Interpersonal Fit and the Process of Organizational Socialization

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Most people only feel like they really "fit" in a job if they have positive interpersonal relationships with their co-workers. There is also a practical, operational side to interpersonal relationships at work, because they facilitate the exchange of information and resources (e.g., Ibarra, Kilduff, & Tsai, 2005; Labianca & Brass, 2006; Nebus, 2006). Unfortunately, research on social relationships at work does not reflect the rich body of knowledge that has been amassed in other fields (Barry & Crant, 2000). Thus, we know that interpersonal relationships are important for organizational behavior, but we currently don't know a great deal about them.

In this proposed chapter, a model of how person-environment fit develops in the course of social interactions among established organizational members and those who are new to the organization will be developed. The focus on the initial period of relationship development (i.e. organizational socialization) will help to illustrate a number of important processes that occur primarily in the initial acquaintance phase. Our theoretical development will proceed from a relationship science perspective (e.g., Kelly et al., 1983; Berscheid, 1999). This perspective offers insights that have been unexplored in both the person-environment fit and organizational socialization literatures.

We note at the outset that this is a distinct topic from person-group fit. Unlike person-group fit, which is concerned with the fit of a person with all of his co-workers, our interest is in specific dyadic relationships.

1) The chapter begins with a review of work from authors in the relationship science literature:

   a) A relationship is a long-range series of interdependent interactions in which two people change one another (Kelly et al., 1983; Berscheid, 1999). The interactions can be based on either emotional exchanges or direct exchanges of goods and services. Relationships are personal, and occur at the dyadic level. The implications of this perspective on relationships will be briefly explained as they relate to the process of socializing newcomers.

   b) Social exchanges occur as interactions (Reichers, 1987), meaning that both newcomers and established members will need to be studied.

   c) Interpersonal relationships can be differentiated in terms of three distinct relationship dimensions: affective bonds (i.e. communal relationships), instrumentality (exchange relationships), and animosity (Mills & Clark, 1994).

   d) The fit literature has differentiated between supplementary and complementary fit perceptions (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). These two types of fit are both individually meaningful from an interpersonal fit perspective. Complementary interpersonal fit exists when a person has resources not possessed by another

person—this characterizes instrumental relationships. Supplementary interpersonal fit exists when two people are similar on characteristics that foster deeper understanding and liking—this characterizes affective relationships. Animosity arises in large part when people have a deep level of misfit on personally valuable characteristics or when they face resource competition.

e) We'll introduce a figure showing the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of interpersonal fit constructs for organizational newcomers.

2) Contributions of an interpersonal socialization perspective to the literature on fit:

a) The fit literature has discussed person-group fit, but that perspective does not consider the individual, dyadic relationship development process and how there can be very different levels of fit within a work group.

b) We plan to highlight how fit with one's entire group may not be required to achieve many of the positive benefits reaped by fit evaluations. Rather, often a few important ties are responsible for fit evaluations. This means that interpersonal fit is related to, but distinct from, our usual conceptualizations of person-group fit.

c) Fit research has tended to be rather static in nature and hasn't examined how fit can grow and change based on repeated interactions between parties (Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007). The relationships literature is inherently based on the idea that fit is something that people develop with time (Hays, 1984; 1985). As such, our perspective on interpersonal fit fills a need for dynamic theory.

d) There is not much research on how fit perceptions can shift dramatically based on interpersonal emotional interactions like interpersonal conflicts or demonstrations of social support. We suggest that affective events and significant cognitive events have implications for fit that have yet to be explored. We highlight the various important events (experienced or witnessed) that we propose will influence perceptions of fit or misfit.

e) Although the development and maintenance of person-organization fit is a crucial component of organizational socialization, research has not sufficiently explicated the social environment in which fit perceptions develop (e.g., Moreland & Levine, 2001; Morrison, 2002).

3) Antecedents of the development of fit:

a) First impressions and their impact on interpersonal relationship development have been studied in the relationships literature, so we begin from this point. This will include a discussion of how perceived demographic fit will determine whether a relationship is developed in the first place and how early socialization experiences can facilitate or inhibit the development of relationships.

b) Deep-level diversity based in attitudinal similarity and values (Harrison, Price and Bell, 1998) and perceived similarity on these criteria also will start or amend the process of interpersonal fit evaluation.

c) Significant events may create or alter perceptions of interpersonal fit. Such influential situations may include affective events that may spur like or dislike emotions such as

acts of citizenship, or being insulted. Significant workplace events that may make one re-evaluate fit are for example, unethical behavior by a coworker or a coworker's expressed innovative ideas.

d) When there are conflicts early in the development of a relationship, research on the confirmation bias (Nickerson, 1998) suggests that there will be problems in establishing fit in the future. Negative emotions will color subsequent perceptions and the relationship will be increasingly marked by behaviors that undermine the creation of interpersonal bonds.

e) Organizations that have a climate for cooperation and interdependence may encourage the development of friendships and close relationships more than organizations that have a climate for competition and independence.

4) Processes in the social relationships picture of fit:

a) Processes of disclosure (Collins and Miller, 1994) as an indicator of acceptance (reciprocal development of fit) as well as a means of increasing the degree of fit by emphasizing commonalities.

b) Social support is a means of reducing stress at work (Karasek & Theorell, 1990; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). The provision of social support is one mechanism by which person-group fit can improve the job satisfaction and well-being of organizational newcomers.

c) Exchanges of goods and services in instrumental relationships will build up the strength of the relationship over time based on norms of social exchange.

d) Undermining (Duffy, Ganster, & Pagon, 2002) is the flip side of social support, and represents the direct interpersonal consequences of poor interpersonal fit. Undermining involves sending direct signals of social disapproval like criticism, belittling, or insulting.

5) Outcomes of interpersonal fit in the socialization process

a) Social network development in the socialization process has been explored in some previous research, and provides one of the important outcomes of interpersonal relationships at work. Newcomers with more extended friendship networks are more knowledgeable about the organization and are more committed (Morrison, 2002). Individual mentor-mentee relationships for newcomers also facilitate learning (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993).

b) Retention, because interpersonal relationships are uniquely related to the concept of organizational embeddedness (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Unlike other perspectives on fit, there is no mediation through organizational commitment, social exchange, or social identity concepts—the relationship itself and the emotional bond it creates are the direct antecedents of the decision to remain in the job.

c) Interpersonal fit and social relationships can also lead to an enhanced level of citizenship behavior because interpersonal affective relationships are seldom monetized or direct-exchange oriented. The affective nature of the relationship means

that co-workers will be willing to provide assistance even in situations in which there are no direct positive personal outcomes attached to behavior.

d) Poor interpersonal fit will lead to higher levels of avoidance and interpersonal deviance. Relationships that are marked by negative feelings may lead to increased levels of fighting, disrupting work for others, or decisions to withhold information.

6) Summary

a) We'll conclude with a review of the unique contributions to the literature provided by an interpersonal fit perspective. This will be a recapitulation of the major points in the chapter as they relate to the figure.

b) Discussion of how this chapter might fit with other chapters in the volume, if relevant.

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