

Exploring the Fit Perspective: Toward a Better Understanding of Perceived Organizational Fit

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Person-organization (P-O) fit is a key facet of person-environment (also referred to as P-E) fit, which pertains to the similarity or match between individuals and their organizations. One avenue that scholars take in untangling the P-O fit concept is referring to people's *perceptions* of fit. According to Kristof-Brown and Billsberry (2013), we have limited knowledge about "how people experience the state of fit or misfit" (p. 4). "We have forgotten to do the initial exploratory work to understand what constitutes employees' sense of fit" (Billsberry, Talbot, & Ambrosini, 2013, p. 125). Edwards (2008) argues that "strong P-E theory should clearly define person and environment constructs that make up fit" (p. 171). The conceptualization of the environment, namely *the organization*, has received very limited attention by scholars who measure P-O fit perceptions. To date, we have little insight on how the organization, and therefore organizational fit, is conceptualized by members of the organization. If we are interested in fit *perceptions*, it is crucial that we understand people's concepts of their organizations.

Research suggests that there are two primary ways in which individuals conceptualize the organization. In the first, the organization is conceptualized as an abstract purposeful *entity* that has a structure, processes, organizational goals, culture, climate, organizational values, strategy, etc. (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). These macro-level organizational characteristics are considered fundamental and enduring, and to a degree, independent of the occupants of the organization (Chatman, 1991; Katz & Kahn, 1978). From this perspective, when assessing perceived fit with the organization, members evaluate their individual fit with fundamental and enduring organizational attributes (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Deng et al., 2011; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Although the P and E components are functionally similar in nature and have the same general meaning, they are not identical nor are they completely isomorphic (Ostroff & Schulte, 2007).

In the second way, the organization is conceived as the *total of its members*. The organization is the sum of the people in it ("the people make the place"; Schneider, 1987). In this conception, if the organization has *personality*, this personality is based on those individuals who make up the organization (Schneider, 1987). From this person-level perspective, when asked to assess their fit with the organization, individuals evaluate the degree of similarity between themselves and other people they know within the organization. This is an aggregated evaluation in which individuals compare their demographic characteristics, personalities, values, and goals to those of other members of the organization. In this perspective, identical elements are considered for both the P and E components (Ostroff & Schulte, 2007). This concept of the organization is constitutive to the ASA (attraction, selection, attrition) framework (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

The research field of organizational fit is currently split between these two viewpoints of the organization. While some studies take a macro perspective and look at the fit between the individual and organizational features (e.g., Cable & Edwards, 2004; Chatman, 1991), others are more interested in the worker's sense of fitting in and

the individual (micro) differences between members of the organization (e.g., Cooper-Thomas & Wright, 2013; Elfenbein & O'Reilly, 2007). Supeli and Creed (2013) refer to this split in the literature:

“There is variability also in measuring P-O fit because of the operational definition of *organization*. Some P-O fit studies have focused on people as the representatives of the organization... while others have operationalized the organization as an entity in general.” (p. 4)

Resick et al. (2013) explain that “people find relevant cues about an organization’s environment through the characteristics of other members (micro level)... and the organization’s goals, structures, systems, and practices (macro level)” (p. 104). Similarly, Ostroff and Schulte (2007), in Ostroff and Judge’s seminal book, *Perspectives on Organizational Fit*, explain that congruence can manifest as fit among personal characteristics of people as well as fit between personal characteristics and a feature of the contextual environment:

“Both person-based and situation-based views of the environment appear to have merit and should be treated as person-person (PP) and person-situation (PS) fit, respectively. An environment that is defined through the personal characteristics of those within it (e.g., aggregated personality, values, goals, and abilities) is fundamentally different conceptualization from an environment defined as a contextual or situational attribute (e.g., culture, climate, organizational goals, and job demands).” (p. 14)

Piasentin and Chapman (2006) support this distinction in conceptualization of the environment:

“We identified two distinct ways of how the O-component of subjective P-O fit has been operationalized in the literature. One method consists of asking employees to consider the organization’s characteristics (e.g., its values, mission, etc.). The other method consists of asking employees to consider the people in the organization.” (p. 208)

A review of the literature suggests that only recently a number of fit scholars have begun to make note of the difference between the two conceptualizations of the environment. The great majority of fit researches, to date, have not paid attention to differences in conceptualizations of the organization. Piasentin and Chapman (2006) argue that “it is apparent, however, that researchers generally do not distinguish between these two points of reference in their operationalization of P-O fit” (p. 208). In this paper, I argue against fit scholars’ tendency to ignore a potentially large discrepancy in individuals’ conceptualizations of the organization. This distinction in conceptualization is crucial because some antecedents as well as consequences of interest may be associated with one type of fit and not the other.

Many fit scholars who ignore the two distinct conceptualizations of the O component tend to include both types of organizational fit on a single P-O fit scale (e.g., Cable & Judge, 1996; Deng et al., 2011; Mitchell et al., 2001). According to Piasentin and Chapman (2006), about 40 percent of the studies include both types of items in their measures of organizational fit. Talbot and Billsberry (2010) explain that such a combination of fit types may be misleading: “...it is possible to perceive misfit with some areas of the environment yet to fit strongly in other areas.... combining various fit measurements into an overall fit score may give misleading results” (p. 3). In many cases, however, there is no sense of what kind of *organization* is being measured (e.g.,

“How well do you think you fit in the organization?”; Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013, p. 4; “To what extent is the organization a good match for you?”; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; “I have characteristics in common with my organization”; Tak, 2011). Given this lack of attention to the P-O conceptual distinction in research, it is not surprising that the reliability of current P-O fit measures is not satisfactory (e.g., it was 0.64 in De Cooman et al., 2009; 0.69 in Zoghbi-Manrique de Lara, 2008; 0.75 in Mitchell et al., 2001; 0.75 in Schmitt et al., 2008; 0.75 in Tak, 2011; and 0.76 in Wheeler et al., 2007). Spector (1992) argues that “the content of complex constructs can only be adequately covered by a scale with multiple subscales” (p. 16).

Table 1 provides examples of perceived organizational fit questions. In the left column, a clear referral to current employees, coworkers, peers, or people who work for the company exists. When responding to these items, a person is likely to assess his or her degree of similarity with other members of the organization. In the right column, by comparison, there is no reference to the people in the organization. Instead, the questions pertain to macro organizational features such as culture, philosophy, company goals, and image.

Table 1
Distinction between the two conceptualizations of the O-component:

Congruence among characteristics of people	Congruence between personal characteristics and a feature of the organization
“My values match those of current employees in this organization” (Cable & Judge, 1996)	“I think the values and personality of this organization reflect my own values and personality” (Cable & Judge, 1996)
“My coworkers are similar to me” (Mitchell et al., 2001)	“I fit with the company's culture” (Mitchell et al., 2001)
“I like the members of my work group” (Mitchell et al., 2001)	“The underlying philosophy of this organization reflects what I value in a company” (Deng et al., 2011)
“I share a lot in common with people who work for this company” (Deng et al., 2011)	“I feel my personality matches the “personality” or image of this organization” (Saks & Ashforth, 1997)
“I fit well with other people who work for this company” (Piasentin & Chapman, 2007)	“My organization’s values and culture provide a good fit with the things that I value in life” (Cable & DeRue, 2002)
“I find that sometimes I have to compromise personal principles to conform to my peers’ expectations” (modified from Posner, 2010)	“What my company stands for is important to me” (Son, 2011)
	“I agree with the values that define the goals of my company” (Son, 2011)

With this logic, I assert that combining two types of fit into a single P-O scale or construct leads to confusion in the meaning and clarity of the construct. It is possible, for instance, that an individual will experience high fit or similarity with other members of the organization, but only a moderate fit with the goals and philosophy of the company, and vice versa. Fit, therefore, may indicate two very different things whose combination makes little sense conceptually or operationally.

It should be noted that similar research advancements in the form of conceptual distinction within a construct can be found in a variety of cases, as in organizational citizenship behavior (OCB), which recently is recognized as either individual (OCBI) or organizational (OCBO) in nature (e.g., Williams and Anderson, 1991). Another example is deviance, which is now often separated into organizational and interpersonal deviance behavior (e.g., Galperin & Burke, 2006). A third example is perceived organizational justice, which is now most-often studied as procedural, interactional, informational, or distributive justice (e.g., Colquitt et al., 2001). Utilizing two types of organizational fit separately in research can lead to the development of a greater variety of research questions as well as to a more proper interpretation of research results.

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