

A Perfect Match is Hard to Find: Dealing with Misfit at Work from a Conservation of Resource Perspective

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Extensive research linked person-environment fit (PE fit) to work attitudes, performance, retention, and employee health (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) broadly defined PE fit as “the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched” (p. 281). Although research on fit is diverse and substantial, research on the misfit is scarce (Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013). PE misfit has only recently received attention, and a consistent definition has still to be found (Billsberry & Cooman, 2010; Ostroff, 2012). Like others, we operationalized misfit as lack of fit (Wheeler, Coleman Gallagher, Brouer, & Sablinski, 2007). Specifically, we focused on employee’ judgements of value (in)congruence which is mostly used to define person-organization fit (PO fit) and is also applied in studies on workgroups (i.e., PG fit; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Despite research on the Attraction-Selection-Attrition framework (Schneider, 1987) suggesting that “misfits” will eventually leave the organization (e.g., Jackson et al., 1991), we know little about how employees deal with misfit, although this might alter the effects on work outcomes such as employee well-being. Accordingly, the following questions remain to be answered: “If misfits do not leave the organization, what do they do to stay? [...] What are the outcomes of misfits staying?” (Wheeler, 2010, p. 5).

To answer these questions, we draw on conservation of resources theory (COR), which suggests that employees are motivated to retain resources and that the perception of resource loss leads to stress (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). Wheeler, Halbesleben, and Shanine (2012) argue that all forms of PE fit can be seen as resources and that misfit results in stress and negative outcomes as a valuable resource is threatened. In line with this notion, research has established value (in)congruence as antecedents to employee stress and health (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). As the perception of misfit likely induces stress, we expect it to affect employee well-being, to which we refer as psychological and physical health (Edwards, 1992). Well-being is indicated by emotional exhaustion and affective commitment (Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016).

COR further posits that employees, who perceive PE misfit would be motivated to invest remaining resources to increase their fit and eliminate the perceived cause of their misfit to achieve positive outcomes (Wheeler et al., 2012). Thus, we argue that “misfits” will engage in some kind of coping behavior to reduce their lack of fit. This may entail actions intended to change themselves or the environment to restore their PE fit (Ostroff, 2012). This research concentrates on two ways of dealing with misfit brought forward by Wheeler et al. (2012): cognitive adaptation (i.e., positive reframing) and impression management (i.e., facades of conformity). Impression management is expected to be a more ineffective strategy to deal with misfit and result in more detrimental effects on employee well-being than cognitive adaptation as it drains more resources (Wheeler et al., 2012). Thus, the topic of dealing with PE misfit has yet to receive empirical validation, which is the purpose of the present research.

The present research has three goals with which we contribute to the person-environment literature. First, drawing upon COR, we add to a deeper understanding of the conditions under which misfit has detrimental effects on employee well-being. Second, we empirically test the hypothesized relationships between the variables depicted in Figure 1 with two field studies: a multilevel team study (Study 1) and a study with two measurement points (Study 2). Third, we explore the differential effects of two misfit dimensions, namely person-group misfit, and person-organization misfit in values.

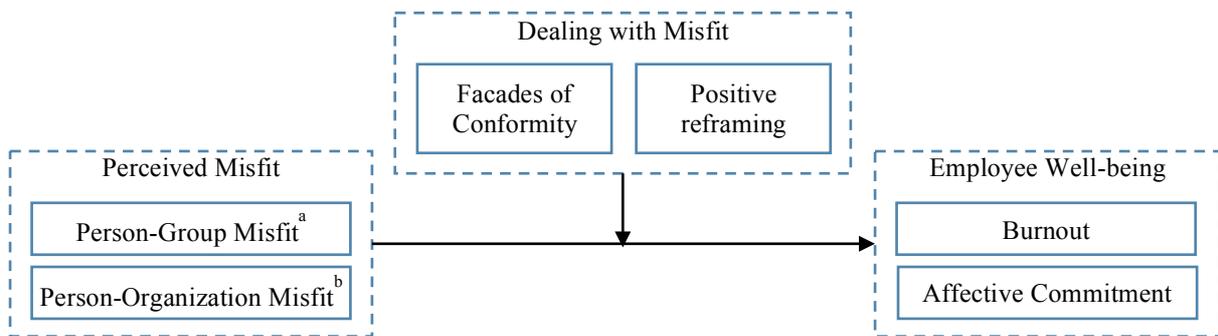


Figure 1. Proposed model linking perceived misfit and employee well-being.
^a Variable in Study 1. ^b Variable in Study 2.

Methods

Design

We tested our assumptions with two field studies. In Study 1 we collected data from 145 team members and their supervisors (50 workgroups). Data collection took place in two organizations (one situated in the healthcare the other in the non-profit sector providing educational, health and hospitality services) and one convenience sample.

In Study 2 we collected data from 177 employees of a convenience sample at two points in time via two online surveys. At Time 1 we assessed the predictor, the moderators and employees' demographics. Two weeks after the first questionnaire was filled out the employees received an invitation to take part in the second survey, where they evaluated the outcomes.

Measures

We assessed perceived PG (mis)fit (Study 1) with three items from Kristof-Brown, Seong, Degeest, Park, and Hong's (2014) scale and perceived PO (mis)fit (Study 2) with Cable and DeRue's (2002) scale. In Study 1 we used three items and in Study 2 five items from Hewlin (2009) to measure facades of conformity. We adapted the items from Knoll, Rieckmann, and Schwarzer (2005) to assess positive reframing. We assessed affective commitment with three items from Meyer, Allen, and Smith (1993). To measure emotional exhaustion we utilized four items of the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (Study 1; Demerouti, 1999) and five items of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Study 2; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). All responses were made on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach's alphas ranged from .68 to .90.

Results

Study 1

Since in our data employees are nested within work groups, we used HLM 7 (Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 2008) two-level hierarchical modeling. Table 1 and 2 depict the results. The findings showed that PG misfit was significantly associated with affective commitment and emotional exhaustion in the proposed direction, supporting our hypothesis.

The findings show (marginal) positive main effects for positive reframing on affective commitment and facades of conformity on emotional exhaustion. Against propositions, we found no significant moderation effects on affective commitment. However, for emotional exhaustion, the results confirm our hypotheses, as both interaction effects were significant. Simple slope analysis showed that when high or low levels of facades of conformity or high levels of positive reframing are shown, PG misfit related to emotional exhaustion (see Figure 2 and 3).

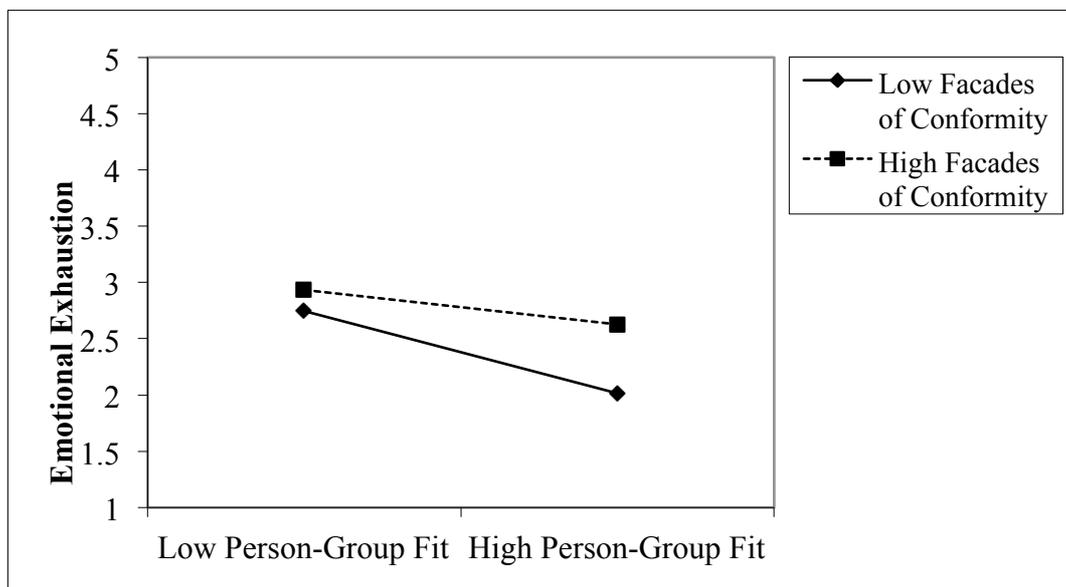


Figure 2. Moderation effect of facades of conformity on the relation between PG misfit and emotional exhaustion in Study 1. The simple slope for 1 SD above the mean was -0.24 ($SE = 0.11$, $z = 2.19$, $p < .05$) and for 1 SD below the mean was -0.56 ($SE = 0.13$, $z = -4.50$, $p < .001$).

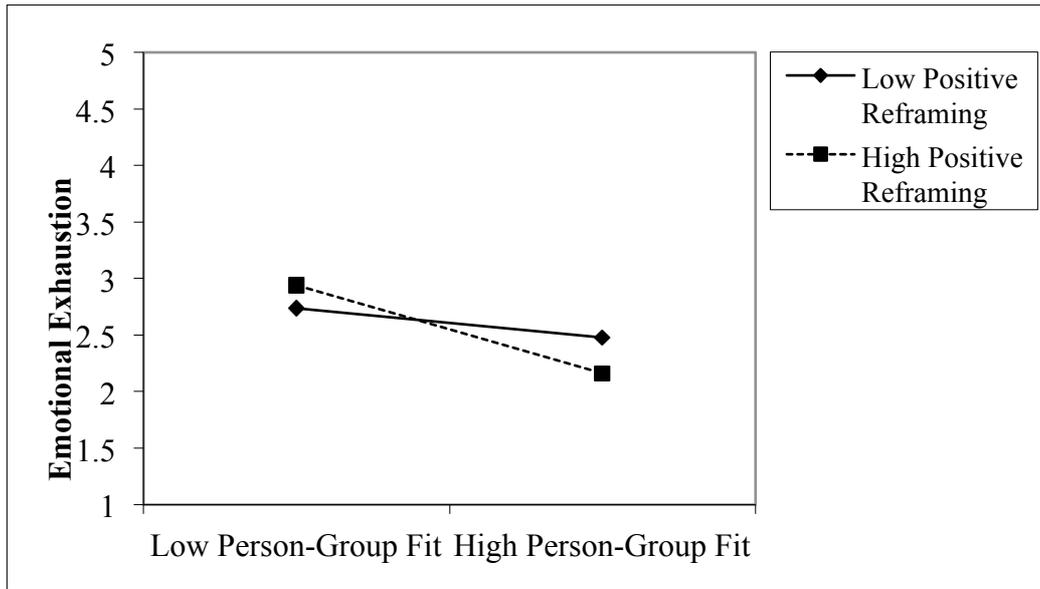


Figure 3. Moderation effect of positive reframing on the relation between PG misfit and emotional exhaustion in Study 1. The simple slope for 1 SD above the mean was -0.59 ($SE = 0.12$, $z = -5.02$, $p < .001$) and for 1 SD below the mean was -0.20 ($SE = 0.13$, $z = -1.48$, $p > .10$).

Table 1
Multilevel Estimates for Models Predicting Employee Affective Commitment.

	Null Model			Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>	Estimate	SE	<i>t</i>
Intercept	3.57	0.10	36.81***	3.33	0.20	16.67***	3.37	0.20	17.06***	3.35	0.19	17.31***	3.33	0.19	17.24***
Clinical Sample				-0.60	0.20	-2.99**	-0.55	0.20	-2.77**	-0.56	0.20	-2.83**	-0.54	0.20	-2.69*
Position tenure				0.02	0.01	1.77†	0.02	0.01	1.95†	0.02	0.01	2.02*	0.02	0.01	1.90†
Interaction time with supervisor				0.08	0.05	1.78†	0.07	0.05	1.54	0.07	0.04	1.68†	0.08	0.04	1.82†
Educational level				0.06	0.15	0.40	0.01	0.15	0.09	0.03	0.15	0.21	0.04	0.15	0.29
Person-group Fit							0.22	0.11	2.09*	0.19	0.11	1.82†	0.20	0.11	1.92†
Facades of conformity										-0.24	0.09	-2.85	-0.25	0.08	-2.89**
Positive Reframing										0.13	0.07	1.86†	0.11	0.07	1.60
Person-group Fit x Facades of conformity													-0.17	0.11	-1.57
Person-group Fit x Positive Reframing													0.14	0.10	1.31
-2xlog			366.32			349.51			345.19			336.29			332.95
Δ-2xlog						16.81**			4.32*			8.90*			3.34
<i>df</i>						5.00			1.00			2.00			2.00
Level 1 Variance (<i>SE</i>)		0.54			0.53 (0.08)			0.51 (0.07)			0.47 (0.07)			0.45 (0.07)	
Level 2 Variance (<i>SE</i>)		0.27			0.17 (0.08)			0.17 (0.07)			0.18 (0.07)			0.19 (0.07)	

Note. *N* = 145 employees in 50 teams. Unstandardized regression coefficients are reported. Intraclass Correlation was 0.33.

† *p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

Study 2

Path modeling with AMOS showed a good model fit. See Table 3 for the results. As proposed, we found a negative relationship between PO misfit and affective commitment and a positive relationship between PO misfit and emotional exhaustion. We also found a positive main effect for facades of conformity on emotional exhaustion and a marginal interaction effect for PO misfit and facades of conformity. Simple slopes test provided further support for the moderated relationship. In support of our hypothesis, Figure 4 shows that the relationship between PE misfit and emotional exhaustion is stronger when facades of conformity are high. Nevertheless, when it comes to affective commitment, we find only a marginally significant main effect for facades of conformity, but no interaction effect, leading to only partial confirmation of our hypotheses. Moreover, the moderation hypothesis was rejected for positive reframing as we found no main or interaction effect on well-being.

Table 3

Pathmodel Estimates for Employee Emotional Exhaustion and Affective Commitment.

	Emotional Exhaustion T2		Affective Commitment T2	
	Estimate	SE	Estimate	SE
Gender T1	-.04	.12	.33	.13 *
Age T1	-.02	.01 *	-.00	.01
Organizational tenure T1	.01	.01	.02	.01
Person-organization Fit T1	-.23	.07 **	.59	.08 ***
Facades of Conformity T1	.25	.08 ***	-.14	.08 †
Positive Reframing T1	-.01	.07	-.03	.07
Person-organization Fit x Facades of Conformity	-.18	.10 †	-.08	.11
Person-organization Fit x Positive Reframing	.02	.08	.01	.09
<i>R</i> ²		.16		.32

Note. *N* = 177. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. Model fit indices: $\chi^2 = 18.06$, *df* = 15, *p* > .10, CFI = .99, RMSEA = .03, SRMR = .06.

† *p* < .10. * *p* < .05. ** *p* < .01. *** *p* < .001.

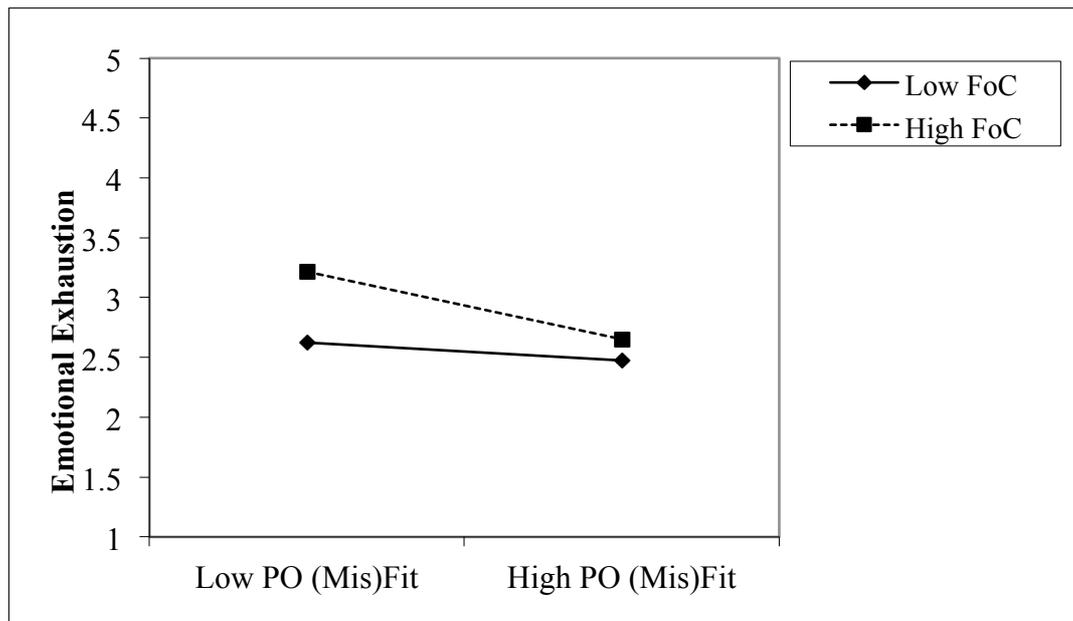


Figure 4. Moderation effect of facades of conformity (Time 1) on the relation between PG misfit (Time 1) and emotional exhaustion (Time 2) in Study 2. The simple slope for 1 SD above the mean was -0.37 ($t(170) = -5.47, p < .001$) and for 1 SD below the mean was -0.10 ($t(170) = -1.45, p > .10$).

Discussion

Our studies show that building up facades of conformity will enhance the adverse effects of misfit on emotional exhaustion. Additionally, facades of conformity also have direct negative effects on employee well-being. Further against expectations, positive reframing did not buffer the detrimental effect of person-group value misfit on emotional exhaustion but enhance it. However, positive reframing also strengthens the effect of person-group fit on emotional exhaustion, leading to lower emotional exhaustion scores. Thus, the effects of positive reframing on well-being were ambivalent.

Implications

Our studies provide initial evidence that employees that perceive a misfit in values are motivated to reduce it. In line with COR and previous research, our findings imply and that how employees deal with misfit matters. One of the practical implications of our findings is that it is not beneficial for employees to deliberately engage in faking value congruence or trying to see the incongruence in a more positive light. Taking action to change the situation and expressing one's value incongruence or even leaving the organization might prove more functional for employees' well-being than hiding oneself or cognitively reframe it - even though positive reframing enhances the positive effects of perceived fit.

Limitations

Due to a lack of research on misfit in general and on coping with misfit more specifically, we operationalized misfit as a lack of fit and had to construct a new

measure to assess positive reframing. However, we build on existing and validated scales. Nevertheless, future research should consider other misfit conceptualizations and examine whether the findings can be generalized to other misfit domains. Further, constructing specific measures, that integrate more strategies (e.g., voice) proposed by the literature (e.g., Wheeler et al., 2012), should be considered to assess dealing-with-misfit more broadly and profoundly.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, our studies are one of the first to analyze how employees deal with value-misfit at work and shed light on how detrimental effects on employee wellbeing might be amplified by how employees deal with misfit. Our findings suggest that employees should be careful when using facades of conformity and even positive reframing when dealing with value incongruence as coping in this way might produce even more detrimental effects of misfit on emotional exhaustion for them.

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