

Conceptualizing person–environment fit as ideal–actual goal discrepancies: What can the fit literature learn from goal-based theories of self-regulation?

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Person–environmental (P-E) fit refers to the compatibility between people’s internal states and aspects of their external environment (Edwards, 1991; Kristof, 1996). Typically, when fit exists, people report more favorable attitudes, experience greater well-being, and perform more effectively (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). While P-E fit is a source of motivation for employees (Latham & Pinder, 2005), there have been few attempts to integrate this phenomenon with contemporary theories of motivation. This lack of integration is unfortunate because understanding how P-E fit ‘fits’ within the broader context of employee self-regulation may address current gaps in P-E fit theory and identify promising directions for future research. In our chapter we will draw attention to the parallels between theories of self-regulation and P-E fit, with the aim of expanding P-E fit theory based on what is known about employee motivation.

The Relevance of Self-Regulation for P-E Fit

Theories of self-regulation describe the motivation-based processes underlying goal-directed behavior (Kanfer, 1990). Central to all theories of self-regulation is the important role played by goals (i.e., internal representations of desired states; Austin & Vancouver, 1996), which give meaning to people’s behaviour and guide the allocation of their time and effort (Bandura, 1986; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Locke & Latham, 1990). Goals provide people with standards that are used to judge information gleaned from the external environment. When there is no discrepancy between internal standards and external information, people experience favorable reactions and maintain their current course of action. In cases where discrepancies exist, they disrupt the system (e.g., elicit negative affect) and motivate people to alter their behavior in order to align the external environment with internal standards. For example, when performance levels fall below goal levels in achievement domains, people respond by increasing their effort (Kernan & Lord, 1990). If goal–performance discrepancies remain stable despite increased efforts, people may eventually focus on reducing goal levels (Donovan & Williams, 2003).

How is the process of self-regulation relevant for the phenomenon of P-E fit? In essence, P-E fit concerns discrepancies between internal standards and the external environment. Internal standards that are used to evaluate the environment include people’s needs, values, personality traits, goals, and skills (e.g., Antonioni & Park, 2001; Bretz & Judge, 1994; Kristof-Brown & Stevens, 2001). Environmental aspects that are compared to these internal standards include vocations, work organizations, groups within organizations (e.g., work teams), specific people (e.g., supervisors), and job tasks and characteristics (e.g., job complexity; e.g., Chatman, 1991; Engle & Lord, 1997; Ferris, Youngblood, & Yates, 1985). Self-regulation and P-E fit are inexorably intertwined because discrepancies are at the heart of self-regulation theories and P-E fit at its heart is a discrepancy.

Much of the attention in the P-E fit literature has revolved around how fit is conceptualized (e.g., supplementary vs. complementary fit) and measured (e.g., direct vs. indirect measures;

Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005; Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). While this research has advanced our understanding of P-E fit, additional theory is needed to further our understanding of why discrepancies in internal standards and external environments predict worker attitudes, well-being, and behaviour. Self-regulation theories provide insights into the effects of discrepancies on cognition and behaviour (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Johnson, Chang, & Lord, 2006), which can be applied to P-E fit. In the remainder of this proposal we discuss three ways in which knowledge derived from self-regulation theories can be leveraged to advance P-E fit theory.

P-E Fit over Time

Missing in P-E fit theory is a dynamic perspective that concerns changes in fit over time (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Although P-E fit is a longitudinal phenomenon (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006; Schmitt, Oswald, Friede, Imus, & Merritt, 2008), little research speaks to the role that change in fit over time may play in influencing employee and organizational outcomes (for exceptions, see Schmitt et al., 2008; Roberts & Robins, 2004). As explained below, the omission of a longitudinal perspective can be overcome by examining P-E fit within a self-regulation framework.

In addition to setting standards, self-regulation theories cover the goal striving stage where people work towards reducing discrepancies between internal standards and external states (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Mitchell & Beach, 1990). When a dynamic perspective is adopted, not only is discrepancy information important but so too is velocity information, or the rate of change in discrepancies over time (Hsee & Abelson, 1991; Johnson et al., 2006). In fact, Carver and Scheier (1998) proposed that cognitive and affective reactions to goal pursuits are more heavily influenced by velocities versus discrepancies, an idea that has received some empirical support (e.g., Lawrence, Carver, & Scheier, 2002). Putting aside the debates about their relative importance, it is clear that both discrepancies and velocities have unique effects on outcomes. For example, across two studies, Chang, Johnson, and Lord (in press) observed that changes in discrepancies (i.e., velocity) predicted people's satisfaction and commitment incremental to the size of discrepancies. Their results also suggested that discrepancies and velocities may interact, such that outcomes are favorable (e.g., high commitment) so long as people have small discrepancies or fast velocities. Only when large discrepancies are paired with slow velocities do people have negative reactions.

What are the implications of this research for P-E fit? An obvious implication is that researchers ought to measure discrepancies over time and examine the consequences of change in fit (i.e., velocity) in addition to discrepancies. Based on velocity-related research (e.g., Chang et al., in press; Lawrence et al., 2002), P-E velocity may be more important than P-E discrepancies when the outcomes under investigation include employee satisfaction, commitment, and job performance. Take, for example, new hires who are in training to learn to perform the duties of a particular position. Initially, there is a large discrepancy because the demands of the position far exceed employees' abilities. Despite the large discrepancy, employees' levels of motivation and satisfaction may remain high if they experience fast velocity owing to their training. Thus, substantial P-E misfit may be tolerable, so long as fit is improving at a sufficient rate over time.

Studying velocity may also broaden our understanding of the place of P-E fit in the turnover process because velocity plays a central role in the assessment of success expectancies and

disengagement (Carver & Scheier, 1998). This implies that if employees do not see P-E fit as improving or worse, they see it as deteriorating, employees may begin to withdraw from their organization. For example, Lee and Mitchell (1994) proposed that turnover is often precipitated by “shocks,” which are jarring events that initiate the psychological analyses involved in quitting a job. We believe that abrupt changes in velocity (i.e., an abrupt, decreasing rate of P-E fit) may serve as shocks which precede reassessments of organizational membership that trigger turnover.

In sum, self-regulation theories provide insight into the role of P-E fit over time, and why velocity is expected to impact employee outcomes. Of course, examining velocity may require longitudinal studies where data on P-E fit is collected at multiple points in time. In the chapter, we will discuss different approaches for measuring change in P-E fit (e.g., subjective vs. objective velocity) and outcomes that may be especially sensitive to P-E velocity (e.g., satisfaction and turnover).

Using Goal Hierarchies to Distinguish between Different Types of P-E Fit

Self-regulation theories also provide insight into similarities and differences across various types of fit (e.g., supplementary fit, needs–supplies fit, and demands–abilities fit; Kristof, 1996; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987). Supplementary fit occurs when characteristics of the person and the situation are the same (e.g., an extrovert who belongs to a team of extroverts). Supplementary fit typically involves people’s values or personality (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Needs–supplies fit occurs when characteristics of the environment satisfy people’s deficient needs (e.g., a challenging task fulfills an employee’s need for achievement). As the name implies, this type of fit primarily involves people’s needs and motives (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Lastly, demands–abilities fit occurs when people’s capabilities satisfy a situational deficiency (e.g., an employee is certified to perform a specific job function). Demands–abilities fit concerns people’s task-based knowledge, skills, and resources (Edwards & Shipp, 2007).

Self-regulation theorists (e.g., Carver & Scheier, 1998; Powers, 1973) propose a hierarchical organization for people’s internal standards. At the top of the hierarchy are person-level standards that are comprised of fundamental values, needs, and traits. These values, needs, and traits are tied directly to one’s sense of self and they guide people’s cognition and behavior. Lower down in the hierarchy are task-level standards that correspond to specific activities. The person-level standards at the top of the hierarchy (e.g., the need for belonging) determine what task-level standards emerge at lower levels (e.g., participating in a discussion group). Thus, task-level standards are important insofar as they service higher person-level standards, and reactions to successful or unsuccessful task-level pursuits tend to be weaker than reactions to person-level pursuits because there often are multiple means to achieve a single person-level standard (Carver & Scheier, 1998).

An implication of the hierarchical organization of internal standards for P-E fit theory is that not all types of fit are equally important. Given that needs–supplies fit and supplementary fit pertain primarily to person-level needs, values, and personality traits, the internal standards used to judge these types of fit are located at the top of people’s hierarchies. Thus, fit based on these standards should have substantial influence on people’s reactions to discrepancies between internal standards and the external environment. In support of this proposition, empirical evidence suggests that needs–supplies and supplementary fit tend to have the strongest relationships with employee attitudes and behaviours (Cable & Edwards, 2004). In contrast, demands–abilities fit involves task-level appraisals of one’s knowledge, skills, and

resources, which exist at lower levels in the hierarchy. Discrepancies involving these task-level standards should therefore have weaker effects than needs–supplies and supplementary fit, which parallels empirical results (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). In the chapter, we will further apply the goal hierarchy concept to distinguish different types of P-E fit, and discuss their implications for employee attitudes and behaviors.

Individual Differences that Impact P-E Fit

A final contribution of self-regulation theories is that they highlight individual difference variables that may moderate the effects of P-E discrepancies and velocities. For example, self-focus, or the tendency to be aware of oneself, causes people to pay greater attention to internal standards and regulate more tightly around them (Carver & Scheier, 1998). Thus, inferring from past research (e.g., Carver, 1975; Carver, Blaney, & Scheier, 1979), we expect that P-E fit will have stronger effects when people are high (vs. low) in self-focus. Another relevant variable is action identification, which is the tendency to focus at either high or low levels in the goal hierarchy (Vallacher & Wegner, 1985). Earlier we proposed that needs–supplies and supplemental fit involve standards at the top of the hierarchy, whereas demands–abilities fit involves those at lower levels. If so, then people who identify at high levels will react more strongly to needs–supplies and supplemental fit, whereas those who identify at low levels will respond more to demands–abilities fit. A final example is temporal orientation, which refers to tendencies to focus on the past, present, or future (Holman & Silver, 1998). Chang, Johnson, and Rosen (2009) proposed and found some support that strong present orientations accentuated the effects of discrepancies, whereas strong future orientations accentuates the effects of velocities. Thus, the ability of P-E discrepancies and velocities to predict workers' attitudes and behaviors may depend on their present and future orientations, respectively. While none of these individual differences have been examined in conjunction with P-E fit, self-regulation theories suggest that these variables may prove useful. We will discuss self-focus, action identification, and temporal orientation, as well as other potentially-useful individual differences (e.g., regulatory focus), in the chapter.

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