Co-Worker Relations and Person-Organization Misfit

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Employees perform better, are healthier, happier, and stay longer in environments in which they fit (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). In line with this, organizations wish to improve fit, and research has typically assessed the influence of organizational recruitment and socialization processes in achieving increases in fit (Chatman, 1991; Cooper-Thomas, Van Vianen, & Anderson, 2004; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005). While the literature on fit as a positive and sought-after outcome has burgeoned, misfit has been relatively neglected. Specifically, little research has investigated how people develop and maintain perceptions of not fitting in. In this chapter, we explore this gap and, in particular, investigate the relationship between co-worker relations and person-organization misfit.

In everyday language, people use the term “misfit” to describe a person who differs from the social or organizational norm, either in terms of their demographic status, personal attributes, or their work-related behaviour. Examples of this include solo colleagues, such as the only Pacific employee in a workplace, the only employee to have (or not have) a university degree, the only openly gay employee, or the only colleague who does not “do” casual Fridays. Despite the common usage of the term in organizational settings, there is no research that directly focuses on conceptualising
misfit. There is also little investigation of the relationship between co-worker relations and fit or misfit, other than research showing that general socialising can reinforce organizational socialisation efforts in achieving fit, while relationship building with the boss can negate such organizational actions (Kim et al., 2005). Furthermore, beyond the earlier work of Jackson and colleagues (Jackson, Stone, & Alvarez, 1993), there is little research on the relative importance of individual differences in perceptions of fit and misfit. A focus on misfit is important because of the potential negative connotations it can have, in particular, for individual performance and wellbeing (Shaw & Gupta, 2004). Moreover, we posit that misfit may have severe organizational implications too. Consider those workers who “go postal”\(^1\) – clearly the experience of severe misfit with colleagues can have fatal consequences.

Perceptions of both person-organization (P-O) fit and misfit are formed through judgements about how well one matches against organizational norms and standards. Critical to deciphering these matches are organizational relationships, that is, associations between colleagues based on regular workplace interactions. Colleagues send each other both implicit and explicit messages about what fit means. Implicit messages (Giri, 2009) may include, for example, demographic features of the colleague, their clothes, or their style of interaction. Explicit messages may involve direct statements about the ways in which fellow employees should fit with the work environment, such as “we don’t have lunch breaks around here”. These implicit and explicit messages from insiders to potential new employees start at recruitment (Cable & Judge, 1996) and continue through socialisation (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004) and in ongoing organizational life (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005).

\(^1\)“Going postal”, is an American English slang term which means becoming extremely and uncontrollably angry and/or violent, usually in a workplace environment.
Like organizational misfit, organizational relationships have also been neglected by scholars, despite relationships being a central prerequisite for a meaningful life (Lips-Wiersma & Morris, 2009; Morrison & Wright, 2009). Thus, in spite of the pivotal nature of relationships, they are typically placed in the background of organizational life, and are not often analysed in relation to other work-related variables (Gersick, Bartunek, & Dutton, 2000). Yet social processes are critical to organizational effectiveness (Ragins & Dutton, 2007) and there is initial evidence that a more socially supportive organizational environment is also associated with greater P-O fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004).

In this chapter, we argue that misfit occurs against a social backdrop, with co-workers themselves and co-worker relationships critical to perceptions of misfit. Within this, we argue that the quality of co-worker relationships is key. By quality co-worker relationships we mean the experience of feeling genuine friendship, a sense of belonging, authentic social intercourse, shared work interests, a true sense of relatedness, and interpersonal trust. Moreover, we propose that the existence of high quality social exchanges serve to mute feelings of P-O misfit. Our research represents the first effort in the literature to explore the links between work relationships and P-O misfit.

The chapter is organized as follows. First, we provide a brief overview of the theoretical background underlying much of the research on organizational fit and misfit, and position the literature on work relationships within this research. Second we review previous research on P-O misfit, summarising the main dimensions underlying misfit into a model (Figure 1), and providing a definition of P-O misfit. Third, we present the findings from qualitative research on the relationship between workplace social relationships and organizational misfit and, from this, we introduce a
revised model of P-O misfit (see Figure 2). The main contribution of this research is in clarifying the varied approaches to P-O misfit found in past research into a unified framework, and both the provision of a definition of P-O misfit and our extension of the literature on misfit through introducing an interpersonal relationships focus. These latter two aspects in particular may prove useful guides for future research.

**Organizational Fit and Misfit**

Schneider’s (2001; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995) attraction – selection – attrition (ASA) theory suggests that people are attracted to organizations that have similar values to their own; they are selected into those organizations; and, if and when there is poor fit, they leave. Thus, P-O fit is based on the match of an individual relative to other individuals that they work with, although these reference individuals may be aggregated to be conceived of as a unitary entity, namely the organization. Although Schneider and colleagues do not specify a role for social interaction in the development and maintenance of perceptions of P-O fit (Schneider, Kristof-Brown, Goldstein, & Smith, 1997), this seems implicit since match on values can only be assessed through sharing information. Nonetheless, the enjoyment of interacting with similar others is given as an outcome of good P-O fit, leading to positive attitudinal outcomes (Schneider et al., 1997).

Looking at this process for misfit then, the ASA paradigm suggests that an employee embedded in a context in which she is dissimilar to most other employees should be substantially less socially attracted to the other employees. This lack of social attraction, in turn, should lead to lower levels of social interaction, and cause the employee to be less socially integrated, with weaker interpersonal bonds and greater levels of conflict between herself and colleagues. Finally, just as having close bonds and the associated social relationships with co-workers facilitates retention
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(Feeley & Barnett, 1997; McPherson, Popielarz, & Drobnic, 1992; O’Reilly, Caldwell, & Barnett, 1989), the consequence of poor social relationships at work should be turnover (Cooper-Thomas & Poutasi, 2010). In summary, just as similarity between colleagues results in fit, dissimilarity results in misfit.

**Previous research investigating organizational misfit.** P-O fit research has tended to focus on the meaning and benefits of fit. In contrast, misfit has been neglected. The small amount of research on misfit identifies a number of dimensions along which misfit is possible. For individual factors, demographic variables of race, gender, and age are commonly investigated, especially in the relational demography literature (Ellis & Tsui, 2007), with socio-economic status and tenure also providing relatively salient initial bases for assessing similarity with colleagues (Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007; Sacco & Schmitt, 2005). In terms of deeper-level 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), and work skills (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996). Looking at organization factors, structural factors that relate to the organization of work may result in misfit, and include policies and job demands (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996). Social factors within the organization, that are less observable, may also result in misfit, such as the pace and structure of work (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005; Slocombe & Bluedorn, 1999), values and ethics, practices and norms, and feedback (Lovelace & Rosen, 1996). We summarise these elements in Figure 1.

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A further clarification is required with regard to the division of these elements into individual and organizational factors. We suggest that misfit is discovered through a process of contrast, but that the background that makes the contrast salient
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will vary, being either the individual or the organization. Exploring this further, for individual factors, an employee will have a clear sense of social identity based on elements such as race or personal values. When this is salient as being different from the social context, for example being a solo woman in a male team (Hogg & Terry, 2000), then misfit stems from the individual factors initially. On the other hand, an employee may encounter organizational structures or social practices that become salient as dimensions of misfit, for example that the work pace is faster or slower than is comfortable (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005). In these cases the misfit stems initially from the organization.

Defining organizational 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 some desirable trait, style, or value relative to others in the organization. In this, misfit and fit are opposite along a continuum (Wheeler et al., 2005, 2007). For example, Chan’s (1996) study of cognitive misfit looks at the continuum of adaptive through to innovative cognitive styles. In this, employees with an innovative cognitive style who work with colleagues who have an adaptive 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. 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. Lovelace and Rosen (1996) present the story of an employee experiencing misfit on ethical grounds, through being party to a discussion where a customer had been promised something
which then could not be exactly delivered, and the organizational cover up of this. Categorical attributes, such as race, also represent such a qualitative difference in fit (Harrison, 2007). We also suggest that employees who innovate to try and craft their own role represent this third type of misfit (Feldman & Brett, 1983), although this can also be a strategy to force colleagues to adjust (Anderson & Thomas, 1996; Kammeyer-Mueller, 2007) and thus reduce misfit.

Previous researchers on misfit do not always specify their assumptions regarding the relationship between fit and misfit. However, 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-organization misfit refers to a mismatch between the individual and the organization, and relates to individual factors that are more than, less than, or qualitatively different from the comparable factors at the organization level.*

These various types of misfit, and the dimensions on which they are based, will vary in salience over time as employees have more chance to interact. Thus, demographic elements such as race and sex may be most noticeable at first, but their influence reduces over time as other deeper level elements become more relevant for assessing fit (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Sacco & Schmitt, 2005; see also Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007). Indeed, Sacco and Schmitt (2005) suggest that extraversion and time facilitate meaningful interactions and help employees overcome any initial perceptions of misfit resulting from demographic dissimilarity, although other research suggests that some demographic differences can have enduring effects.
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(Ibarra, 1993). Similarly, Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2005) suggest that social cues, such as the behavioural hurriedness of proximal co-workers, can make evident work rhythm fit and misfit. Further, that workplace rhythms are more salient to employees new to the context, who become synchronised with the dominant rhythm more rapidly when tasks are interdependent and require co-worker co-ordination. In spite of these suggestions on the important role of social interactions for misfit, as yet there is no research that investigates this directly. For fit, there is evidence that new employees who seek information and try to build a good work relationship with their boss show higher levels of fit (Kim et al., 2005). Further, new employees who spend more time with their mentor and participating in social activities also show higher fit (Chatman, 1991; see also Cooper-Thomas et al., 2004). Thus it is logical that social relationships and interpersonal interactions are also fundamental to misfit.

Conceptually, the literature on fit refers to congruence in terms of values and attitudes, whereas the literature on diversity refers to congruence in terms of externally visible characteristics, usually related to demographic categories (Elfenbein & O’Reilly, 2007). Elfenbein and O’Reilly (2007) suggest that researchers should explore the extent to which their findings reflect a combination of incongruities in underlying cognition, such as values, as well as demographic differences. The research which is presented in this chapter incorporates this suggestion, reflecting our diverse understanding of individual differences and the links to perceptions of misfit. We now turn to our current research on work relationships and how they are central to organizational misfit.

Evidence for the Relationship between Organizational Misfit and Work Relationships
Our interest in the link between social relationships at work and perceptions of misfit stems from previous research on co-worker relations (Wright, 2005; Wright, 2008). As part of a larger quantitative survey on loneliness in the workplace, qualitative information was gathered asking participants to comment generally on their social relationships at work. This data was initially gathered to place a context around the quantitative data on loneliness, social support, and the organization’s emotional climate. However, an initial scroll through the data suggested that there was a link between fit and relationships. On more detailed analysis, a clear theme emerged illustrating a connection between ‘fitting in’ with their organization – or not – and the quality of their co-worker relations. It was the following quote that sparked the research idea of investigating more closely the link between misfit and worker relations:

“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…at times I feel really lonely.”

Because misfit is under-researched (Billsberry et al., 2006; Chatman et al., 2008; Judge, 2007; Wheeler et al., 2007), qualitative methods offer a way of gaining a deeper understanding of what the concept means. The present research represents a fresh approach to a data set that was not previously investigated to look at misfit (Wright, 2005). Here, we take a novel approach and aim to understand how individuals perceive their misfit with the organization and what they believe the causes of misfit are (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005).

Participants. 537 participants responded to a questionnaire about social relationships in the workplace. The survey was published online and invitations were sent out to New Zealand and Australian organizations known to the first author to participate in the research. Snowballing was used to generate sufficient responses
from employees within the organization. In the questionnaire, there was the opportunity for respondents to write open-ended comments regarding the quality of their co-worker relationships. 167 participants spontaneously provided comments regarding various aspects of fit or misfit in their organization and the quality of their co-worker relations. This group were largely professional employees (researchers, accountants, lawyers, HR specialists), ranged in age from 25 years through to 60 years (mean = 43 years), and were mostly female (72%).

**Data analysis.** We adopted an interpretive paradigm – where behaviour and perspectives will differ depending on the various organizational contexts. Given this, we chose an inductive coding approach as the most appropriate way to preserve unique perceptions embedded in the data. A further advantage of using an inductive approach is the avoidance of imposing preconceived categories which may bias the findings (McClelland, 1998).

**Themes emerging from our data.** Our analysis revealed four themes relating the underlying topic of social relationships to individual and organizational factors affecting PO misfit. These four themes are demographics, individual differences, role factors, and organizational context. Using our data as the basis for each theme, we highlight participant comments which address each theme.

**Demographics.** Relational demography theory (Tsui, Egan, & O’Reilly, 1992; Tsui & O’Reilly, 1989) suggests that demographic similarity positively impacts the social relationships between individuals. Conversely, demographic dissimilarity is thought to disrupt interpersonal relationships. To the extent that demographic characteristics of groups create salient work environments, those who do not fit into those environments should experience negative outcomes (King & Cortina, 2010). Likewise, Schneider’s (1987) ASA theory suggests that organizations have a natural
tendency toward establishing homogeneity because those who do not fit are not
attracted to, selected for, or retained on the job. One conceptual limitation of the ASA
model and relational demography theory is that they underemphasise the potential for
moderators between demographic similarity and fit. While our data supports the
notion of demographic dissimilarity leading to perceptions of misfit, the relationship
tended to be influenced by the quality of work relationships. Further, it seems
plausible that some employees experience borderline fit but that this is sufficient for
them to choose to remain at the organization (Cooper-Thomas, 2008).

“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.”

“It might be of worth to also note that I am gay. I am reserved around my co-
workers and always feel a bit out of place but there are some kind people
which is why I stay on.”

When analysing the quotes, there was a strong sense that demographic
differences were only perceived as a fit or misfit issue if interpersonal factors such as
kindness and inclusion were missing from the work social environment. For example,
two respondents noted misfit issues relating to age differences, but with different fit
outcomes according to interpersonal treatment from colleagues.

“As one of the younger people in my workplace, and having only started
recently, I feel somewhat separate, although they do make me feel welcome. I
guess I tend to be shy naturally anyway, which makes it difficult to fit in
immediately with new co-workers.”
“I'm the young guy at work, completely different demographics to those people around me. The people I work with are not the people I hang around with after work so 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.”

Length of tenure surfaced as a salient demographic variable affecting the quality of relationships formed in the workplace. Naturally, for employees who have only been in the role a short while, the development of meaningful and trusting relationships will be in their infancy (Rollag, 2004). Furthermore, frequent changes in the role context, for example through restructuring of work, limited opportunities to develop social relationship and, in turn, restricted perceptions of fitting in. A certain degree or longevity of relationships with colleagues is needed to develop competence, acceptance, and trust, for both social- and task-related matters (Feldman, 1977). 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 findings show that the initial development of interpersonal relationships in the work environment contributes to whether the individual feels they fit or not.

“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 would like to comment that 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.”
Individual differences. Our data suggests individual differences affect perceptions of misfit. As would be expected, P-O fit was experienced by those whose personality matched those they worked with, and this was largely linked to the quality of interpersonal interactions. Intuitively, it follows that cordial interpersonal relations will exist when members of the workplace share similar individual characteristics. This reinforces the notion of supplemental person–organization fit (Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987) suggesting that similarity between an employee and his or her co-workers is associated with positive outcomes at work (Kristof, 1996).

“The people here are kind and friendly and really positive – I need that to feel part of the organization.”

On the flip side, those who reported a mismatch between their personality and those of their co-workers experienced stronger feelings of misfit. A mismatch in social inclusion needs between colleagues also contributed to feelings of misfit.

“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] here at [Government Organization]. Our social relationships aren’t the greatest and now I have some idea why.”

“I’ve been in this new job for 4 months, and there are few people here who are ‘exactly my type of person’, and consequently I haven’t developed any particularly close social relationships with any workmates. It would be nice to have a closer social relationship at work as it would make me feel better about being here.”
A high degree of misfit was felt also when the individual reported a more gregarious nature but worked amongst colleagues who preferred limited social contact. Notably, it was this minority group who experienced greater levels of loneliness (Wright, 2008).

“*I came from another city to work for the federal Govt in Australia. First Govt job & first time in Canberra. I find my colleagues to lack social skills to a significant degree. They don't get on with each other - let alone me. In order to get along it's a matter of adjusting for me to operate in a way I feel comfortable. I prefer social activity at work but have to do this via long distance with my friends in my home city.*”

A clear theme emerged in the data suggesting that fitting in was largely determined by an individual’s desire for social exchange in the first place. If the employee did not seek to fit in and reported no desire to form or maintain work social relationships, perceptions of misfit were not reported. 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).

“I like to keep my work and social life separate.”

“I tend to keep a distinction between work social activities and outside of work social activities, preferring not to mix the two.”

“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.”

**Role.** The nature of the role emerged as a unique theme impacting on the quality of relationships and perceptions of misfit within role factors. It was also
interesting to note that the quality of work relationships has a direct association with misfit regardless of role factors.

“I feel unaccepted by my colleagues - I am fairly new in this position, and find it stressful to fit in with everyone, even though there are a lot of positives about the job.”

A clear theme emerged from respondents noting that their specific role either caused or required them to establish a certain social distance from colleagues. Such people are likely to experience borderline fit, either voluntarily, where they have chosen to establish such a distance, or involuntarily, where the distance is due to objective role requirements.

“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.”

“As I spend a significant amount of time out of the immediate work environment, I feel it very important to have the trust of my work mates and think it is important to get to know the people on a personal level while keeping some professional distance.”

“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.”

Another clear theme emerging from the data was that the conditions of employment, in terms of permanent versus temporary roles, and full-time versus part-time, play a part in the perception of fit and misfit with the organization. Those who
work in part-time, temporary, or contract roles can feel (or be made to feel) on the periphery of the social network within the organization.

“...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 focussed on meeting huge workloads and are not that interested in building rapport etc with low-status part-timers!”

Finally, the physical environment in the organization, in combination with role segregation (versus interdependence), also seem to determine feelings of individual misfit. The physical layout of office space was a theme suggesting a link with perceptions of fit and misfit.

“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 within the Minister’s portfolio. Being a smoker I generally take breaks with the receptionist as he too is a smoker, other than that I have been in this office for four months and I could honestly say I do not really know or understand the rest of the members in this office. I rely heavily on the two senior PA's within the Ministry for social contact.”

Proximity and shared tasks provide co-workers opportunities for interaction (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005). Co-workers who work in close proximity (e.g. have desks, offices, or work stations near each other) or who work on projects together are more likely to become friends (Sias & Cahill, 1998). Because friendship is based on mutual respect and liking and because organizations are (in the mind of workers)
made up of co-workers, it follows that employees who have friends in their work environment are less likely to experience PO misfit.

**Organization.** Particular organizational cultures impact individuals differently. It is often suggested that congruence with the organization’s values is key to experiencing P-O fit (Chatman, 1989; Kim et al., 2005). Such values may include hard elements, such as ‘being aggressive’ or ‘achievement orientation’ as well as gentler values such as ‘tolerance’ or ‘being easy going’ (O’Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Regardless of the actual values, what is important is that the values held by the organization, or more specifically one’s immediate colleagues who represent the organization, match those of the individual employee. Within our dataset, differences in values were evident in the notion of cliques and divisive interpersonal competition, negatively affecting relationships. We propose that these result in perceptions of borderline fit.

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

“The competition within [our organization] for career advancement impacts upon the quality of relationships that can be had. Some people are very determined to achieve [leadership roles] and can be ruthless in their self-promotion. This prevents sincere friendships developing and can make those who don’t achieve feel on the outer.”

“Support to overcome work related issues is unavailable and because competitiveness is high it is not seen as wise to be too open, friendly or personal. Support is purely work related and cliques are seen as divisive. Only

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2 “Feeling on the outer” is a colloquial term used to express an individual’s perception of social marginalisation. The first two quotes both use the word “outer”. The quotes come from different participants but within the same organization.
One or two could be called friends, most are professional acquaintances and treated as such."

Most relationships in the workplace are heavily influenced by organizational culture characteristics, such as hierarchical structure, individual competition, and seniority. In some cases, organizations strongly discourage friendship at work for fear of improper behaviour or reduced productivity (Berman, West & Richter, 2002). For example, in his study of an engineering firm, Fletcher (1998) discusses how co-worker relations and their benefits disappear into the system through a process that constructs such relationships as non-work, and dismisses them as inconsequential. This theme was present in our data, with some participants suggesting that the organizational culture they experience does not value or encourage the formation or maintenance of workplace social relationships, and hence limits opportunities to engender P-O fit. The covert message is that the workplace is not a place for informal social expression or relationship formation.

"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 [stet] 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."

Although not a pervasive theme in our data, a concerning pattern emerged indicating that chronic perceptions of misfit resulted in the more extreme feelings
associated with alienation, loneliness, and ostracism. This was particularly associated with organizational structure and local group cultures that either passively or actively made people feel lonely and out of place.

“The professoriate is an isolating occupation as is academia in general. Group process is not the norm, hierarchy created by design, and relationships not traditional from a workplace perspective. If this isn’t accepted by the individual it can be a very lonely place.”

Employees experiencing relationships in these alienating organizational cultures can feel marginalised or threatened (Golden-Biddle, GermAnn, Reay & Procyshen, 2007). Over time, the feeling within such organizational cultures is one of ‘not caring’, where the majority of employees develop a dismissive attitude toward the quality of work relationships or inclusive needs, unwittingly creating a divisive culture rather than a socially enriching one. Such a negative social climate contributes to perceptions of misfit across a work group or an organization, except perhaps for the persecutors of such behaviour, who revel in such an antagonistic climate.

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

“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”.

By early adulthood individuals regard social inhibition and withdrawal as maladaptive behaviours (Younger & Boyko, 1987). We suggest that the negative social reputation associated with social withdrawal may lead to borderline fits and misfits. Such individuals may develop negative self-perceptions which further exacerbate their withdrawal, and push them further into misfit territory. In the absence of intervention, the circular pattern of behavioural withdrawal, negative co-
worker reputation, and negative self-perceptions may result in the employee feeling ‘out of place’ most of the time whilst at work. In light of our analysis in this research, employees who experience this high degree of misfit in association with poor quality co-worker relations may find it difficult to access social opportunities and solve interpersonal dilemmas, becoming gradually more socially inhibited. In the absence of intervention or organizational culture change, these factors may lead to heightened psychological distress and feelings of alienation and loneliness.

On the flip side however, our data show that organizational cultures that emphasise positive social relations engendered feelings of fit, and have positive individual affective outcomes such as commitment and social integration. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that the match of an individual to the organization’s goals, values or needs 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). It makes sense that cultures in which employees like each other, get along well, and help each other out are going to have a positive impact on collective perceptions of fit.

“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].”

Organizational culture shapes positive relationships (Golden-Biddle, et al, 2007), and as the above participant comment suggests, positive relationships also
shape culture by keeping symbolic forms and positive organizational practices (such as interpersonal helping) alive and reinforcing them with meaning and significance.

A Revised Model of Organizational Misfit and Work Relationships

If P-O misfit is the lack of congruence between the attributes of the employee and those that she works with in the organization, our data suggests that relationship quality at work is central to this perception of incongruence. Our research provides further support for the individual and organizational differential precursors to misfit outlined in Figure 1, but in addition suggests that these factors only contribute to perceptions of misfit if the individual experiences poor co-worker relationships in the workplace. Thus co-worker relationships act as a buffer or exacerbator for perceptions of P-O misfit. In other words, experiencing feelings of misfit may not be distressing if one’s work peers provide opportunities for genuine social connection.

Figure 2 presents the qualitative themes deciphered from the current data in the plain font and the elements from Figure 1 added in italics. We focus first on the qualitative data analysis, that is, the plain font in Figure 2. The four themes emerging from the data, of demographics, individual differences, role, and organization, are portrayed in our model of workplace fit. First, it is noticeable that these four elements are similar to those extracted from the previous, mostly quantitative literature on P-O misfit and shown in Figure 1, and included in Figure 2 in italics. However, our qualitative analysis suggests additional elements. Sexual orientation emerged at the individual level, as well as specific personality orientations, such as being shy, hostile, anti-social, and disinterested in social relationships at work. On the organization side, misfit was associated with structural factors including the constant change and upheaval at work, and role changes as well as employment contract effects within role
perceptions. Other elements that were newly discovered as relevant to misfit, of a more social nature, included the desire to keep a professional distance, time pressure, tenure, and also group or team disruption.

A second interesting feature of the data in our qualitative analysis is the importance of social relationships, and the social context, to perceptions of misfit and fit. In Figure 1, work relationships are missing, although a few authors mention the social context as important for providing the fit contrast (Chan, 1996; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2005). As summarised in Figure 2, our analysis suggests that social relationships have direct effects on perceptions of misfit, and also act to buffer or exacerbate perceptions of misfit stemming from other causes. So they may act either as insulation against or intensification towards feelings of misfit. We propose that these two aspects, of extending the factors associated with P-O misfit, and showing the importance of social relationships to perceptions of misfit, make substantial contributions to our understanding of what misfit is, and how perceptions of misfit develop and are maintained. Specifically, that both individual and organizational factors may precipitate perceptions of misfit, and that co-worker relations may be involved in these, or may act to moderate their effects on perceptions of misfit. Hence our research provides initial evidence that P-O misfit is not simply an equation of individual and organizational factors directly affecting misfit. Rather, the complexities of human relationships in the workplace can act to heighten or lessen perceptions of misfit. The development of both P-O 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. According to both the fit literature (e.g. Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995) and the literature on friendship development (e.g. Sias & Cahill, 1998)
individuals become closer when they perceive they are demographically or
attitudinally similar to one another, or both, and when they enjoy each other’s
personalities. This chapter provides data to support the notion that perceptions of
misfit is fundamentally about poor quality collegial relationships. Our research
supports and expands on previous research, adding an interpersonal relations stratum,
causing, buffering, or aggravating the relationship between individual and
organizational factors and P-O misfit.

**Conclusion**

The relationships we have with other individuals constitute a critical part of
the environment in which we live our working lives. Our analysis shows that
relationships with co-workers may cause perceptions of P-O misfit, or they may
buffer or exacerbate the effects of individual and organizational, and this is the main
contribution of this chapter. In addition, we provide a review of previous research on
P-O misfit and provide a definition of this. Further, through an interpretive analysis
of qualitative data, we have expanded the individual and organizational factors
associated with P-O misfit. Together, these contributions may prove useful
boundaries to guide future research on P-O misfit.
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.


Figure 1: Individual and organizational misfit dimensions

Figure 2: Individual and Organizational Factors Contributing to Perceptions of Person-Organization Misfit