

## **A Conservation of Resources View of Person-Environment Fit**

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In terms of the phenomenon of person-environment (P-E) fit, Edwards (2008) summarizes the state of P-E fit theories, finding that P-E fit scholars apply at least five distinct theories to ground the construct; yet each of these theories does not sufficiently satisfy the tenets of good theory. This poses problems for the study of P-E Fit, as theory serves a critical role in the studies of social sciences (Bacharach, 1989). Social science theorists define theory as explaining four crucial aspects of any phenomenon: what, how, when, and why (Bacharach, 1989; Sutton & Staw, 1995; George & Jones, 2001; Mitchell & James, 2001). That is, a good theory informs social scientists by identifying the phenomenon (what), describing the intra- and inter-relationships of the phenomenon (how), establishing the boundary conditions of the phenomenon (when), and most importantly elucidating the importance of the phenomenon (why).

The lack of theoretical clarity has resulted in a highly disparate body of literature, with P-E fit researchers differentially using terminology, research designs and methodologies, and analytic procedures (for the sake of brevity in this proposal, we refer to all conceptualizations of fit as P-E Fit). More critically, the lack of good theory to apply to the construct has stifled the growth of P-E fit research (Edwards, 2008), called into question the validity of the construct (Judge & Ferris, 1992), and led researchers to subsume the construct as a component of other constructs (e.g., job embeddedness; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). Without a solid theoretical grounding, researchers cannot even define what 'fit' is. In the present proposed chapter, we seek to utilize conservation of resources theory (COR, Hobfoll, 1988, 1989) to provide an overarching theoretical framework for understanding the construct of P-E Fit. COR will provide much needed integrative clarity that explains not just extant fit literatures but also provides a useful framework for future studies of the construct, including multilevel studies.

Fortunately, Edwards's (2008) theoretical review of P-E Fit allows us to focus on his recommendations for developing appropriate P-E Fit theory. Edwards argues that P-E Fit theory must 1) satisfy "good theory" requirements delineated by theory builders (e.g., Bacharach, 1989; Sutton & Staw, 1995), 2) have P-E Fit as central to the theory, and 3) must accommodate the five streams of research that have flowed from P-E Fit research over the past century (e.g., job satisfaction, job stress, vocational choice, recruitment and selection, and culture and climate). While we use Edwards's (2008) review as a touchstone, we conceptually depart from his review in a substantial way. We couch P-E Fit (and its various conceptualizations) as a resource. That is, we view P-E Fit as central to COR in so far as it P-E Fit is a resource.

Our view of P-E Fit in terms of resources will likely strike discordant notes among P-E Fit purists. However, we divert from traditional P-E Fit theory based on the same century of P-E Fit research summarized by Edwards. That none of the five theories reviewed by Edwards satisfy the three criterion he delineates suggests that P-E Fit might indeed and ironically be a theoretical misfit. Fortunately, Edwards marks important criteria for properly understanding fit and recommends solutions for what he calls the theoretical stagnation of fit. Thus, the remainder of our proposed chapter follows Edwards's criterion for understanding fit, namely

1) defining fit inclusive of its seemingly myriad conceptualizations, 2) describing the nomological fit network, 3) elucidating the logic of that nomological network, and 4) incorporating contextual issues that any good theory should address, including issues related to moderators, levels of analysis, and timelag. In addressing these four criteria, we accept Edwards's recommendations for overcoming fit's theoretical stagnation and open new directions for fit researchers to pursue.

### **Conservation of Resources**

We begin our chapter by defining P-E Fit as a resource in the context of COR, which we briefly summarize. Hobfoll's (1988, 1998) COR theory explains employees' motivations to accumulate, protect, expend, and replenish personally valued resources used to meet the demands of the work environment. Hobfoll (1998, 2001) identified and categorized 74 resources into four general categories: 1) conditional (e.g., status), 2) personal (e.g., traits, KSAs, etc.), 3) energy (e.g., effort, time, etc.), or 4) object (e.g., compensation, material assets, etc.). Based on the conceptualization of P-E Fit (e.g., objective, subjective, supplementary, complementary), fit could exist as any of these four categories of resources. Regardless of categorization, employees have two motives relative to the resource. First, the anxiety that employees experience from the actual loss of or threat of loss of resources is disproportionate to the relief that employees feel from resource gain, what Hobfoll (1989) called the 'primacy of resource loss'. Second, employees will invest current resources in an attempt to gain future resources, what Hobfoll (1989) called 'resource investment'. Taken together, COR explains employee motivation to meet the demands of both work and non-work contexts as a function of resource protection, replenishment, and investment. Resource depletion without replenishment causes employees to feel stress, which if chronic, leads to burnout and subsequent deleterious outcomes (see Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). Conversely, yet not as empirically established, resource gain, abundance, and investment leads to positive employee outcomes (Hobfoll, 2001).

To date, most COR-based research falls within the stress and burnout nomological network (inclusive of work-family integration); yet Hobfoll construed the theory as a general motivation theory (Hobfoll, 2001). Because COR has seen extensive empirical validation for the primacy of resource loss tenet of the theory, outcomes of interest, including job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and turnover, are typically couched in the context of resource loss. A major contribution to the COR literature that we intend to make in the present chapter is to not only position the construct of P-E Fit as a resource that satisfies the primacy of resource loss tenet of COR but also satisfies the resource investment tenet of the theory. Our conceptualization of P-E Fit as a resource is based, in part, on recently published research on the topic of job embeddedness, of which fit is a component.

Halbesleben and Wheeler (2008) theorized that job embeddedness (the psychological forces that enmesh an employee within the organization and community in which the employee works and lives, respectively), constituted a resource caravan that employees invest into their jobs. A resource caravan occurs when an employee has an excess resource of some kind that is then bundled with other resources, which are then invested into the environment with the hopes that future resources will accrue in return (Hobfoll, 2001). Based on Hobfoll's (1989, 1998) postulation that employees not only invest current resources to gain future resources but also draw on available sources of social support, recent research has empirically established antecedents of the resource caravan of job embeddedness to include LMX (Harris, Wheeler, & Kacmar, In press; Wheeler & Halbesleben, 2009), perceived

organizational support (Wheeler & Halbesleben, 2009), and human resource management practices (Wheeler, Harris, & Harvey, In press; Wheeler & Halbesleben, 2009). Importantly, Wheeler and Halbesleben (2009) found that the fit component of job embeddedness, which Mitchell et al. (2001) defined as a conglomerate of subjective assessments of P-E and P-O Fit, most strongly related to the three antecedents described above and the outcomes of employee job performance and turnover intentions. This suggests that the 'fit' component of job embeddedness might be the resource around which the other component resources bundle.

### **P-E Fit Nomological Network**

However, because Mitchell et al. (2001) subsumed multiple conceptualizations of fit into their 'fit' component of job embeddedness, we seek to elaborate how P-E Fit can be considered as a resource. Consistent with both 'good theory' and Edwards's (2008) considerations for developing better P-E Fit theory, in our chapter we will next describe the inter- and intra- relationships between P-E Fit and other phenomena. In this proposed section of the chapter, we will interpret extant P-E Fit literature through COR to describe PE-Fit's nomological network (Edwards's second criterion). Moreover, we will elucidate the logic of P-E Fit as a resource (Edwards's third criterion). In satisfying these two criteria that Edwards has provided, we will synthesize the five discrete streams of existing P-E Fit research that Edwards stipulated must be accounted for in any theoretical extensions of P-E Fit theory.

Last, we will examine the boundary conditions of COR apply to P-E Fit, satisfying Edwards's fourth criteria for developing P-E Fit theory. In this section of our chapter, we will examine contextual forces that should affect P-E Fit as a resource. Fortunately, large P-E Fit and COR extant literatures exist that we can draw upon. For instance, Halbesleben's (2006) meta-analysis of sources of social support research will provide us a lens through which to understand contextual factors that affect P-E Fit. His analysis helps to explain how both work and non-work sources of support affect resource protection and replenishment, which can provide insight into how these sources of support affect P-E Fit that we see in extant fit literature. Second, we seek to provide theoretical justification for conducting multilevel P-E Fit studies. Multilevel phenomena also represent boundary conditions that any theory should address, and researchers have recently been attempting to examine multilevel P-E Fit effects (Ployhart, Weekley, & Baughman, 2006). We are fortunate in this multilevel theoretical endeavor to rely upon Wheeler, Harris, and Halbesleben's (In press) multilevel investigation on how effective job-level HRM practices impact employee-level outcomes, including intent to turnover. In their research, they synthesize COR with Barney's (1991) resource based view (RBV) of the firm. Finally, we also seek to address a final boundary condition of COR applied to P-E Fit, that of time. Time is often an overlooked boundary condition of theory building (George & Jones, 2001; Mitchell & James, 2001). For example, P-E Fit research, especially related to P-O Fit, has relied on Schneider's (1987) *attraction-selection-attrition* (ASA) framework to motivate hypotheses. Schneider theorizes that employees and companies continually assess attraction to each other, which leads to each party to continue to select each other or ultimately end their relationship (the attrition component of the framework). However, we know of no fit research that examines when or how often employees assess fit. COR addresses the issue of time and resource saliency, which we will rely upon to establish this boundary condition for COR applied to P-E Fit.

## Methodology and Future Research Implications

One of the more perplexing areas of the study of P-E Fit focuses on how employees can actually assess multiple dimensions of P-E Fit. Both Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006) and Wheeler, Buckley, Halbesleben, Brouer, and Ferris (2005) have proffered theoretical explanations for how and why employees assess multiple dimensions of P-E Fit. COR accommodates multiple dimensions of fit, as each dimension of fit represents a resource that can be bundled to invest for future gains or offset losses. Taking a resource perspective has methodological and analytic implications, such as when to utilize surface-response or polynomial regression analytic techniques that P-E Fit researchers have grappled with for almost two decades. We will examine these issues in our chapter. Furthermore, Wheeler et al. (2005) attempted to also describe *misfit* outcomes, and this topic of misfit has increasingly come under the scrutiny of P-E Fit researchers (e.g., Wheeler, Gallagher, Brouer, & Sablinski, 2007). We will apply a COR perspective to attempt to direct future research endeavors in this area.

## Conclusion

Our proposed chapter provides a new direction for theoretically grounding the construct of P-E Fit. The view of fit as a resource might address the lack of integration and coherence among current theoretical constructions of what we call 'fit'. Our proposed chapter will also contribute to the COR literature, especially related to the resource investment tenet of the theory. Unlike the stress and burnout empirical research that examines outcomes in the context of resource loss, much of the P-E Fit research examines outcomes in the presence of fit not misfit. Our chapter might provide a bridge to understanding both fit and misfit as a function of resource investment or loss, respectively.

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