

Which of These is not Like the Others? PE fit, Lack of PE fit, and Misfit

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When Jon Billsberry invited me to write this paper for the 4th Global e-Conference on Fit, I had two sequential thoughts: Me? (Surprised) Me?! (Incredulous) About 5 years ago, I made a conscious decision to stop conducting research related to the traditional P-E fit literatures. Amy Kristof-Brown, while providing feedback on a book chapter I had written, asked why no one, myself included, had followed up on research I conducted several years ago on PE fit and misfit. I couldn't speak for anyone else and really didn't want to tell her why I hadn't, but the real reason is I gave up on PE fit. Sorry, Amy, you had to find out the answer to your question here and now.

You must understand the study of PE fit meant and continues to mean a great deal to me. I entered my doctoral program determined to understand PE fit. It was 'the topic' I wanted to research. I value research on the topic. I attended conference sessions with the hopes of meeting researchers, who either complemented my skill set or shared my views, interested in collaborating. I took methods and statistics courses relevant to the field. If you're looking for proof, search for my dissertation! So why did I choose to stop studying PE fit? Maybe it was the repeated shock of rejection or gradual dissatisfaction I felt with the fragmentation of PE fit literatures, but I quite simply at some point felt myself to be a misfit. I don't know on which path from Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model of turnover that put me!

In response to my perceived misfit, I started behaving differently. At conferences I sometimes offered sharp criticisms about the study of PE fit. At other times, I tried to give the impression I thought the same as others did about PE fit research. I tried to ignore the sources of my perceived misfit, even if that meant denying my own inabilities to conduct quality research. This wasn't a pleasant time in my professional life, and I suspect my unhappiness spilled over into my personal life. My wife will neither confirm nor deny my suspicion, but while she tried to lend emotional support, what I really needed was instrumental support. In the face of my perceived misfit, I completely immersed myself in PE fit research. I invested my research efforts into designing better studies and crafting better arguments. These efforts led to very few returns. Journal rejections became personal, and I became cynical about PE fit research. I started to feel exhausted when even thinking about research, which spilled over into my teaching. To stop the downward spiral, I did what a lot of misfits do: I took my toys out of the PE fit sandbox and moved them into another, really, really nearby sandbox (job embeddedness). I made a lot of noise about the reasons for changing sandboxes, but who listens to a self-proclaimed misfit? Who is to say I mistook misfit for a lack of success? Who is to say I objectively lacked fit?

In the job embeddedness (JE) sandbox I played quite happily, crafting my previous PE fit research into JE research. Then I met Jon at a conference (probably in a session where I was offering sharp criticism), and he told me I was mistaken about my misfit beliefs. I met some of his doctoral students while presenting JE research, and we had some invigorating discussions. My friend, colleague, and often coauthor, Jonathon Halbesleben, thought my ideas about PE fit might be theoretically framed in Conservation of Resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1988, 1989). Suddenly, I had several sources of support, and I have started conducting PE fit research again,

this time with what I feel are better results. It seems that now my research investments are paying greater dividends. I have now fully reengaged.

Why would I convey this inane story of my own perceived misfit? First, I believe that PE fit and misfit are highly personal and idiosyncratic experiences. Most of us who have experienced both fit and misfit understand how personal these experiences can be. Second, I have just outlined in COR terms what I think people do when experiencing PE fit and misfit.

At an AOM symposium on misfit this past summer in Montreal, three important events occurred that will shape how I approach this paper. First, the organizer of the misfit symposium, Jon Billsberry, wore what appeared to be a Hawaiian shirt and I think flip flops. Fitting for a symposium on misfit. Second, an unnamed audience member fell asleep during most of my presentation, which I presumed happened out of boredom. My research has always had a sedative effect. Third, the session discussant, Amy Kristof-Brown, emphasized we need to clearly define what we mean by "fit" and "misfit". She noted how fortunate we were to have started this discussion now so we as a field might avoid the fragmentation seen in the PE fit literatures. You will hopefully find this paper more conversational, as opposed to academic in approach. I don't want anyone to fall asleep while reading this paper, and I would like to help continue the conversation about how we define our constructs. Therefore, I begin by asking you "Which of these is not like the others: PE fit, lack of PE fit, and misfit."

I have no firm response to this question, nor should you expect me to have one. I think it implausible for one person or one group of researchers to answer this question in one paper or conference presentation. One unorthodoxy you might notice in this paper is my purposeful neglect of numerous citations. We have rich literatures, so I can either cite the comprehensive reviews and meta analyses of PE fit (e.g., Edwards, 2008; Kristof, 1996; Arthur et al., 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) and make you reread those articles, or I can include so many citations that the reference section of this paper will exceed the length of the body of this paper. I choose relative paucity (more than ten citations, which is still too many), and I apologize if anyone takes offense. These rich PE fit literatures give us a frame of reference for understanding PE fit. However, this frame of reference, while useful, anchors us to what we know about PE fit. This frame of reference might not completely apply to misfit. The assumption we make about misfit is it represents the obverse of fit, yet our theories do not account for misfit (Edwards, 2008). It could be the theories we apply to PE fit need modifications to explain misfit, but it could also be we need novel theories that can account for both PE fit and misfit. At the 3rd Global e-Conference on Fit, Jonathon Halbesleben and I introduced a COR perspective of PE fit. While some might not find our perspective useful beyond other theories applied to PE fit, we argue COR integrates existing PE fit theories and empirical evidence with the added benefit of explaining misfit. If nothing else in this paper, I hope to get you thinking...or as Jon Billsberry likes to say...mulling.

A brief primer on COR

I summarize the basic tenets of COR (Hobfoll, 1988, 1989, 2001). Resources consist of "objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies that are valued by the individual" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). Furthermore, people idiosyncratically value resources, so each person lives within unique resource and demand environments. While heavily utilized in stress, burnout, and well-being research, COR is a general motivation theory of human behavior based on the following tenets:

- People have a motive to protect existing resources against actual or threatened loss (termed 'Primacy of Loss Principle').
- People possess a motive to invest resources as a means to gain more resources (termed 'Resource Investment Principle').
- Those with more resources are in a better position to mitigate and are resilient to resource loss.
- People with an excess of one resource can bundle other resources around it to create a resource caravan. Excess resources are invested to create a resource gain spiral where gain begets gain.
- Those lacking resources tend to make poor investment decisions. This leads to a resource loss spiral where loss begets loss.

In total, COR describes how people accumulate, protect, and invest resources as a means to meet the demands to the environment. When people cannot protect or replenish resources, they experience stress. Chronic stress will result in burnout and a host of deleterious outcomes. When people successfully protect, accumulate, and invest resources, they experience myriad positive outcomes. COR emphasizes an interaction between the person and environment, as both the person and environment can influence the other in the continuous resource management process.

COR applied to PE Fit

A COR view of PE fit suggests assessments of PE fit reflect the extent to which we believe we have the personal resources or can find resources in the environment to meet the demands of our work environments. When we experience PE fit (e.g., adequate or excess resources), we feel satisfied, committed, and engaged. We likely exhibit increased in- and extra-role performance. We do not want to leave this environment, as leaving would threaten our resources. Conversely, when we lack PE fit, we cannot find resources in the environment or must solely rely on personal resources to meet the demands of work. When we lack fit, we feel dissatisfied and uncommitted. We will feel stress and experience burnout. We will not invest our resources into extra-role behaviors. When we lack PE fit, we want to leave this environment to find one that better fits our idiosyncratic resource needs. And what about misfit? Misfit might occur when our varied resource needs come into conflict in the person-environment interaction (e.g., low PO fit and high PJ fit) or when our resource needs are only partially met. It's not that we lack fit as much as we want more fit. Maybe this is too fine a line between lack of PE fit and misfit, but consider the following example.

My employer offers onsite childcare, which signals two PE fit resources available in the environment. One is the actual childcare resource (e.g., a benefit). The second is the cultural value my employer signals (work-family balance). These environment resources add to and match my personal resources. We have PE fit. However, my wife stays at home with our children. So the environment only offers one resource (values), which I appreciate and add to my personal resources. But now the other resource isn't available to me in a way that I can use, and my employer doesn't offer other work-family benefits I can use (e.g., flexitime or telecommuting). My other resources then become threatened as I try to balance my work and home lives. This seems to be misfit to me. On the other hand, what if I did not have children or similar family obligations? Both environmental resources lack salience. I might appreciate the

resources if I am even aware of them, but these resources hold little meaning. There is no congruence. To me this seems like a lack of PE fit.

While some outcomes of lack of PE fit and misfit are likely the same (e.g., stress, burnout, etc.), some of the outcomes might differ. Should I lack PE fit, the highest return on investment behavior might be to find a better environment. The environment is void of salient resources, so I have no interest to invest my resources to change the environment. Doing so would threaten my resources. On the other hand, should I experience misfit, I have previously argued (Wheeler et al., 2007) and highlighted in the opening paragraphs of this paper that I might pursue different options. I might engage in what PE fit researchers might describe as complementary PE fit seeking. I might become vocal about what changes need to be made. I might adapt to the environment by engaging in job crafting (Lyons, 2008; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Literally, I might incrementally change my job or local environment until resources align. I might engage in supplementary PE fit seeking, too. I might engage in impression management to try and match the environment. Or I might simply hope the misfit goes away and ignore it.

I hope at this point you are thinking “Wait a minute, wouldn’t someone lacking PE fit do these same things?” Possibly. However, I refer back to the Primacy of Loss and Resource Investment tenets of COR. When resources lack saliency, your resources are not threatened and you would not view investments of your resources into this environment as high return on investment behaviors. That would only serve to threaten resources you do find salient.

And what about complementary PE fit? You might construe complementary PE fit as both fit and misfit. For instance, if I engage in job crafting, I have certain KSAs that do not match but complement the environment; yet by successfully crafting my job, I will achieve supplementary PE fit over time. Adding to and receiving unique characteristics from the environment might fit my idiosyncratic resource needs, yet at the same time I do not match the environment. I literally misfit, which I and my employer might like. Can misfit occur because of competing complementary and supplementary PE fit motives?

Are you still mulling? I am too. So let me briefly list a few research areas of interests and questions I think about when differentiating between PE fit, lack of PE fit, and misfit.

1) Idiosyncratic Resources

How important are the different conceptualizations or dimensions of PE fit (e.g., PO fit, PV fit, PG fit, etc.) to how we describe who we are? Does misfit occur because of cognitive dissonance between competing resources we value but can't equally find in the environment? What if I love working for an organization because of its social mission but feel underemployed and underpaid as a result?

2) Multidimensionality and Time

How do the resources I value change over time, even brief periods of time, and how does this affect my behaviors? How rapidly or cyclically do I assess PE fit? Do resource shocks on non-salient resources matter to me?

3) Saliency

Related to the previous questions, how does dimensionality of PE fit affect how we assess both PE fit and misfit? Do we weight resources equally? Do we assess PE fit or misfit based upon only the most salient resource? If so, do we ignore other PE fit dimensions or sources of fit or misfit? Does our focus on the most salient dimension of PE fit cause us to behave in ways that threaten non-salient resources?

4) Measuring Misfit

Do our existing measures of PE fit capture misfit? In order to assess misfit, do we have to develop measures assessing misfit across dimensions of PE fit? In my opinion, the organizational cultural profile (OCP; O'Reilly et al., 1991) measures both saliency and congruence of PE fit. Do we develop similar measures of misfit?

5) Predisposition

Does someone who scores highly on positive affect fundamentally view PE fit and misfit differently? Does a person who scores highly on negative affect see the world as nothing but misfit? What does this mean for the misfit and the employer?

6) Attribution (e.g., It's your fault, Mr/s. Employer)

How does attribution affect how we assess PE fit and misfit? To whom or what do we attribute misfit? What are the consequences of this attribution? How does it influence subsequent behaviors?

7) Turnover and Retention

If misfits do not leave the organization, what do they do to stay? How long can a misfit remain in an organization? What are the outcomes of misfits staying? Do organizations value misfits? What is the difference between misfit and complementary PE fit?

My Evolving Response

My thoughts on PE fit, lack of PE fit, and misfit continue to evolve. This speaks to the challenge any of us who want to do research on these issues face. While I previously thought misfit represented the lack of PE fit (e.g., the polar opposite of PE fit), I now lean toward misfit representing a distinct construct. I cannot wait to hear what others think about this topic, and I have a sincere hope our discussions here will help us to clarify how we think about these constructs. None of us own this topic, and I want to encourage as many divergent viewpoints on this topic as possible. I might be completely wrong about my thoughts on this topic, as I've found it so easy to spin myself into a circle thinking about this topic. We have a challenge ahead of us, and I am glad to be with you all on trying to figure out which of these is not like the others. Most importantly, I hope you are still awake.

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