Mapping Fit: Maximising Idiographic and Nomothetic Benefits

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[We apologise that at the moment this paper is a combination of structure, notes and written paragraphs. Hopefully it'll make sense and if anything isn't clear, let us know and we'll try and clarify in the forum.]

Introduction

Recently there has been a lot of concern about the usefulness of the concept of person-organization fit (e.g. Harrison, 2007). While the topic has a strong theoretical base in interactional psychology, it lacks clear definition in organizational settings. Judge (2007, p. 436) wonders whether fit might be more illusory than real: 'Is person-organization fit mostly a general impression that may say as much about a person's general attitude toward his or her organization?'

One reason for the lack of clarity in the construct is that capture techniques have been used that are not necessarily grounded in the way that people conceptualise their fit. Most of the techniques used in fit research are nomothetic in that they aim to "yield explanations and predictions that are true for 'most of the people most of the time'" (Krahé, 1992, p. 129). People's fit with organisations has been dissected in many ways, focusing on analyses of jobs (e.g. Caldwell & O'Reilly Iii, 1990) values (e.g. DeRue and Cable, 2002; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1992), vocations (Holland, 1985), organizational culture (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) and personality (e.g. Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 1998), however the extent to which these are the actual constituent parts of fit has not been checked. In short, we have forgotten to do the initial exploratory work to understand what constitutes employees' sense of fit.

Although many years have passed by, it is not too late to study fit with idiographic techniques that seek to establish the richness of individuals' perceptions. Indeed, by taking such an approach, we might resolve our definitional and conceptualisation problems. Edmondson and McManus (2007) argue that when theory is nascent with many open ended questions needing to be answered qualitative research methods are recommended; it is only when the theory is more mature that quantitative methods should be used to test hypotheses. In other words it seems that many fit studies have put the cart before the horse by starting with nomothetic quantitative studies.

To reiterate, the organizational fit domain is still growing and hence it is not too late to start conducting idiographic studies. These will help develop the theory despite the fact that idiographic research faces the challenge to move beyond the individual case and draw conclusions for more generalised study of the subject. As Krahé notes "it is perfectly possible to employ idiographic or individual-centred methods to test nomothetic, that is, general hypotheses" (Krahé, 1992, p. 131).

We will begin this paper by looking at the nature of nomothetic and idiographic research and the way it has been employed in organizational fit research which will demonstrate the

dominance of nomothetic techniques and the limitations that have resulted from adopting this approach. In particular, we will explore Chatman's (1989) discussion of nomothetic and idiographic techniques in organizational fit research and critically assess the contribution of the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP: O'Reilly, et al., 1991), which has been advocated as a technique that simultaneously employs nomothetic and idiographic approaches. Following this, we will look at cognitive mapping which is considered one of the most effective ways of revealing complex perceptions. We will explain how the technique can be used to gain in-depth understandings of people's sense of fit. The final section, will explore how causal maps, probably the most useful form of cognitive maps, can help researchers bridge the nomothetic-idiographic research gap (Larsson, 1993; Larsson and Finkelstein, 1999). Bridging this gap means that in analyzing multiple causal maps the researcher can combine rich, detailed data with large sample breadth and hence it maximizes both the benefits of idiographic and nomothetic research methods.

Section 1 Nomothetic and Idiographic Research

A nomothetic approach is generally understood to be one where research seeks to identify what is true or generalizable for groups or populations (Grice, Jackson, & McDaniel, 2006) . In nomothetic research, the goal is to identify general laws, to find what holds true not just for the individual, but for people in general. In contrast, an idiographic approach focuses on the individual. It is important to note that in the study of psychology and in the management field in general, the term nomothetic "has become equated with aggregate measures of data collection and analysis" whereas idiographic "has come to describe research strategies that place considerably more emphasis on the individual" (Grice, et al., 2006, p. 1191). As a corollary the nomothetic method "emphasizes quantitative analysis of a few variables across large samples" (Larsson, 1993, p. 1515) and the idiographic case study method "focuses primarily on the qualitative, multi aspect, in-depth study of one or a few cases" (Larsson, 1993, p. 1515).

The distinction is clear when contrasting research in the sciences with the study of historical figures. Sir Isaac Newton's universal law of gravity is a clear cut example of research finding a generally applicable theory, though it must be emphasised that even in the sciences, universally applicable theories are hard to come by. In contrast, when researching historical figures, a historian is not seeking to find generally applicable principles. A study of Napoleon Bonaparte would, for example, focus on the individual, his behaviour and motivation and not seek to explain the behaviour of all men.

Although these are fundamentally different approaches to research, in a seminal paper in the organizational fit domain, Chatman (1989) argues that it is possible to combine both approaches in the same technique. [Insert full explanation of Chatman's argument.]

[Insert critique of the OCP to show the benefits of simultaneous idiographic and nomothetic research but also the limitations caused by starting with nomothetic constraints.]

Although this might appear to be epistemologically unsound as nomothetic studies tend to be associated with a positivist perspective, and idiographic studies with an interpretive perspective. This said in line with Chatman (1989), Larsson (1993, p. 1515) argues that "Few would disagree with the desirability of studying many issues in many cases instead of sacrificing either a number of issues or a number of observations or cases". It is also the position we take in this paper.

Section 2   The Case for Cognitive Maps

[We will begin this section by looking at the reasons why cognitive maps are a useful tool and follow this with a discussion of the various forms of cognitive maps based on Huff (1990). From this, we will highlight causal maps as the most relevant for fit researchers and then devote the rest of the chapter to causal maps.]

[We will end this section with an explanation of the following heuristic model that conceptualises four different ways for generating and analysing fit causal maps. We intend to devote most attention to the bottom right box in which maps are generated idiographically and analysed nomothetically. This quadrant is the most important for our purposes because, conceptually, it captures an exploratory approach from which generalisations should emerge. In short, cracking this quadrant should lead to the development of new theories.]

Figure 1   *A Heuristic Model for Map Generation and Analysis*

Section 3   Generating Maps

[This section will look at different ways in which different forms of cognitive maps can be developed. Primarily they will be separated into idiographic and nomothetic forms and then different types considered within each category.]

While there are several ways of building a map (for instance, Axelrod (1976) derives the starting constructs from texts and Markóczy and Goldberg (1995) from interviews, which will be discussed in the nomothetic generation section), as mentioned earlier fit research is

still at the nascent stage and we need to understand how people make sense of their fit. Consequently, we believe that starting the map from prescribed checklists or structured interviews is inappropriate. We want the maps to emerge as fully as possible with a minimum of influence (Bougon, 1983), *i.e.* we would argue that in exploratory research the map should be built without predetermined constructs. The only predetermined concept should be 'fit' (or misfit) the others should surface during the mapping session itself. It is important to note though that when the fit literature becomes mature, starting from a list of fit constructs would become the natural choice.

Section 3.1   Idiographic Generation

A number of scholars (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005; Bretz, Rynes, & Gerhart, 1993) Kristof-Brown, 1997) have argued that fit researchers need to take a step back and to investigate how people conceive their sense of fit without any pre-conceived ideas clouding the issue. Although a number of approaches have been proposed (e.g., repertory grid analysis), one of the most fruitful of these appears to be cognitive mapping, which has been shown in other fields to unlock complex constructs (Huff, 1990; Huff and Jenkins, 2002; Ambrosini and Bowman, 2005).

Cognitive mapping works through a process of spreading activation (Daniels, de Chernatony, & Johnson, 1995). The basic idea of cognitive mapping is that people are asked to think about the matter at hand, such as the things influencing their sense of fit. As they think of things, these are recorded on a large sheet of paper. By doing this, they have the opportunity to 'see' their thoughts and in the process new ideas spring to mind. Causal mapping is a particular form of cognitive mapping where participants are encouraged to think about the factors 'causing' or influencing the various factors that initially emerge and link them. This creates a series of causal chains that can be analysed in several ways. One way is to analyse the content of the chains. Another is to focus on the ends of the chains, called 'tails', which, if the mapping has been done well, are viewed as the fundamental causes or drivers of the behaviour (Eden and Ackermann (1998).

[Fuller explanation to follow]

Section 3.2   Nomothetic Generation

[At this point in the chapter, we intend to look at how cognitive maps can be generated nomothetically. The essence of this approach is to begin with a set of constructs and all participants are asked to 'arrange' these in a manner that reflects their way of thinking about the subject. Primarily, this approach is an evaluative one. Amongst others, we review the approaches of Axelrod (1976), Clarkson and Hodgkinson (2005), and Markóczy and Goldberg (1995).]

Section 4   Analysing Maps

[As the title suggests, in this section we will explore how cognitive maps can be analysed. It will begin with an explanation of different approaches to analysis: inductive, deductive and retroductive. Following this, we will look at idiographic analysis before a longer look at how a nomothetic approach can be adopted.]

4.1 Approaches to Analysis

Cognitive maps can be analysed using either a inductive, deductive, or retroductive approach.

4.1.1 Inductive analysis

Inductive analysis is essentially about developing theories. When carry out an inductive based analysis one way of analysing the map is to use thematic coding. Such coding involves identifying emergent classifications from the data (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

4.1.2 Deductive analysis

Deductive analysis is theory-testing. In this case the data are coded using categories that are argued for in the literature.

4.1.3 Retroductive analysis

Retroductive research is about hypothic inference, it involves the 'creative' construction of hypotheses. Retroduction is a method attached to critical realism (Bhaskar, 1978). Instead of letting the coding emerge or using pre-determined coding when using retroduction, the researcher creates hypotheses about mechanisms/structures that have not yet been observed and then the researcher analyses the data to see whether these mechanisms can be found to exist (Blaikie, 2003).

So in summary in each of these cases the maps can be content analysed "Content analysis refers to [a] means of summarizing, standardizing, and comparing…already existing data" (Smith, 1975, p.218), the difference being that the summarizing is done on different basis. The next question is how having analyzed the data from a map, i.e. how having carried our idiographic research one can move on to nomothetic research.

4.2 Idiographic analysis

4.2.1 Idiographic analysis of nomothetically generated maps

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4.3 Nomothetic analysis

4.3.1 Nomothetic analysis of nomothetically generated maps

[This will include a review of Clarkson and Hodgkinson's (2005) Cognizer approach.]

4.3.2 Nomothetic analysis of idiographically generated maps

[Insert major section on how this can be done]

In view of the tradition in fit research to use nomothetic methods, causal mapping has essentially been ignored as a possible method in the field as to date, almost all uses of the technique have been for idiographic purposes, i.e. to understand the individual or individual situations better (refs). However, the most relevant research question for which mapping is a legitimate technique in the organizational fit domain is a nomothetic one: how do people

construct their sense of fit (or misfit)? In the following section, we turn argue that the data gathered from the idiographic use of causal maps can be used nomothetically.

Bridging the idiographic-nomothetic gap can be done by analyzing multiple maps and hence combine rich, detailed cases with large sample breadth. This would allow researchers academics to use both quantitative and qualitative methods. Once numerous maps have been coded (either inductively, deductively or retroductively), it is then possible to use a second level of coding and to explore patterns by looking across all the maps. This stage could involve statistical analysis of the coded second level data. [to be developed]

Conclusion

In this paper we have argue that collecting data via causal mapping, which allow to capture rich and detailed data about how people make sense of their fit or misfit can allow for both nomothetic and idiographic research, and hence may be a strong base from which to develop our understanding of fit and as such develop our understanding of the fit construct.

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