Abstract

Purpose – In recent years, the literature on person-environment fit as a sought-after outcome has burgeoned whereas misfit has been relatively neglected. Specifically, little research has investigated how people develop and maintain perceptions of not fitting in. In this paper we review past research on misfit, and present new data examining the role of coworker social relations in surfacing or diminishing perceptions of misfit.

Methodology - Written data were collected from 167 participants and analyzed using thematic coding. Themes emerging from the data were compared against our model of person-environment misfit.

Findings – From our analysis of previous misfit research we identify four dimensions of misfit: Sociodemographic, individual differences, structural, and social. Our own data support and extend these dimensions. Further, our findings suggest that the social context is related to perceptions of misfit.

Practical Implications - Managers can play a key role in misfit perceptions, both through action and inaction. Managers should note the importance of social relations in perceptions of misfit, and aim to provide supportive and well-structured work contexts.

Originality/ Value: Our paper makes four key contributions to the person-environment fit literature. One is the categorization of dimensions of misfit, developed from past research. The second is the provision of three conceptual models summarizing different approaches to misfit in relation to fit. Third, we provide a novel perspective on misfit by focusing on social
norms as the background against which misfit is experienced. Fourth, our research supports and extends on the four component model of misfit developed in our initial review.

Keywords: person-environment misfit, social context, social norms, coworker relations, coworker interaction, workplace friendship.

Running Header: Misfit

_Type of paper:_ Research Paper

_Last length of paper:_ 5996 words (not including references, table & figure).
Employees perform better, are healthier, happier, and stay longer in environments in which they fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Although the literature on fit as a positive and sought-after outcome has burgeoned, misfit has been relatively neglected (Billsberry et al., 2006; Chatman et al., 2008; Judge, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2007). Specifically, little research has investigated how people develop and maintain perceptions of not fitting in. A small number of studies suggest that social interaction may be key to perceptions of fit and misfit (Chatman, 1991). In this paper, we explore misfit and, in particular, investigate this in the context of coworker interactions.

Perceptions of fit and misfit are formed through judgments about how well an individual matches against relevant norms (Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). The inherently social nature of these evaluations is acknowledged, with perceived fit being a socially constructed phenomenon using a normative referent (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006; Kristof, 1996). Yet in spite of this, the social context for developing perceptions of fit and misfit has been largely neglected. We focus here on misfit, and next outline the small amount of previous pertinent research.

**Person-Environment Misfit**

Although our focus in this paper is on misfit, research on fit is predominant. Investigations of fit have assessed the person relative to other people, the job, vocation, group, organization, and environment (Edwards, 2008; Kristof, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Schneider, 2001; Vogel & Feldman, 2009). Misfit has been relatively neglected (Billsberry et al., 2006; Chatman et al., 2008), and there is no evidence that it corresponds with these same categorizations. Moreover, Edwards (2008) has recently criticized the theoretical stagnation of fit research, providing an opportunity for our treatise of misfit to take a fresh perspective.
Previous research investigating misfit. The small amount of research on misfit identifies a number of dimensions along which misfit is possible. Individual sociodemographic variables of race, gender, and age are commonly investigated, especially in the relational demography literature (Ellis & Tsui, 2007). For example, research by Stone-Romero, Stone and Salas (2003) indicates that variations in cultural backgrounds are related to role expectations, intentions and behavior, and create perceptions of cultural misfit. Variables of socio-economic status, tenure, and sexual orientation also provide relatively salient bases for assessing similarity with colleagues (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007; Pichler, Varma, & Bruce, 2010; Sacco & Schmitt, 2005). In terms of individual differences, misfit may occur due to cognitive style (Chan, 1996), personal style (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996), and personal values (allocentrism and idiocentrism; Robert & Wasti, 2002). Other bases for misfit occur at the job and organizational level. Thus structural factors that relate to the organization of work may result in misfit, and include policies, job demands, and differences in work skills (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996). Further, social factors within the organization may result in misfit, such as the pace and structure of work (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005; Slocombe & Bluedorn, 1999), ethics, practices and norms, and feedback (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996). We summarize these elements in Table 1.

Three conceptualizations of person-environment misfit. Developing our ideas from this body of research, we propose that there are three ways in which misfit may be construed. A first type of misfit refers to having a greater or lesser amount of an element relative to others in the organization. In this, misfit and fit are opposite ends of a continuum (Wheeler et al., 2007), and this is depicted in Figure 1a by a double-headed arrow that fades away towards the misfit end of the arrow. An example of this conceptualization is Chan’s (1996) study of cognitive misfit, which investigates the continuum of adaptive through to
innovative cognitive styles. In this, an adaptive cognitive style is predominant among employees, and therefore employees with an innovative cognitive style “misfit”.

A second type of misfit refers to employees who have either more or less than the ideal amount or degree of some attribute. An example of this is Jansen and Kristof-Brown’s (2005) research on work pace where misfit can occur from employees working either faster or slower than the social norm. This is depicted in Figure 1b where the attribute, such as work pace, ranges from low to high, and misfit occurs over a limited spectrum. Hence those who misfit may be on either one or the other side of this normative spectrum. Note that Edwards (2008) defines fit as proximity between the person and the environment, and both these first two types of misfit match this conceptualization.

A third type of misfit relates to qualitatively different dimensions, where the attributes of the individual employee are contrasted as distinct in type but cannot be quantified as lesser or greater than that present in the social context. As an example, Lovelace and Rosen (1996) discuss an employee experiencing misfit on ethical grounds, experienced in the organizational cover up of a customer promise that was not kept. Categorical attributes, such as race, also represent such a qualitative difference in misfit (Harrison, 2007; Stone-Romero, Stone & Salas, 2003). We suggest that employees who innovate to craft their own role are also included in this third type of misfit (Feldman & Brett, 1983), with individual’s misfit forcing colleagues to adjust, and this in turn reducing the individual’s misfit (Anderson & Thomas, 1996; Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007).

This third type of misfit representing a qualitative difference is shown in Figure 1c. Each white circle depicts an individual with the potential to misfit in a setting where gray triangles predominate. We have depicted various options according to the degree to which the difference in fit is salient; from left to right the white circle seems to fit better – in that it
looks more triangle-like – until in the fourth circle along, it is nested behind the triangles and actual differences are hidden.

These diagrams also offer the interesting possibility that borderline fit occurs (Cooper-Thomas, 2008). In Figure 1a there may be individuals on the transition from grey to white who neither fit nor misfit. Similarly, in Figure 1b, there may be individuals at the edges of the fit bandwidth who experience borderline fit. Finally, in Figure 1c, varying degrees of merger of the white circles could reflect borderline fit. The notion of borderline fit, although intriguing, relies on a better development of the notion of misfit and we turn to this next.

**A definition of person-environment misfit.** Previous researchers on misfit rarely specify their assumptions regarding the relationship between fit and misfit. Quantitative approaches have predominated and, in line with this, the first and second approaches to misfit outlined above are often implicit. Here, we provide a definition of misfit to provide a foundation for future research. Specifically, if misfit may also be more or less than ideal fit, or qualitatively different, a definition helps to clarify this position and we offer the following:

*Person-environment misfit refers to a perceived mismatch between the individual and the environment, on a dimension that is salient to one or both parties, and relates to individual factors that are more than, less than, or qualitatively different from the comparable factors at the organization level.*

There are several elements of this definition that are important. First, it is a perceived mismatch that is important. Perception is inherently subjective, and one person with an objective mismatch, such as a solo man in a team of women, may not experience misfit on the basis of gender whereas another man in an identical situation might. A second related aspect is that the dimension must be salient to one or both parties. The notion of salience has been highlighted by Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006), similarly discussing the degree to
which a certain aspect of the environment is more conspicuous than another in judgments of fit. Drawing from social cognition research, they suggest that salience of fit may be experienced due to novelty or uniqueness, because of a contrast effect against a background, or due to inconsistent behavior. In all of these, the social context is imperative. As an example for misfit, an employee may not notice his own cognitive style until this becomes salient as being different from the workplace norm.

**The role of coworker relationships in perceptions of misfit.** Evaluations of fit or misfit occur during social interactions. These start at recruitment and continue through selection, socialization processes and in ongoing work experiences (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cooper-Thomas, Van Vianen, & Anderson, 2004; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005; Schneider et al., 1995). There is evidence that the salience of dimensions of misfit varies over time as employees have more chance to interact (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Thus, demographic elements may be most noticeable at first, but their significance may reduce as other deeper level elements, such as values and ethics, become more relevant for assessing misfit (Harrison et al., 1998; Jackson & Chung, 2008; Sacco & Schmitt, 2005; see also Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007). For example, Sacco and Schmitt (2005) suggested that extraversion and time facilitate meaningful interactions and help employees overcome any initial perceptions of misfit resulting from demographic dissimilarity (see also Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005).

It is clear then that workplace interactions are important to perceptions of misfit. Such perceptions are socially constructed phenomena, formed in relation to a normative referent (Edwards et al., 2006; Kristof, 1996; Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). This normative referent is surfaced through social interactions. Indeed, there is a tranche of research that looks at individuals’ manipulations of fit in social situations, such as recruiting, to better match an ideal or normative employee image (Cable & Judge, 1991; Ferris & Judge, 1991; Snyder, 1987). Social relationships are central within misfit, either
implicitly (Chan, 2006) or explicitly (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005), and hence differences only result in perceptions of misfit when such differences are salient in the specific social context, relative to a norm.

Norms are socially constructed and provide implicit or explicit rules regarding appropriate values, attributes, beliefs, and behaviors at the group level (Berkowitz, 1972; Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). Norms relate to people’s social behavior when such norms are “focal” (Cialdini, Kallegren & Reno, 1991) – which is similar to our use of “salience” in defining misfit – and relative to some normative referent group. We propose, therefore, that norms provide the contrast for perceiving misfit. New employees identify salient norms through observation and social interaction (Louis, 1980), and hence social exchanges are crucial to perceptions of misfit. The social psychology of norms has not influenced the fit literature explicitly but is seen occasionally in the broader literature on work behavior. For example, recently Fugas, Meliá and Silva (2011) argued that norms from different reference groups will have more or less influence on an individuals’ safety behavior. Social workplace norms are also implicated in judgments of pay (Judge & Cable, 2011) and retirement age (Potočnik, Tordera, & Peiró, 2009).

Our argument then is that social norms are key to misfit, and these norms will be learned by employees from workplace interactions (Louis, 1980). There is some indirect evidence from research with new employees that social interactions are important to fit. Specifically, new employees who seek information and try to build a good work relationship with their boss show higher levels of fit (Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005), and new employees who participate more in social activities and mentoring also show higher fit (Chatman, 1991). At a broader level, a more socially supportive organizational environment is associated with greater fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004). These findings provide
some initial quantitative evidence of the role of interpersonal interactions in fit, and allows for them to be important in misfit also.

**Evidence for the Role of Work Relationships in Person-Organization Misfit**

Misfit is under-researched (Billsberry et al., 2006; Chatman et al., 2008; Judge, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2007), and hence qualitative methods offer a way of gaining a deeper preliminary understanding of what the concept means (Billsberry et al., 2006). As Lee (1999) suggests, qualitative research is suited to discussions of description, interpretation, and explanation which matches our research focus. The current research was conducted as part of a study of coworker relations. An open-ended question asked participants “please comment generally on your social relations at work”. Note that this question did not prompt respondents to link social relationships to fit, and therefore the themes relevant to misfit that are apparent in our data were not solicited. Instead, we expected that social interactions would provide the basis for perceptions of misfit, and used this novel, exploratory and possibly risky approach to see whether our theoretical hunches would be supported (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005).

**Method**

**Characteristics of the Sample.** Data were collected online with respondents answering the question above on their social relations at work. Snowballing was used to increase the number of responses, in that participants recruited future participants from among their colleagues. 323 employees responded and, of these, 167 participants provided spontaneous comments regarding various aspects of fit or misfit in their organization and linked this to some aspect of the quality of their coworker interactions. This sample of participants comprised mostly professional employees (83% researchers/academics, managers, accountants, lawyers, analysts, or HR specialists), ranged in age from 25 years through to 60 years (mean = 43 years), held at least a Bachelors degree (74%) and were
mostly female (72%). 57% were New Zealand European; 82% worked full-time and had held tenure in their current position for 4.2 years. Note that respondents providing comments relevant to fit or misfit were not different on any of these dimensions from those not responding.

**Data coding and analysis.** We chose thematic coding to preserve unique perceptions embedded in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This inductive analysis is an iterative process, with thematic categories refined as the coding progresses until all the data is accommodated. Prior to coding, a list of synonyms for “fit” and “misfit” were identified (e.g., belong, not/fitting in). All units of data (e.g., fragments, sentences or paragraphs) referring to perceptions of fit or misfit were identified based on this list, then extracted to form the basis for the study. Text length ranged from one short sentence to large paragraphs of text. The coding process was blind with all demographic and identifying information removed.

The coding process was as follows. First, categories were defined by organizing portions of the text using a database was much like a quantitative database, in a case by variable format, with each cell consisting of portions of text about a category. Keywords from the text were underlined to facilitate categorization. Conceptual saturation was reached when no new categories were generated. Next, relationships between the different categories were analyzed and diagrammatical representation built up to better understand the data. All conceptual decisions were tracked using memos (Gephart, 2004). All coding processes were peer reviewed by an independent qualitative researcher to remove any subjective interpretation by the authors. Three segments of text and their associated coding were queried, and these were re-analyzed and re-coded more appropriately.

**Results**

Our analysis revealed four themes underlying person-environment misfit which matched our four categories of sociodemographics, individual differences, structure and
social factors (see Table 1). In this section, we present these themes and integrate them in the context of relevant literature, also including illustrative example quotes.

**Sociodemographics.** Relational demography theory (Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992; Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989) suggests that demographic similarity positively impacts the social relationships between individuals. To the extent that demographic characteristics are salient in work environments, those who do not fit should experience negative outcomes (King & Cortina, 2010). Our data support this notion, with gender, age, tenure, and sexual orientation emerging as themes, as indicated in Table 1. Respondents indicated that, for these sociodemographic factors, their salience as a basis for misfit was intertwined with the quality of coworker interactions. Thus interpersonal factors such as kindness and inclusion were important aspects of the social environment that were pertinent to perceptions of fit and misfit.

Gender: “There are very few men where I work, thus there are sometimes difficulties like not being included in social activities, or other communication dynamics. I actually find my social work-life here quite difficult. Who knows? I do think that my demographic status affects my relationships.”

Sexuality: “I am gay. I am reserved around my coworkers and always feel a bit out of place but there are some kind people which is why I stay on.”

Age: “I’m the young guy at work, completely different demographics to those people around me… I am a bit removed. They don’t go out of their way to make me feel included. I would prefer to work with people my own age who I could relate to and have fun with.”

Our data also suggest that some employees experience borderline fit (Cooper-Thomas, 2008) yet, since the issue of fit or misfit is not of sufficient concern for them, they choose to remain with their organization.

Length of tenure surfaced as a prominent sociodemographic category associated with the quality of relationships formed in the workplace.
Tenure: “I have only just started my job and so have not had a chance to form strong relationships yet. But I'm not sure I'll ever feel at home as people aren’t very friendly.”

“… I have only been with the organization for three weeks, so am still really in the initial stages of making friends etc. However, I find the people here incredibly warm and friendly and ready to listen, they have made me feel so welcome – I really like that and so the transition into the organization has been really good.”

Naturally, for employees who have only been in the role or organization a short while, the development of meaningful coworker relationships will be in their infancy (Rollag, 2004). Nevertheless, early interactions can signify to employees how well they are likely to fit (Chatman, 1991; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004). In keeping with this, our data suggest that the initial development of interpersonal relationships in the work environment is important to perceptions of misfit and fit. For example the tenure quotes illustrate misfit and fit respectively in the context of how friendly colleagues are.

**Individual differences.** Our data suggest individual differences are implicated in perceptions of misfit, with support for themes of personality, cognitive style, and desire for social interaction, as shown in Table 1. Those who reported a mismatch between their personality and those of their coworkers experienced strong feelings of misfit.

Personality: “We have just done the Myers-Briggs test at work, and it made me realise how different I am and why I don’t get on with everyone. Even though [the facilitator] said that this [difference] was a strength it just highlighted the differences between me and [my colleagues].”

A high degree of misfit was felt when the individual reported a more gregarious nature but worked amongst colleagues who preferred limited social contact.

Personal Values: “I find my colleagues to lack social skills to a significant degree. They don't get on with each other - let alone me.... I prefer social activity at work but have to do this via long distance with my friends in my home city.”
Interestingly, some of our respondents reported that they had no desire to form or maintain work social relationships and hence did not experience misfit, simply because there was alignment with their desired and actual social experience at work.

Desire for Social Interaction: “I like to keep my work and social life separate.”
“Generally - work is not where I seek social support - at least not close relationships. Workmates are workmates and interactions are generally work related or less personal. I don’t think this is a problem.”

We suggest that these people instead chose to have borderline fit; that is, having a sufficient level of fit and interaction at work to be effective at the task, but not socially integrated (Cooper-Thomas, 2008; Kristof, 1996). Throughout the dataset there was evidence that some respondents seemed to voluntarily opt for borderline fit, where they balance a desire to fit on some dimensions but not others. Such individuals do not meet our definition of misfit, because the mismatch is not salient to them. There was also evidence of misfit based on individual differences in cognitive style, supporting Chan’s (1996) research.

Cognitive style: “I don’t really feel a part of my company … I don’t think like the others do, kind of like I don’t really belong…”.

**Structural factors.** The manner in which work and the organization was structured emerged as a unique theme mentioned in the context of the quality of relationships and perceptions of misfit. Employment contract and role isolation are shown in Table 1 as emerging themes. For employment contract, there was a contrast between mainstream permanent roles versus other types of employment contracts, including temporary and part-time roles.

Employment contract: “Part-time employment means I am unable to attend many staff functions, and have limited time for lunch breaks etc, and staff in my area seem to be very...”
focused on meeting huge workloads and are not that interested in building rapport etc with low-status part-timers.”

“…I only work 15 hours a week so I don't mix a lot with the others.”

Those on non-mainstream contracts reported feeling on the periphery of the organization’s social network. Role isolation, stemming from the physical environment in the organization and the structuring of work into roles and hierarchies, was also a basis for individual misfit.

Role isolation: “I work in a Ministerial office and the physical layout of the office and the work of each member of the office is segregated into portfolio's. I often work on my own within my own office for many hours without a single hello from other members of the office because each office member is busy working on their own issues .... I could honestly say I do not really know or understand the rest of the members in this office.”

“I'm the boss in a medium-sized government agency in a small provincial town: I don't want or look for particular intimacy with my workmates although I get on with them well and care for their relationships with each other and with me. Too much socialising would compromise those relationships but of course too little would seem stand-offish and would be detrimental to workplace well-being and cohesion.”

“I am the only person at work with my job title. I know and interact with many people, but being the sole researcher causes a slight distance.”

The first quote illustrates how the physical layout of work may be implicated in perceptions of misfit. The second and third quotes reveal the choice for those in supervisory or managerial roles to purposefully establish a certain social distance from colleagues, and the way in which having a unique role can create distance, respectively.

There is ample evidence of the link between familiarity and liking which can occur without conscious recognition of such familiarity – known as the “mere exposure effect” (Bornstein, 1989; Hansen & Wänke, 2009; Zajonc, 1980). Proximity and shared tasks provide coworkers with opportunities for interaction (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005). Further, coworkers working in close proximity are more likely to become friends (Sias &
Cahill, 1998). Drawing on our data, being on non-mainstream employment contracts or in roles that provide structural isolation may reduce opportunities for interaction, and hence for the development of familiarity, liking, and friendships. Thus structural factors which impede social interaction can reduce the opportunity to develop a sense of fit, or may contribute to a sense of social isolation and misfit, or both.

**Social.** There was evidence of misfit at a broader social level within our data. These notions are captured in the themes of *organizational culture, social opportunities, and cliques* in Table 1. Relationships in the workplace occur in the context of an organization’s cultural characteristics, such as hierarchical structure, individual competition, and seniority, and also in opportunities for social interaction. In some cases, organizations strongly discourage friendship at work for fear of improper behavior or reduced productivity (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002), or because relationships are viewed as a distraction or of low value (Fletcher, 1998). This theme was present in our data, with some participants suggesting that the organizational culture they experience does not value social interaction, and hence this limits opportunities to develop a sense of fit.

Social opportunities: “*The divisions between staff and leaders are distinct and the hierarchy operates despite a flatter structure. Social interactions are limited to end of financial year lunches, Xmas [sic] etc.*”

“*Workplace is not considered a place for friendships as change in jobs and sections is ongoing and disrupts any friendships - time for lunch breaks different, rosters etc complicate possibilities to maintain any more than 2 or 3 friends. Emails are essential means of communication but even this is done with care. This is accepted as a fact of life - less friendly relationships and friends.*”

Culture: “*The competition within [our organization] for career advancement impacts upon the quality of relationships that can be had.... This prevents sincere friendships developing and can make those who don’t achieve feel on the outer.*”

“*In-house jokes and banter are tell tales of those who are in... and those who are out*”
Moreover, a theme of cliques was present in the data, with respondents mentioning perceptions of distance and exclusion.

Cliques: “There are groups here who can be difficult, hostile or nasty, pushing people away and ostracising them.”

“There is a clique at work that sometimes strain what could be a more cohesive environment. Unfortunately this includes the programme leader which can make people feel on the outer.”

“It is interesting to answer these questions as there are some colleagues and staff to whom I feel distanced... simply because they can be intimidating”.

Interestingly, two quotes within this theme use the term “feel on the outer”. This is a colloquial term used to express an individual’s perception of social marginalization. The quotes come from different participants but within the same organization. Other research has found that employees who experience alienating organizational cultures may feel marginalized or threatened (Golden-Biddle, GermAnn, Reay & Procyshen, 2007).

Overall, the data under this social dimension suggest that a negative social climate can help to surface perceptions of misfit. Those who experience negative social climates may withdraw socially and, alongside this, develop perceptions of misfit. On the flip side however, some respondents indicated a sense of fit and commitment through experiences of their organization being supportive of social interactions and positive social relations.

Social Opportunity: “I shifted here to Auckland knowing no-body at all. I was 95% reliant on work for my social stimulus. [My organization] makes an effort to ensure we all get social time together. We have weekly drinks which I have found critical to building a bond with my team mates and feeling included. I look forward to coming to work and am proud to work for [my organization].”

This is consistent with previous research suggesting that the match of an individual to the organization’s values explains variance in individual variables such as commitment (Boxx,
Odom, & Dunn, 1991), turnover (McCulloch, 2001), and job performance (Kristof-Brown & Stevens, 2001). Further, positive relationships at work have been shown to enhance individual and organizational wellbeing and effectiveness (Dutton, 2003). In line with this, organization cultures which supported relationship-building are likely to be viewed as inclusive.

**Discussion**

We defined misfit as a perceived mismatch between the individual and the environment on a dimension that was salient to one or both parties. In line with this, our data suggest that the social context of work is central to this perception of misfit. Our qualitative research provides further support for the individual and organizational differential precursors to misfit outlined in Table 1, and the dimensions of our original model are supported and extended to include additional factors. Further, our data are congruent with the notion that these factors only become the basis for perceptions of misfit when the individual experiences poor coworker relationships.

Turning to our analysis of the dimensions of misfit, Table 1 shows both those dimensions derived from past research (shown in normal font), and the support for these in our data (shown with a tick) and new factors (shown in italics). Several factors emerged at the individual level, such as differences in personality and desire for social interactions at work. On the organization side, structural factors were evident including reward structures favoring individual competition, as well as employment contract implications. Other elements that were newly discovered as relevant to misfit, of a more social nature, included the lack of opportunities for interaction, desire to keep a professional distance, time pressure minimizing social interaction, and also group or team disruption. Overall, the analysis of misfit dimensions is supported both by our review of past research and by the current data.
A second interesting feature in our qualitative analysis is the important role for social norms in perceptions of misfit and fit (Cialdini et al., 1991). In our review of previous misfit research, summarized in Table 1, work relationships are missing although a few authors do mention the social context as important for providing the fit contrast (Chan, 1996; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005). Our theoretical and empirical analyses suggest that social relationships are key: Dimensions of misfit may exist, but coworker interactions may either conceal or disclose these as salient in the social context. Specifically, social norms, revealed via coworker interactions, provide a filter for the development of misfit perceptions. These two aspects, of extending the elements associated with misfit, and supporting the role of social norms experienced via interactions to perceptions of misfit, make substantial contributions to our understanding of what misfit is. The development of both fit and misfit and also work relationships occur due to – and in the context of – individual and organization factors. Our data suggest that these processes work concurrently rather than independently. This research supports the notion that perceptions of misfit are fundamentally developed in the context of social norms, with these being evident through interactions. The contribution of this research is in clarifying the varied approaches to misfit found in past research into a unified framework, and the extension of the literature on misfit through introducing an interpersonal focus.

Limitations

Our sample of 167 respondents for a single question differs from the typical sample in qualitative research where a smaller number of participants provide more in-depth information. Some readers may view our sample as small, which may limit the empirical generalizability of the findings. The lack of in-depth conversation with participants to more fully explore the concept of misfit is a limitation of this study and warrants further research. Additionally, our findings cannot claim legitimacy beyond the sample we studied. Also,
given that most respondents came from different organizations, it was not possible to analyze organizational context. We have focused specifically on how individuals’ self perceptions within the organizational environment shape their perceptions of misfit.

**Future Research**

Our research was deliberately exploratory given that few researchers have investigated misfit (Billsberry et al., 2005). Our findings raise a number of interesting issues that merit additional investigation. As indicated above, a limitation of this research is the lack of conversation with participants exploring misfit themes and context, and this would be a valuable next step to provide a deeper understanding of misfit. One key contribution of our research is Table 1 in which we develop a categorization of misfit dimensions that captures both past and the present research. Future qualitative research should investigate these dimensions relative to each other, to more profoundly understand and extend them.

Particularly interesting questions relate to the possible differences across dimensions. For example, is structural misfit more amenable to change, since tasks and roles can be adjusted? We suggest also that social misfit may be the most detrimental to personal wellbeing, since belonging is fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

A second area for further research is a more systematic analysis of how social norms and coworker relationships are implicated in the development and perpetuation of perceptions of misfit. Research could compare organizations with different organizational cultures in terms of support for social interactions, or practices supporting positive coworker relations, to see if these were associated with differences in perceptions of fit and misfit. Cross-cultural issues could be considered too, such as the roles of collectivism and individualism in perceptions of fit and misfit. We would expect that organizations in countries with collective values would have stronger social norms, and these could make misfit based on individual differences, structural, or social factors more salient. In line with this suggestion, recent
research by Ramesh and Gelfland (2009) showed that in a collective culture – India – employees were more influenced by organization and community links than in the individualistic culture of the United States.

A third issue worthy of further consideration is our definition of misfit. Future research could explore and refine this. Relatedly, we proposed that misfit only occurs if mismatches “are salient to one or both parties”. Research could examine whether salience acts as a mediator or moderator between elements taken from the four factors that can underlie misfit (sociodemographic, individual differences, structural, social) and actual perceptions of misfit. It may also be that borderline fit exists at this cusp, with low salience protecting against and high salience promoting perceptions of misfit.

**Practical Implications**

Person-environment fit meshes well with current ideas of enabling employees to be aligned with the organization (Silzer & Church, 2009), in order to experience engagement, use their full abilities at work, and deliver high performance (Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010). Further, we know that fit is associated with more positive work and organizational attitudes (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004), and lower turnover (Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, Hermans, Du Bois, Caers et al., 2009). Seen in this light, it is clear that fit has much positive potential for organizations whereas misfit is not desirable.

Our research suggests that social norms are involved in perceptions of misfit. In some cases managers were critical in supporting poor social norms through developing teams with little diversity, structuring work in ways that provided solo roles and competitive systems, and allowing cliques to prevail. A number of respondents talked about cultural norms which promoted fit or misfit, such as having friendly relations with colleagues, regular and often spontaneous social opportunities with coworkers or, in contrast, a lack of opportunities for interaction apart from infrequent formal occasions. Managers can promote workplace norms
that support social interaction opportunities and reduce feelings of social isolation. Structural elements of work contributed to misfit perceptions also, such as office layouts and role descriptions. These seem relatively easy to change, and could present quick wins for managers looking to improve perceptions of fit. For managers themselves, they may need to develop some common ground with direct reports for the sake of rapport, allowing some sense of fit to develop. Overall, we suggest that managers should view coworker relations as an important and useful means of positively embedding employees in the organization (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001; Morrison & Wright, 2009). Managers should develop and entrench formal and informal policies and practices that support positive coworker relations, resulting in more employees perceiving that they fit, and fewer employees experiencing misfit (Cooper-Thomas, 2009).

Finally, our findings have broader societal implications. The unhappiness of those who do not fit in is clear from respondents’ quotes presented in the results. Due to crossover effects that can occur between colleagues (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009), those working with employees who misfit may also have poorer experiences of work, and this may spillover to friends and family of the misfitting employee. Hence, although misfit may be felt most keenly by the individual, it is likely to have broad negative ramifications. Further, with increasing changes in society (e.g., immigration) and in how work is done (e.g., types of contracts), the potential bases for misfit are increasing.
References


Judge, T. A. (2007). The future of person-organization fit research: Comments, observations, and a few suggestions. In C. Ostroff & T. A. Judge (Eds.), *Perspectives on organizational fit* (pp. 419-445). New York: LEA.


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Figure 1: Three different conceptualizations of misfit

Figure 1a: Fit – misfit as a continuum

Figure 1b: Misfit as more or less than fit

Figure 1c: Misfit as a qualitative difference from misfit