

Qualitative Research in PE Fit and Misfit

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When Jon asked me for a keynote paper on the topic of Experiencing Organizational Fit and Misfit, I was truly enthusiastic because this topic fits nicely with the subject of my recent research endeavor: qualitative approaches to fit and misfit. With this paper, I will then be able to advocate how and why fit scholars should consider delving into how individuals interpret their experiences of fit.

As with most researchers, I commenced my academic career studying quantitative approaches (as if there are fewer entry barriers to such things). While I was pretty confident in my statistical skills and thought the rest of my academic life would involve wading through piles of numbers, one idea lingered, never far from my thoughts. Ever since my college years I have been fascinated by the idea of “fit” or “match,” thinking about how employees would benefit from a positive fit between what they want and what the company has to offer. For a while, I was intrigued by quantitative research, until a voice from deep within my heart spoke up.

“What is fit?” it asked.

We all know that for a number of decades fit has been defined by dimensions derived from theories or investigated using researcher-determined methods (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Edwards, Moss-Jones, Marsh, van Meurs, & Coldwell, 2008). I have always wanted to know what people really mean, precisely, deep down, when they say “fit.” Fifteen years of teaching experienced employees has shown me that managers are constantly intrigued by the concept of how employees fit with the organization (especially with other people at work), what contributes to that sense of “fit,” and the consequences of it.

If we as a field do not know the nature of the employee’s own sense of fit, how can we assess employee wellbeing based on the employee’s experience of fit? This applies to both theoretical investigation and practical consultation.

I finally got a chance to explore fit using a qualitative method after I was promoted to a full professorship. (This is an example of how the current incentive system can defer interesting work—or at least the work that the authors find interesting). In one study, my coauthor and I attempted to conceptualize fit in a Chinese context. In another, we outlined why misfit occurs and laid out a process for creating work that is tailor-made to fit one’s needs. In the following two sections, I will summarize current efforts to approach fit and misfit using a qualitative methodology, including my own two attempts, and will discuss the issues surrounding the exploration of workers’ experiences of fit and misfit.

Current Qualitative Endeavors on Conceptualizing Fit

In this section, I summarize the studies that have made the effort to examine the employee’s own experience of fit. Lovelace and Rosen (1996) may be one of the earliest explorations of the employee’s experience of fit. As part of a quantitative study regarding differences in person-organization (PO) fit faced by a diverse variety of groups, the authors used the critical incident technique to understand specific events that helped participants (MBA alumni in managerial positions) learn whether they fit

well or poorly with their current organization. The results reveal four categories of fit: feedback, job demands and skill compatibility, organizational policies and procedures, and ethical/values issues.

Billsberry et al. (2008) used a sample of 63 individuals representing a wide range of posts in a British university and 38 employees in six organizations in different business sectors in the UK. The authors used a combination of causal mapping and storytelling methods in which each participant was asked to think of the factors that influence their fit and annotate the diagrams as those factors spring to mind. The participants were then asked to elaborate on each factor in search of its underlying causality. The study found 15 different dimensions of fit: skills and knowledge, nature of work, individual behavior, opportunities for growth and development, opportunities for achievement, colleagues, manager, relationship, physical environment, terms and conditions of work, organizational values, organizational mission, organizational reputation, organizational behavior, and work/life balance.

Another study that explicitly attempted to explore the nature of fit is one of my own: Chuang, Hsu, Wang, and Judge (2015). My colleagues and I applied the grounded theory procedure and conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 30 Chinese working adults with diverse backgrounds. We asked the informants “Of the incidents you described as being daily events, which ones have prompted you to think about fit?” The findings suggest an integrated Chinese model of person-environment (PE) fit that constitutes five dominant PE fit themes: competence at work, harmonious connections at work, balance among life domains, cultivation, and realization.

These exploratory studies have advanced the field with inductive approaches and thus have ample implications to the conceptualizations of fit. Lovelace and Rosen (1996) focused on how groups of different ethnicity and gender experienced PO fit and found two new dimensions compared to the Organizational Culture Profile (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991): compatibility between the way the company handled ethical decisions and the respondent’s ethics, and the way in which the company handled issues related to women and minorities. They concluded that the way managers experienced PO fit is more complex than previously documented.

The studies by Billsberry et al. (2008) and Chuang et al. (2015) are more comparable in that they both delved into employees’ experiences of overall fit. They both found constructions of fit that were not currently available from fit research adopting pre-determined methods: opportunities for growth and development, opportunities for achievement, terms and conditions of work, and work/life balance (Billsberry) and balance among life domains, cultivation, and realization (Chuang). Those themes represent the difference between types of fit driven by theory and conceptualizations of fit based on the employee’s experience.

Although some of the concepts identified in Billsberry et al. (2008) and Chuang et al. (2015) are similar, they come from different cultural roots, and these roots provide a fundamental basis for differentiation. As a supporting notion, Chuang et al. emphasized that although the Chinese concept of cultivation could be similar to the idea of personal growth and learning, Western culture sees “learning” as the acquisition of knowledge about the external world in order to master the world or to express personal creativity. In contrast, Confucianism depicts cultivation as duty-based and involving the most important purpose of human life, which is to self-perfect or self-cultivate, socially and morally. Li (2012) mentioned that “It is the person’s self, not the external world, that is the object of his or her intellectual attention, contemplation, practice, and living” (p. 37). Thus, within Chinese Confucian culture, learning is a necessary journey one

takes when transforming the self, and this differentiates it from the kind of learning that is more external.

One aspect that is worth noting regarding Chuang et al. (2015) is how it differs from the current literature that understands fit by “dimensions.” Chuang et al. identified “themes” that are emergent life topics associated with experiences of fit. In addition to identifying themes of fit, Chuang et al. went a step further to depict the process (i.e., input-throughput-output) by which each theme is formed. This helps us understand not only what the sense of fit means but also the process by which people experience fit. For example, the theme of “harmonious connections at work” refers to individuals’ experience of fit when they discover that they can smoothly coordinate or affectively connect with others at work. This process starts with individuals being adaptive to social interactions at work with such parties as supervisors, coworkers, customers, and subordinates (input), followed by interactive reciprocation such as offering unsolicited help and responding promptly (throughput), and ending with being affectively connected or smoothly coordinating tasks with other people (output). The output stage is the point at which individuals can feel that sense of fit.

Current Qualitative Endeavors on Conceptualizing Misfit

In this section, I summarize the few studies that have used an inductive approach to conceptualize misfit. As previously cited, Lovelace and Rosen (1996) also asked participants about incidents that led them to question their fit, which the authors used to represent incidents of PO misfit. Six categories of misfit were identified: feedback, job demands and skill compatibility, organizational policies and procedures, ethical/values issues, treatment of women and minorities, and personal style compatibility. Four of these are identical to fit perceptions.

Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013) was one of the ambitious attempts to conceptualize overall misfit using an inductive method. They approached misfit from the perspective of the social context of work. By asking participants to “comment generally on your social relations at work,” the authors revealed four underlying dimensions of misfit which matched the four categories that the authors summarized based on the current misfit literature: sociodemographics, individual differences, structural factors, and social factors. The authors emphasized the important effect that coworker interactions have on individuals’ perceptions of misfit, and concluded that “Dimensions of misfit may exist, but coworker interactions may either conceal or disclose these as salient in the social context.”

In what may be a possible contribution to the misfit literature, my colleagues and I have developed a grounded theoretical model to account for why employees leave a job that is highly regarded by society for one that is less socially desirable. There are many available examples of people resigning from their position as a lawyer, engineer or doctor to become a baker, tour guide or blog writer. One would think that, to abandon such a great job, these people must have experienced the tragedy of a lifetime. We interviewed 35 working adults in Taiwan and found out that what caused them to quit was a tension or misfit between the kind of person they wanted to become and the kind of person their previous job had made them. This tension was so strong that those individuals finally left their established position to launch out on their own so they could tailor their work to their needs.

The job crafting literature has been fruitful in informing employees how they can craft a job to meet their needs (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For example, Vogel,

Rodell, and Lynch (2015) found that job crafting mitigated the negative relationship between value incongruence and employee engagement and job performance. However, job crafting would not have been an option for our informants, whose reason for quitting was related to an identity crisis rooted in their personhood: “who I want to be” vs. “who my job has made me to be.” Merely changing the tasks at work will not fill that gap. This means that these people were solving a problem that was internal to them, not external. This notion departs from Lovelace and Rosen’s (1996) view that those who reported a non-fit incident were more likely to place the blame externally. It may also point to an interesting phenomenon that is worth exploring: misfit conceptualized as an identity crisis.

In summary, current qualitative inquiries into misfit are limited in that most of them opted to focus on a specific aspect of the investigation such as PO fit, social interactions, or identity. Billsberry et al. (2008) observed that “People who reported good fit were much less animated than those people who reported poor fit or misfit...Misfits were completely different; no introduction to the concept was required and they were able to describe many stories of organizational incompatibility.” Based on that, we are not surprised to find that while some of its conceptions are similar to those of perceived fit, misfit could also include unique themes that become unbearably salient when a mismatch occurs. This raises empirical questions that warrant future research.

Discussion and Conclusion

In the preceding sections, I have laid out and discussed some of the findings of qualitative research on fit and misfit. However, one question that remains unanswered regards the relationship between experienced fit and experienced misfit. Are they two ends of the same continuum or two distinct constructs? In an attempt to delineate the relationship between fit and misfit, Cooper-Thomas and Wright (2013) proposed three different conceptual models: a) fit-misfit as a continuum, b) misfit as more or less than fit, and c) misfit as qualitatively different from fit. The current qualitative research on fit and misfit noted above does not appear to have answered this question squarely because the majority of these studies prompted only one of these conditions: either fit or misfit. One exception is Lovelace and Rosen (1996) where the authors identified categories for fit and misfit and those categories for both are very similar. This finding appears to suggest that people have a hard time differentiating fit and misfit, and that the two might be opposite ends of the same continuum. This poses an empirical question that calls for future research. Qualitative research may be an appropriate avenue to examine the relationship between fit and misfit because it enables the revelation of people’s fit experience, and it is within that personal experience that the relationship between fit and misfit can be found.

Another unexplored issue that could be addressed by qualitative research is culture. The concept of fit or misfit may be defined differently in different cultures. For example, a paper by Billsberry and De Cooman (2010) presented in the 4th Global e-Conference on Fit discovered that, in British English, the word “misfit” implies a negative state of mind, whereas the equivalent word in Dutch simply refers to an outsider who is not one of the group, a less emotional term. This brings up the broader issue of whether people around the globe experience fit and misfit in the same way.

To complicate things even further, aside from the definitional issue, how people interpret fit and misfit based on their cultural value or wisdom may pose a challenge to

conceptualizing fit and misfit. For example, Chuang et al. (2015) and Lee and Ramaswami (2013) both agreed that Chinese people or those in more collectivist cultures are less likely to perceive misfit than are Westerners. One of the reasons may be that collectivists try to improve or adapt themselves (e.g., cultivating oneself) to meet the requirements of the environment. Another reason may be that some Chinese people perceive incongruence (or misfit) as fit. This is because Confucianism teaches Chinese people to practice self-perfection and Chuang et al. found that when Chinese people do pursue self-perfection, they feel a sense of fit because they are practicing what they have been told to do since birth. In the event that objective misfit (e.g., incongruence) is perceived as fit, understanding the concepts of fit/misfit becomes extremely challenging but intriguing. I call for more qualitative research to investigate the experience of organizational fit and misfit in regards to their definitions and their meaning in different cultural settings.

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