

# **A Discourse Perspective on Fit: Understanding the Meaning of Organisation Fit and Misfit to a Manager**

Jennifer Hennessy, *Waterford Institute of Technology*  
Thomas Garavan, *University of Limerick*

## **Introduction**

The comment by Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & March, (2005) that one of the limitations of existing PO fit research is that researchers have yet to explore the individuals' own sense of fit forms the focus for the current theoretical discussion. In particular this chapter will examine from a theoretical perspective how adopting a discourse perspective can contribute to the PO fit literature by creating a better understanding of what the concept of organisational fit actually means to the individual and in particular to those employed as managers within an organisation. The chapter will firstly focus on existing approaches to the study of PO fit and will examine how the adoption of a primarily positivist paradigm has limited a deeper understanding of the concept of PO fit.

## **Paradigms in Existing Fit Research**

Kristof-Brown and Jansen (2007) in asking the question of how PO fit should be studied, begin their answer by referring to the proposition in PO fit research that when characteristics of the person and their organisational environment are alike or fit together then positive attitudinal and behavioural outcomes are likely. They follow this by suggesting that the next logical step is to ask how should PO fit be measured. Of course they are perfectly correct in their focus provided a positivist paradigm is adopted as is used in the majority of PO fit studies. This section will investigate traditional approaches to the study of PO fit and current approaches which restrict the conceptualisation, measurement, and analysis of PO fit will be addressed. Current thinking regarding the future direction of PO fit research will also be discussed in terms of how its boundaries are confining a broader exploration of the concept of PO fit.

### *Existing approaches to the study 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). Billsberry, et al., (2005) have identified three main approaches to the study of PO fit research. Schneiders' (2001) ASA framework has had a significant impact on fit research. He basically suggests that individuals who are found to fit with the organisation at pre entry stage are likely to stay with the organisation. Other research has focused on matching characteristics of the individual such as their values to characteristics of the environment. These dimensions have included values (Judge & Cable, 1997; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991), goals (Vancouver & Schmitt, 1991), and personality (Ryan & Schmitt, 1996). Other research has focused on a narrow segment of PO fit research such as how the organisation's can meet the needs of the individual through structures such as rewards. Bretz, Ash & Dreher (1989) examined the fit between internal need states and work environments

which were defined by approaches to reward management and whether needs structure fit drove organizational choice. All of these approaches to the study of PO fit have helped us to develop an understanding of fit but do not give us an idea of what fit actually means.

In attempting to deconstruct the concept of PO fit most researchers have discussed the differences between complementary and supplementary forms of fit (Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987) and have examined whether PO fit should be viewed as objective, perceived or subjective fit. As Judge (2007: 434) based on a earlier observation “the literature on fit is confusing and plagued by conceptual ambiguities”. Perhaps the essence of what PO fit means is about to be lost within its own terminology.

Methods of data analysis in existing fit research include tradition difference scores the use of polynomial regression analysis, profile comparison measures, heterogeneity indices and cluster analysis (Ostroff, 2007). Difficulties with the use of difference scores and profile similarity indices has been extensively reported by Edwards (1994), and Judge (2007) has identified that polynomial regression analysis has its own difficulties. Therefore current methods of analyzing fit have their own methodological difficulties.

The current chapter will suggest that a fresh look at PO fit has much to offer the literature in this area. If we look at 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. Lovelace and Rosen’s (1996) have identified subtle variations that exist between individuals in terms of their perceptions of PO

This leads into a discussion of how alternative paradigms could provide useful to the study of PO fit and in particular how they could enhance our understanding of what fit actually means. The reasons why an understanding of the meaning of PO is important will be highlighted and the potential contributions of expanding our understanding of the concept of fit will be addressed.

### **A Discourse Perspective**

The chapter will then continue by examining the value of adopting a discourse perspective to the study of fit. Potter (1997:146) suggests that discourse analysis is “the medium for interaction.....[the] analysis of what people do” and highlights that discourse analysis is not just another methodological tool but is also a set of meta-theoretical and theoretical assumptions. 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”. Discourse analysis will illuminate and surface individuals talk about PO fit. By studying how people engage in discourse about PO fit we may gain a greater understanding of how people experience fit in terms; of how their concept of self and other factors affects their PO fit experiences; what they understand as the effects of PO fit on themselves and the subtle variations between and within individuals with regard to PO fit. Furthermore, in studying discourses regarding fit differences may become evident in the language that people employ when discussing fit and misfit.

## **Theoretical and Methodological Considerations in Discourse Analysis**

The various theoretical perspectives within discourse analysis which are relevant to PO fit research will be examined as well as identifying the forms of discourse analysis that stem from these different perspectives. Relevant analytical tools which could be applied to PO fit research will also be identified.

### *Understanding Epistemology and Ontology*

Theoretical perspectives based around epistemological and ontological issues in discourse analysis influence the form that discourse analysis takes. Some discourse theorists are committed to a postmodern and social constructionist perspective (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 1997; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) whereas others such as Fairclough (2005) adopt a critical realist social ontology. Fairclough's approach is located in what he terms an analytically dualist epistemology "which gives primacy to researching relations between agency and structure" (Fairclough (2005: 916). His perspective is of particular value within an organisational context. He suggests that postmodern perspectives are often offered as the only alternative to positivist perspectives but as there is a strong traditional of realism within an organisational context he argues that there must be a middle ground between positivist and post modern perspectives (Fairclough, 2005:917).

### *Forms of Discourse Analysis*

Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) have distinguished between eight approaches to discourse analysis. However the purpose of this chapter is not to provide an exhaustive review of all of the forms of discourse analysis and only the forms of discourse analysis that have relevance to the study of PO fit will be identified. Therefore discourse forms relating to linguistic studies specifically, will be ignored. Woods and Kroger (2000) refer to one form of discourse analysis as discourse analysis in social psychology or DASP. Bryman, (2004: 470) suggests that this version of discourse analysis is action oriented and can be seen as a way of getting things done. He refers to Gills' (1996) reference to Widdicombe (1993) who suggests that this form of discourse analysis treats the way that something is said as being "a solution to a problem" (Widdicombe 1993:97 quoted in Gill, 1996: 146). Porter likens this form of analysis as being like a "craft skill more like bike riding....than following the recipe for a mild chicken rogan josh" (Porter: 1997: 148).

Another form of discourse analysis is critical discourse analysis. "CDA provides a way of moving between close analysis of texts and interactions, and social analyses of various types" (Fairclough, 2001:229). CDA regards 'language as social practice' (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). It examines how language figures as an element in social processes and also investigates the relationship of language to other elements of social processes (Fairclough, 229: 2001). Fairclough suggests that the 'critical' element within critical discourse analysis "is essentially making visible the interconnectedness of things" (Fairclough, 1985; 747). Critical discourse analysis is considered to include a range of shared perspectives "on doing linguistic, semiotic or discourse analysis' (van Dijk, 1993:131) and is often investigated from a power and domination. According to Wodak (2004) CDA considers discourse in various institutional, political, gender related and media contexts.

### *Organisational Discourse Analysis*

One form of discourse analysis whose roots can partially be found in critical discourse analysis is organisational discourse analysis. This form of analysis has particular application within a PO context. Organisational discourse analysis can be defined as the study of “the struggle for meaning in organisations” (Grant & Hardy: 2003:5). Organisational discourse has been labeled a “quasi-scientific” form of discourse because of its “focus on analytical transparency and methodological rigour” (Grant & Hardy, 2003:10). A fuller examination of the application of organisational discourse analysis to PO fit research will be provided below.

#### *The Analysis of Discourse*

The analysis 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 conversation analysis, narrative analysis, storytelling analysis, rhetorical analysis and the use of metaphors. It should be noted that the researcher’s theoretical position determines the analytical tools that are utilized. Many of these forms of analysis have application within organisational discourse analysis however other forms of analysis have specific application to an organisational context. In a special issue on organisational discourse in the journal, *Organisation Studies*, discursive manoeuvres, organisational negotiations, discourse, rhetorical analysis and documentation analysis were used as analytical discourse tools (Grant & Handy, 2003).

#### *Studying Managers*

The discourse of managers is of particular interest to studying fit due to the complexity of their role and experiences within the organisation. Gosling & Mintzberg (2003) have suggested that little attention has been paid to the question of what does it mean to think like a manager. The world of the manager provides a unique perspective on the concept of organizational fit. Their discourses regarding fit are fundamentally embedded in their concept of self; the organisation in which they work; the broader context of their environment; the relationships that they engage in and their involvement in change processes. These elements are what Mintzberg refers to as the five elements of the managers mindset.

### **The Application of Organisational Discourse Analysis**

The final section of the chapter will focus on the application of organisational discourse analysis to PO fit research through a discussion of theoretical and methodological considerations in order to gain an insight into how this form of discourse analysis can be used to deepen our understanding of the meaning of organisational fit from the perspective of the individual manager.

#### *Theoretical Application*

The application of organisational discourse analysis can be used to study processes of organizing through the discourse of its members. Through a number of discursive interactions and processes the organisation can deliver and reinforce the meaning of fit to its members as well as identifying the repercussions for them in failing to comply with the organisations view of fit. Organisational discourse analysis also enables the study of how organisations members understand how the organisation can negotiate with them to achieve fit. This

communication can be delivered in a variety of contexts including various forms of company documentation, meetings, interviews, workshops, award ceremonies training processes, social interactions and bargaining procedures. Examining discourses in these contexts may give us a greater understanding of the factors influencing organisational member's sense of fit.

Discourse 'acts as a powerful ordering force in organisations' (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a:1127). This ordering force can determine who is "in" and who is "out" (Grant & Hardy, 2004). Organisational discourse analysis can be used to examine how dominant meanings "emerge from the power laden nature of organisational contexts" (Grant & Hardy, 2004:6). For example why is that some individuals perceive that they don't fit with the organisation and feel that organisational processes and structures don't seem to fit their needs and/or that they don't have the ability to meet the demands that their workplace puts on them. Conversely why it is that others feel that their needs are met by the organisation's structures and practices and/or they feel that they do have the ability to meet the demands of the workplace. Discourse analysis may uncover people's conceptions regarding their place, position and sense of identity in the organisation and whether this is being influenced by their perceived fit or misfit with the organisation. In studying discourse on organisational fit subtle variations between and within individuals with regard to PO fit may be identified.

### *Tools of Analysis*

The analytical tools which could be used to analyze discourse pertaining to organisation fit are many as Schneider (2001) has stated fit is "a syndrome with many manifestations" and therefore the tools employed must fit with the particular form and focus of fit research. Discourse analysis tools may vary depending on whether supplementary or complementary fit is of interest. If the focus is on the person and analyzing individual discourses then tools such as story telling analysis or interview analysis may be useful. If the study is focusing on organisational discourses then analytical tools relating to rhetorical analysis or documentation analysis may prove fruitful.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter will examine from a theoretical perspective how adopting a discourse perspective has much to offer existing PO fit literature. In particular organisational discourse analysis may provide particularly fruitful in enhancing our understanding of the meaning of fit in an organisational context. The current chapter has suggested that analyzing the discourses of organisational members will illuminate and surface individual managers talk about PO fit. Furthermore analyzing the discourse of employees may provide an insight into the differences between fit and misfit and whether individuals engage in different discourses depending on whether they see a fit or a misfit between themselves and the organisation. Adopting a discourse perspective has many implications for future fit research. Discourse analysis may be used to examine the different levels at which people experience fit and the relationships between these levels of analysis. Employing a discourse perspective may also be valuable in examining whether the roles that people adopt within an organizational context influence their discourses regarding fit. Furthermore discourse analysis may open up our understanding of variations in fit experiences depending on organizational stage. Employees who have just joined the organisation may engage in different fit discourses than employees who have longer tenure with the organisation. Therefore a discourse perspective offers a new paradigm to the study of fit research, a paradigm which has a significant contribution to make to our understanding of the meaning of fit. It is hoped that this chapter has in some way provided an alternative direction for the study of fit.

## References

- Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2000) 'Varieties of discourse: On the study of organizations through discourse analysis', *Human Relations*, 53, 9 1125-1149.
- Billsberry, J., Ambrosini, V., Moss-Jones, J. & March, P. (2005) Some suggestions for mapping organizational members' sense of fit. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 19, 4.555-570.
- Billsberry, J., Ambrosini, V., van Meurs, N., Coldwell, D., Marsh, P. & Moss-Jones, J. (2007, January) *What is this thing called fit?* Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Psychological Society's Division of Occupational Psychology.
- Bretz, R. D., Ash, R. A., & Dreher, G. F. (1989) 'Do people make the place? An examination of the attraction-selection-attrition hypothesis', *Personnel Psychology*, 42, 3, 561-581.
- Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press, UK
- Edwards J. R. (1994) 'The study of congruence in organizational behavior research: Critique and a proposed alternative', *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 58, 51-100.
- Fairclough, N. (2005) 'Peripheral vision: Discourse analysis in organization studies: The case for critical realism' *Organization Studies*, 26,, 6, 915-939.
- Fairclough, N. (2001) 'Critical discourse analysis as a method in social scientific research' in R. Wodak and P. Chilton (eds), *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis: Theory Methodology and Interdisciplinarity*, US: John Benjamins.
- Fairclough, N. and Wodak, R. (1997) 'Critical Discourse Analysis', in T. van Dijk (ed.) *Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, pp. 258-284. London: Sage
- Gosling J., & Mintzberg, H. (2003) 'The five minds of a manager', *Harvard Business Review*, November.
- Grant, D., & Hardy, C. (2004) 'Introduction: Struggles with organizational studies' *Organization Studies*, 25, 5, 5-13.
- Judge, T. A. (2007) 'The future of person-organization fit research: Comments, observations, and a few suggestions', in C. Ostroff & T.A. Judge, *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Judge, T. A., & Cable, D. M. (1997) 'Applicant personality, organizational culture, and organization attraction', *Personnel Psychology*, 50, 359-394.
- Kristof, A.L. (1996) 'Person-organisation fit: An integrative review of its conceptualisations, measurement and implications', *Personnel Psychology*, 49, 1-49.

Kristof-Brown, A. & Jansen, K.J.(2007) 'Issues of person-organization fit', in C. Ostroff & T.A. Judge, *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Meglino, B. M., Ravlin E.C., & Adkins C. L. (1989) 'A work values approach to corporate culture: A field test of the value congruence process and its relationship to individual outcomes', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 74(3), 424–432.

Muchinsky, P.M., & Monahan, C. J. (1987) 'What is person-environment congruence? Supplementary versus complementary models of fit', *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 31, 3, 268–277.

Ostroff, C. (2007) 'General methodological and design issues', in C. Ostroff & T.A. Judge, *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, NY: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

O'Reilly, C.A., Chatman, J., & Caldwell, D.F. (1991) 'People and organizational culture: a profile comparison approach to assessing person-organization fit', *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 34 pp.487-516.

Potter, J. (1997) Discourse analysis as a way of analyzing naturally occurring talk. In D. Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*, 144-160, London: Sage

Potter, J. & Wetherell, M. (1987) *Discourse and Social Psychology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Putnam L., and Fairhurst, G. (2001) ' Discourse analysis in organizations: Issues and concerns' in F.M. Jablin, & L. Putnam (eds), *The New Handbook of Organizational Communication: Advances in Theory, Research and Methods*, CA: Sage.

Ryan A.M., & Schmit, M. J. (1996) 'An assessment of organizational climate and P-E fit: A tool for organizational change', *The International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, 4, 1, 75–95.

Schneider B. (2001) 'Fits about fit', *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 50, 1, 141–152.

Van Dijk, T. (1993) 'Principles of critical discourse analysis', *Discourse & Society*, 4, 249-283.

Vancouver, J.B., & Schmitt, N.W. (1991) 'An exploratory examination of person organisation fit: Organizational goal congruence', *Personnel Psychology*, 44, 333 - 352.

Wodak, R. (2005) 'Preface: Reflecting on CDA' in R. Wodak and P. Chilton (eds), *A New Agenda in (Critical) Discourse Analysis: Theory Methodology and Interdisciplinarity*, US: John Benjamins.

Wood, L.A. & Kroger, R.O. (1995) *Doing Discourse Analysis: Methods for Studying Action in Talk and Text*, London: Sage.