From Static to Dynamic Approaches to Person-Environment Fit Research

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The question of how people fit in jobs, work groups, and organizations has become one of the central themes in the organizational behavior literature (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). From the Theory of Work Adjustment to Attraction-Selection-Attrition theory, the concept of person-environment fit has proved a fruitful stimulus to research. However, theory and research on person-environment fit has not fully accounted for the ways that fit is initially developed, grows over time, or decreases. Research has also not attended to dynamic employee reactions to their levels of fit, as an initial evaluation of fit may lead to either a trajectory of increasing or decreasing commitment behavior. The goal of this brief address is to encourage researchers to move from static person-environment theories to dynamic theories that address how persons and environments shape one another over time.

I'll begin by describing some of the major principles that have emerged in person-environment fit theory already, primarily to highlight the tacit assumption of stability in individuals, environments, and reactions to environments in these theories. Next, I'll describe some conceptual considerations that will be required for a dynamic theory of person-environment fit, including the need to measure variables over time, the need to specify the functional form of the relationship between variables and time, and the need to conduct appropriate analyses. Finally, I'll conclude by discussing some specific areas where we might see dynamic theories of individuals and environments begin to play themselves out in the future. The first area for future research I address is the ways that fit between individuals and environments might change over time. The second area for future research I address is the ways that judgments of fit might lead to processes that unfold over time. These sections are necessarily speculative and exploratory, and are not at all intended to be exhaustive. The goal is to provide a stimulus for future research.

Current state of the field

To date, most of the research on person-environment fit has come from those who see both individuals and organizations as stable, unchanging entities. Individuals have certain inherent personality characteristics, abilities, and preferences and these intersect with the enduring characteristics of organizations. For example, in attraction-selection-attrition theory, the characteristics of organizational founders lead them to select those who have similar characteristics, and those whose characteristics don't fit the environment will leave (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). There is little sense of change in individuals or environments in this theory. If there is a match between who individuals are and what organizations want, and vice versa, then fit has occurred and will endure over time. The persistence of organizational cultures (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003) and the impressive literature on the stability of individual personality over time (e.g., Roberts, O'Donnell, & Robins, 2004) suggest that there is value in this perspective.

However, an alternative perspective also should be considered, a perspective that sees fit as something slowly achieved as individuals and environments adapt themselves to one another. Consider, for example, how a new employee might slowly find his or her values

changing to match those of the work group as the worker endeavors to increase his or her fit with the environment. Alternatively, consider how an employee who comes into conflict with co-workers might increasingly recognize the differences between his or her personality and values and the personality and values of co-workers. In addition, fit perceptions probably do not have the same effect on outcomes over time. For example, fit might lead to progressions of behavior over time as employees either increase their participation in an environment that they see as fitting with their characteristics, or decrease their participation in an environment that doesn't fit with their characteristics. Both changes in fit over time, and changes in behavior over time based on fit therefore should be considered.

The dynamic imperative

What are the implications of a dynamic perspective on fit for organizational scholars? First and foremost, dynamic theories require thinking about variables that are most likely to change. As noted earlier, most research does suggest that personality traits do persist over time with minimal shifts due to life events. Similarly, organizational structures and overarching values probably adapt very slowly in response to employees and environments. Measuring changes in these variables over time is unlikely to lead to many insights about the dynamics of fit. However, other variables like contextually-based values (e.g., the value placed on meeting certain organizational goals), adaptive behaviors, interpersonal relationships, or work habits may be where dynamic processes can be captured.

Second, dynamic fit theories will require researchers to adopt more dynamic hypotheses. In their review of dynamic mediated relationships, Pitariu and Ployhart (2010) review a variety of concerns that theorists need to address when considering dynamic relationships. Theories that address dynamic relationships, unlike static hypotheses, need to address timing, duration, and shape of the relationship between variables over time. Timing concerns when dynamic relationships occur. In the fit context, we might expect that changes in perceptions of fit with the environment will be accompanied by subsequent changes in attitudes, which will then be followed in time by behavioral responses. Duration concerns how long the relationship will occur. For fit relationships, one might expect that first impressions of an organization's culture are likely to exert an especially strong influence on perceived fit over the first few months on the job, and then the influence of these first impressions might weaken. A poor performance review might similarly be expected to decrease perceived person-job fit for a period of weeks or months, after which the effects of this particular event will fade. Shape refers to whether the theory expects there to be a linear or curvilinear relationship between constructs. In the fit literature, researchers might expect that fit will either increase or decrease rapidly early on in organizational tenure as newcomers learn about their organization, supervisor, workgroup, and co-workers, and then fit perceptions will settle in to a more stable pattern over time.

Third, dynamic theories require dynamic data collection and analysis strategies. Repeated measures designs have grown in popularity within the organizational sciences, helping us to refine our theories about how initial conditions lead to changes in the level and slope of employee attitudes. Researchers interested in tracking employee fit or the consequences of fit over time will need to contemplate the appropriate spacing between observations. Do we expect fit to change over weeks, months, or years? A lack of dynamic data makes it difficult to say for certain what the appropriate spacing between measures should be, and researchers will need to use theory to guide their choices until more evidence is gathered.

Examples of research involving changes in person environment fit

Having suggested that there is a need for research examining the dynamics of change, are there any specific examples that come to mind that have illustrated how individuals' evaluations of fit change in response to changes in their environments? In this section I'll suggest a small number of possible areas for changes in person-environment fit, although I'm sure that most readers will readily be able to think of others.

Much of the dynamic research in the field of organizational behavior has come from affective events theory (AET) (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). According to AET, individual attitudes towards work are shaped by events in the environment. Fit is generally thought of as a cognitive appraisal of the concordance between a person's characteristics and environments, with emotional attitudes towards the work flowing from these cognitive appraisals. Thus, fit might serve as a mediating construct between cognitively appraised organizational or job events and changes in employee attitudes. Research has shown that moods and emotions are shaped by events, but there is still little research showing how perceptions of fit might also be shaped by events. For example, a critical positive or negative event in organizational policy (e.g., downsizing, actions to improve environmental impact of operations, revelations of misbehavior from top executives, bringing a new line of innovative products to market) might lead employees to re-evaluate their level of fit with the organization's values.

Cable and Parsons (2001) give an alternative model of fit development, showing how fit perceptions can change as worker tenure changes. They examined how person-environment fit levels changed over time in response to organizational socialization programs. To test their hypotheses, the authors distributed surveys regarding values prior to job search, then again at a future point in time after employees had a chance to work in their jobs. Content and social aspects of organizational socialization both resulted in higher levels of person-organization fit. In this case, the perception of fit between individuals and the environment was shaped by specific actions taken by the organization to change the values of employees.

One interesting implication of dynamic fit theory is that the very meaning of "fit" could be time dependent. Using a dynamic theory of commitment formation, Lance, Vandenberg, and Self (2000) used latent growth modeling to demonstrate how employee commitment levels change over time. Their research suggests that in addition to values changing evaluative person-environment fit, the nature of subjective appraisals of person-environment fit also can change over time. In the early relationship process, employees may have a more transactive view of fit between themselves and environments, such that fit is largely a matter of the material rewards and demands of the job being consistent with one another. Later in relationships, employees may take a more relational-based view of fit between themselves and environments, such that fit is more of a matter of fit between one's values and goals and the broader goals and values of the organization, supervisor, and work group.

As a result of my own research focus, I have probably overemphasized the role of dynamics in organizational socialization processes. There are other areas besides the growth of fit among newcomers that could equally benefit from a dynamic view. In particular, there might be interest in examining how perceived fit can decline over time as workgroup membership changes or task demands change.

Examples of research involving changes in response to person environment fit

In addition to considering how individual perceptions of fit change in response to changes in the environment, it's also worth considering how individual adaptations to levels of fit are time-dependent.

One might expect that initial perceptions of similarity or difference will have a main effect on fit, which might lead to an increasing set of behaviors that signal withdrawal from the environment as evidenced by research showing that employees who are initially dissatisfied with their work environments show an increasing trend in both their intention to turnover and their job search behaviors (Kammeyer-Mueller, Wanberg, Glomb, & Ahlburg, 2005). However, research has not examined how initial perceptions of fit shape dynamic reactions to the environment.

Work habits and routines, seldom assessed in the organizational sciences, are likely to be highly situationally variable and reflective of the context in which they occur. For example, a person who perceives that he or she has a good level of fit with his or her work group will develop a set of habits that increasingly put them in proximity to these co-workers, which in turn will further facilitate fit. On the other hand, a person who does not feel like he or she fits will develop habits to limit social interactions with co-workers, thus further setting the stage for future reductions in fit.

In other cases, individuals who feel that there is a poor fit between themselves and the environment might make active efforts to change the environment over time. For example, a person who perceives there is a poor fit between his or her abilities and the demands of the job might develop plans to increase his or her skill set progressively over time. These changes can also be prospective, based on an estimate of fit with an environment one does not currently occupy. For example, a person might estimate that there is a good likelihood of fit between his or her abilities and a job further up the promotion ladder in the organization, and will therefore take a series of actions (e.g., first improve skill sets, then make others aware of these skill sets) to increase fit with this future job.

Conclusion

In sum, there are clearly a variety of directions that might be profitably explored to improve our understanding of person-environment fit from a dynamic perspective. This brief introduction to some of these issues will hopefully spur researchers to consider how to integrate a dynamic conceptualization of person environment fit into their research. I look forward to seeing how researchers develop dynamic theories of fit in the future.

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