

Developing Perceptions of Person-Environment Fit: Exploring the Role of Affective, Cognitive and Behavioral Triggers Using a Weekly Diary Study

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Over the past two decades, considerable research attention has been devoted to the study of P-E fit, which has produced important insights into the relationship between fit and a wide array of affective, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Despite this progress, many challenging questions remain, in particular those relating to the experience of fit – also referred to as *perceived fit*. Although the longstanding assumption has been that perceived fit embodies the cognitive representation of P-E interactions, recent studies propose that fit perceptions may be the outcome of psychological processes that are more dynamic and complex than has been assumed thus far (DeRue & Morgeson, 2007; Edwards et al., 2006; Gabriel et al., 2014; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). In line with a growing body of evidence showing that many organizational behavior constructs show sizable levels of within-person variability (Dalal & Hulin, 2008), results from a recent experience sampling study suggests that individuals perceive variable levels of fit too across different situations – with ICC₁ values ranging from 22.05 to 32.41 depending on the type of fit (Gabriel et al., 2014). Arguably, these fluctuations are closely tied to the complex nature of perceived fit, which is assumed to be colored by various affective and cognitive factors (Billsberry et al., 2005; Edwards et al., 2006; Judge & Cable, 1997). Yet, little work has been done to explore these intra-individual changes in perceived fit, and a theoretical logic regarding how and why factors other than P and E influence these perceptions is still missing (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Consequently, we still do not know *what* perceived fit actually represents, *how* these perceptions form, and *why* they change over time, because answering these questions necessitates an important methodological shift from a between-person to a within-person level of analyses (Collins, 2006; Roe, 2008).

Theoretical Framework

The Manifestation of Fit Perceptions

Theoretically, perceived fit is believed to result from perceptions of the objective person and environment, which are cognitively compared to determine perceived fit (French, Caplan, & Harrison, 1982; Kristof, 1996). Edwards and others however explicitly challenged this assumption, and argued instead that perceptions of fit tap into other psychological processes than merely the perceptions of person and environment (Edwards et al., 2006; Judge, 2007; Judge & Cable, 1997; Kristof, 1996; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). In this respect, Shipp and Jansen (2011) recently theorized that fit perceptions are subject to cognitive crafting. In fact, individuals are believed to craft and recraft stories or “narratives” of fit on a continuous basis, as these personal stories help individuals to understand and make sense of their experiences at work. These fit narratives thus serve as an interpretive lens on the environment and help employees to

answer the “why” question of fit (Shipp & Jansen, 2011: 80). Building upon affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), sense making theory (Louis, 1980), and self-perception theory (Bem, 1967, 1972), we suggest that individuals engage in a continuous process of context-self comparisons based on (a) affective cues (operationalized as emotional states), (b) cognitive cues (operationalized as self-appraised task performance and PC breach), and (c) behavioral cues (operationalized as OCB) that are embedded within their own work experiences. The subjective processing of such cues results in dynamic fit experiences that do not necessarily manifest as a result of what happens in the objective sense, but are rather based on employees’ idiosyncratic reconstructions of past events or experiences – i.e., by making sense of the feelings, thoughts, and behavior these experiences elicited.

Hypothesis 1: Weekly affect is positively related to weekly fit perceptions

Hypothesis 2: Weekly self-appraised task performance is positively related to weekly fit perceptions

Hypothesis 3: Weekly PC breach is negatively related to weekly fit perceptions

Hypothesis 4: Weekly OCB is positively related to weekly fit perceptions

Method

Procedure and Participants

We collected data from employees from various industry sectors in Belgium by means of snowball sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In so, we specifically targeted employees who worked at least part-time (i.e., at least 50% of full-time employment) and held exactly one paid job. Respondents were asked to fill out a weekly questionnaire during twelve consecutive work weeks between February and August 2015. Weekly scores for the substantive variables were recorded only if participants did not miss more than two working days during the reference period (i.e., the past work week). Our final sample comprised 160 respondents and 1531 out of a maximum of 1920 (160 participants x 12 weeks) usable data points, which equals a response rate of 79.74 percent. More than half of the respondents were female (56.30 %). Mean age of the sample was 35 years ($SD = 10.08$), ranging from 20 to 62 years.

Analytical Strategy

In this study, we were interested in the concurrent and lagged relationships between affect, self-appraised task performance, PC breach, OCB-O and perceptions of fit. Concurrent relationships refer to momentary relationships between affect, cognition, and behavior at time t and fit perceptions at time t when controlling for past fit perceptions at time $t-1$. As Finkel (1995) argued, predictors sometimes influence outcomes in a synchronous way in that these predictor-outcome relationships only unfold over a very short period, or even within the same time window. In this study, the presence of significant concurrent relationships would indicate that perceptions of fit manifest as a result of affective, cognitive, and behavioral cues within the same week. Lagged relationships refer to the relationships between affect, cognition, and behavior at time $t-1$ and fit perceptions at time t when controlling for past fit perceptions at time

t-1. In this study, the presence of significant lagged relationships would point to a continued influence of affective, cognitive, and behavioral cues on employees' fit perceptions up to one week later.

Given the nested structure of our data, we estimated intra-class correlation coefficients (ICC) for all variables in order to justify the need for a multilevel model approach. For the different fit perceptions, ICC values were .25 (value fit), .28 (DA fit) and .26 (NS fit). For the predictors, ICC values were .37 (affect), .45 (self-appraised task performance), .75 (PC breach), and .29 (OCB-O). The results hence indicate that the largest proportion of the observed variance could be attributed to within-person fluctuations – which justifies a multilevel approach (Hox, 2010). We therefore estimated 2-level concurrent and lagged models for each separate fit outcome. Conform the recommendations of Enders and Tofighi (2007), the level-1 independent variables were person-mean centered.

Results

The results of our multilevel analyses are reported in Table 1. We first turn to the results of the concurrent models, i.e., the relationships between affect, self-appraised task performance, PC breach, and OCB-O at week *t* with fit perceptions during the same week *t*. In line with hypothesis 1, a significant positive relationship between affect and all three forms of fit perceptions was found. Thus, employees who reported a more positive affect during a certain week *t* also reported higher perceptions of value fit, demands-abilities fit, and needs-supply fit during the same week *t*. Hypothesis 2 predicted a positive relationship between self-appraised task performance and employees' fit perceptions. Table 1 shows that this is the case for perceptions of demands-ability fit and needs-supply fit, but not for value fit. Hence, hypothesis 2 was only partially supported. Similarly, also hypothesis 3 was only partially supported since we only found a significant negative relationship between PC breach and perceptions of value fit and needs-supply fit, but not demands-ability fit. Finally, and in line with hypothesis 4, a significant positive relationship between OCB-O and all three forms of fit perceptions was found. Next, we turn to the results of the lagged models. Table 1 shows that none of our lagged models is significant. Thus, no significant relationships between affect, self-appraised task performance, PC breach, and OCB-O at week *t*-1 and fit perceptions at week *t* were found. Hence, whereas hypotheses 1-4 were partially or fully supported for the concurrent models, they are rejected for the lagged models.

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to explain how weekly perceptions of fit manifest as a function of affective, cognitive, and behavioral cues that are present in the work environment. Overall, affect and OCB-O proved to be the most influential and consistent predictors of employees' weekly fit perceptions. Remarkable was the absence of any lagged relationships between affect, self-appraised task performance, PC breach and OCB-O, and employees' perceptions of fit. The absence of lagged effects indicates that the temporal relationships between affect, cognition, behavior, and fit perceptions likely unfolds over a different time span than one week. Theoretically, one possible explanation could be that perceptions of fit are highly stable and only change very slowly over time, which would imply that a time lag of one week is too short for affective, cognitive, and behavioral stimuli to influence employees' perceptions of fit.

This explanation is however contradicted by the outcomes of the ICC₁ scores for fit – which suggest that majority of the variance in fit perceptions is situated on the within-person level – and the lack of significant relationships between fit on week *t*-1 and fit on week *t*, which in combination suggest that fit perceptions are anything but stable and instead show unpredictable fluctuations from one week to the next. Therefore, and more likely, the influence of affect, cognition and behavior on perceptions of fit seems *short-termed* or even synchronous in nature. This implies that perceptions of fit are highly intertwined with employees’ work experiences within the same time window. Hence, when these work experiences change, so do employees’ perceptions of fit, and new work experiences may compensate for, or even erase, the effect of previous work experiences.

Table 1

Effects of Affective, Cognitive and Behavioral Cues on Perceptions of Fit^a

Model variables	Value fit		DA fit		NS fit	
	Concurrent	Lagged	Concurrent	Lagged	Concurrent	Lagged
Value _{<i>t</i>-1}	.08	.12*	-	-	-	-
DA _{<i>t</i>-1}	-	-	-.03	-.03	-	-
NS _{<i>t</i>-1}	-	-	-	-	.06	.07
Linear trend	-.08*	-.07*	-.04	-.03	-.03	-.01
Affect	.30***	.02	.25***	.04	.36***	.08*
Task performance	.02	.01	.13**	.08*	.11**	.04
PC breach	-.10**	.02	-.06*	-.01	-.07*	-.02
OCB-O	.22***	.03	.14***	-.00	.16***	.00
<i>R</i> ²	.26***	.05	.19***	.04	.25***	.02

^a **p* ≤ .05; ***p* ≤ .01; ****p* ≤ .001

Implications for the Literature

First, the present study contributes to our understanding of how fit perceptions form and change over time. In line with Shipp and Jansen’s (2011) conceptualization of fit narratives, individuals seem to engage in a recursive sense making process that is triggered by the affective, cognitive, and behavioral information embedded within their own work experiences. In turn, the subjective processing of these informational cues results in time-bound fit perceptions. The fact that affect plays an important role in this fit formation process should come as no surprise (e.g., Edwards et al., 2006; Gabriel et al., 2014). It is, however, noteworthy that other factors that are traditionally considered to be outcomes of perceived fit, such as task performance and OCB-O (e.g., Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) also influence these perceptions of fit. Moreover, the absence of any significant time-lagged relationships suggests that employees’ fit perceptions are directly related to their subjective work experiences within that very same week.

Second, the results of our study indicate that fit perceptions are dynamic and change over a relatively short time frame (i.e., a week or less). These results are in line

with earlier findings by Gabriel and colleagues (2014), who found perceptions of fit to fluctuate within individuals throughout the course of a single day. These results show that perceived fit is a dynamic concept, which conflicts with the rather static conceptualizations of fit that have been dominating the fit literature thus far.

Third, still little is known about the meaning of perceived fit, what its components are, and how this concept differs from more atomistic measures of PE fit (Edwards et al., 2006; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). Our findings ascribe to Edwards' claim that perceptions of fit do not result from a systematic combination of the perceived person and environment. Rather, perceived fit seems to represent a highly situational, psychological, and differentially weighted approximation of PE fit which taps into persons' experienced congruence with the work environment. However, in contrast to Edwards' conception, it incorporates more than affect alone.