who are currently 'experiencing' the 'condition'. This will prevent a whole host of problems like loss

of memory and post-event rationalisation. But such people will be difficult to track down because they disguise their condition and so do their employers (Talbot and Billsberry, 2007). However, the theory suggests that some people leaving companies are likely to be misfits, so the most natural way to find misfits to talk to is to approach people looking for work, possibly via job agencies. But these are a skewed sample of misfits, i.e. those who have chosen to leave. Can anyone think how I could interview a more general cross-section of people in the throes of 'full-blown' misfit?

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