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Definitions of Fit and Misfit in Northern Europe: Insights from a Cross-National Research Collaboration¹

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Abstract

This paper addresses the well-established definitional issues in the organisational fit and misfit literatures. In particular, it reflects upon the poorly defined nature of the terms ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ and the way they are used by researchers across languages and national borders. During a scholarly visit of the second author to the first author’s laboratory, it quickly became apparent that their understanding of the two terms was subtly different. These differences are discussed and implications developed. The paper ends with suggestions for how these differences might be systematically studied.

Introduction

It is now well-established that problems with the definition of ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ have dogged organisational fit research since its inception (Harrison, 2007). There are many reasons for these difficulties including multiple definitions and usages in common parlance, a failure to explore what fit and misfit means for the individual, and early work that used alternative wordings (e.g., congruence, similarity) to study ‘fit’ (Billsberry et al., 2005). In addition, there has been enduring tension in the literature between the way the words ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ are used. They have been used both as a psychological attitude – for example, Schneider (1987, p. 442) writes, “people who do not fit an environment well will tend to leave it” - and as a measurement of similarity or difference – for example, Chatman (1989, p. 339) writes, “person-organization fit is defined here as the congruence between the norms and values of organizations and the values of persons”. This difference represents a fundamental philosophical difference. Those referring to ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ as a psychological attitude are adopting an ‘*inside-out*’ approach where the thoughts, feelings and desires of the individual are paramount; Whereas those taking the more calculative approach are taking an ‘*outside-in*’ approach where the researcher brings together elements of the person and the situation. This philosophical difference is an epistemological one between interpretivist and positivist stances. With such significant differences of understanding and usage of these terms, it is hardly surprising that common definitions have not been forthcoming.

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This paper adds to the definitional confusions in the organisational fit literature (☺) as we add a translational element. Regardless of the definitional issues raised above, there is an assumption in the literature that ‘fit’ means ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ means ‘misfit’ wherever organisational fit research is conducted. Our insight from a research collaboration between British and Belgian researchers is that ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ in British English certainly do not mean the same as ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ translated into Dutch. Moreover, it seems that Dutch does not offer any direct analogues of the British English interpretations of the words (especially the word ‘misfit’). This lead us to wonder whether people from other countries speaking different languages actually experience these phenomena in the same way as people in Britain or other English-speaking countries.

The body of this paper begins with an autobiographical reflection on the authors’ dawning realisation that they were talking about different things when referring to ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’. Following this, the paper explores how the words ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ and their translated analogues are defined and understood in Belgium and The Netherlands. Finally, the paper offers an outline of a research plan that could be used to (i) understand similarities and differences in the various usages of the words ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ and their translated counterparts in four European countries, (ii) to explore which, if any, of the words used as translated substitutes for the word ‘misfit’ correspond to the British English meaning, and (iii) to help define the emotional elements of the word ‘misfit’.

Collaborative Confusions

Just a couple of weeks before the 4th Global e-Conference on Fit, Rein De Cooman (the second author) travelled to Coventry, England, to spend a month engaged in collaborative research in Jon Billsberry’s (the first author) laboratory. The goals of this visit were to develop new research projects in fit and misfit issues, share knowledge about fit and misfit, and have a concentrated writing retreat. Jon has always lived in England and is rather ashamed that he only speaks English. Rein, on the other hand, has always lived in Belgium, has Dutch as her first language and is also fluent in French and German.

Within the first week, it became clear to the two researchers that they were using the same words, ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’, but meaning different things. This was most evident when using the word ‘misfit’ as Jon saw this as a negative, unwanted and unpleasant condition akin to a disorder such as stress or anxiety, whereas Rein’s understanding had fewer emotional connotations and was more about being an outsider of a group; a non-conformist. In more detail, this is how the two researchers understood the word ‘misfit’ when the differences emerged.

Jon sees misfit as a psychopathology that is an enduring and negative state of mind. It stays with and afflicts ‘sufferers’ both inside and outside of the environment in which they perceive themselves as misfits. It is persistent, unwanted, unpleasant, and something that they would rather not be. There is a strong sense of being ostracised in the condition, although the ostracism may in fact be unintended and the people seen to be causing the ostracism may be completely unaware they have had this effect. The ‘sufferers’ want to be part of things and care deeply about the matters that have caused their isolation. They may have become outsiders, but there is more to be a misfit than being an outsider; it has a strong emotive element to it and a sense of ‘being out of step’ or ‘not in tune’ with the way things are done. Misfits are passionate people who care deeply about the things causing their ostracism. It differs from people who are ‘different’ or people who enjoy being on the periphery or outside; they would be mavericks. People become misfits because something is ‘done to’ them. The mindset of misfits is that they are victims. ‘Sufferers’ have tremendous difficulties alleviating themselves of the condition. Their usual course of action is to remove themselves

from the environments in which they have been made misfits. They may find coping strategies, such as identifying and bonding with other misfits. A useful quality of misfits for the researcher is that misfits know when they are misfits and label themselves as such.

In contrast, Rein sees misfit as a label that an individual may receive in a certain social environment. Misfits are individuals who deviate from their immediate surroundings due to their appearance, conceptions, or behaviours. They are maladjusted to a particular environment which makes that others perceive them as misfits. The label is a result of interpersonal interactions rather than an enduring feeling or pathology the individual develops as a reaction to his or her own perception of the environment. Similar to the condition of fit, individuals may or may not be aware of the misfit label and they may or may not be motivated to get rid of it. Because a condition of misfit entails a lot of negative consequences, misfits will often begin to suffer from it and, subsequently, consider withdrawal. Others will see it as a kind of personality trait or identity and will never really suffer from it.

In our collaboration we wanted to find a scale that could be used to identify whether someone is a misfit. As a starting point, Jon offered a scale that he had used in staff surveys. This single question asks respondents to categorise themselves as a 'fit' or a 'misfit'. The question is 'To what extent do you think you are a fit or a misfit at...?' and the five point scale runs: 'Misfit' (1), 'More Misfit than Fit' (2), 'Neither a Fit nor a Misfit' (3), 'More Fit than Misfit' (4), 'Fit' (5). Trying to translate this question and scale into Dutch highlighted some relevant problems. First, whereas the word 'misfit' is commonly used as a noun in English – describing someone as a misfit, or someone describing themselves as a misfit is not uncommon – 'fit' is more commonly used as a verb. In fact, describing someone as 'a fit' seems distinctly odd. This scale works because it is grounded in an understanding of what a misfit is; describing oneself as 'a fit' makes sense when it is the opposite of being a misfit. Second, the opposite is true in Dutch. To fit ('fitten/passen') is only used as a verb, whereas 'misfit' has no opposite in the same terminology. Making sense of the word 'misfit' thus implies that Dutch-speaking people try to think about the opposite of fitting in.

Empirical Investigations

To explore these differences, we decided to reach out to our friends and colleagues to get their view.

A Dutch colleague who has worked with The Fit Project in the UK for about four years, Jitse Van Ameijde, commented: "I would say that '*pas / passen*' (fit / to fit) would be the most appropriate translation of the concept of fit, although I think it doesn't have near the same verve and intuitive appeal as the English word. Another related concept would be '*aangepast*' which roughly translates as 'well-adjusted' and as such is conceptually a bit different." He continues: "In terms of misfit, once again we don't have a single word which is as catchy as 'misfit'. We have certain nouns which denote a similar meaning such as '*buitenbeentje*' (similar to 'outsider'), '*uitzondering*' (similar to 'exception' and can be applied to people who don't fit) or '*zonderling*' (an unusual, eccentric, or remarkable person). In terms of verbs perhaps '*afwijken*' (to deviate) would be a reasonable approximation."

Dannie Talbot, an organisational fit researcher who has just successfully defended her thesis who speaks fluent British English and Dutch, supports Jitse's view stating that: "I think that Jitse is right that '*passen*' is the closest you're going to get because it actually relates to the concept of fitting. *Buitenbeentje* is a good word but it doesn't really directly translate as misfit as it's someone who's a bit different." Rein adds, in fact the English words 'misfit' and 'maverick' are both translated as '*buitenbeentje*' in Dutch. I think this is interesting and maybe partially explains my view discussed earlier.

To further explore how the term ‘misfit’ is understood in Dutch, we decided to ask a group of people, most of whom have Dutch as their first language, a good understanding of English, and are based in Belgium or The Netherlands, to give their view on how the word would be translated into Dutch. Rein asked her friends on a social network website the following question: ‘What do you think about when I say ‘misfit’? Does this word ring a bell? How would you describe this?’ [‘Waar denken jullie aan als ik zeg ‘misfit’? Doet dit woord een belletje rinkelen? Hoe zou je dit omschrijven?]. The most interesting reactions are contained in the following table.

Question (Dutch): waar denken jullie aan als ik zeg ‘misfit’? Doet dit woord een belletje rinkelen? Hoe zou je dit omschrijven? Please help me out guys!!!!	Question (English translation): What do you think about when I say ‘misfit’? Does this word ring a bell? How would you describe this?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iemand die niet thuis hoort in de groep/omgeving 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somebody who does not fit in his group/environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mislukkeling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A failure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iemand die misplaatst is om een of andere reden 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone who is misplaced/mistaken because of a certain reason
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Onaangepast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maladjusted
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twee delen/personen/structuren die niet bij mekaar passen, een beetje zoals 2 puzzelstukjes die toch niet in mekaar klikken 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two parts/persons/structures that do not suit each other, like two pieces of a puzzle that do not click into each other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iemand die niet de juiste kwaliteiten heeft die verwacht worden in een bepaalde rol, wat niet wil zeggen dat deze persoon geen goede kwaliteiten heeft, maar wel dat hij/zij haar huidige rol verkeerd/niet goed vervult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone who doesn’t have the right qualities that are expected in a certain role, which does not mean that this persons lacks good qualities, but rather that he/she does not fulfill her/his role properly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iemand met een te kleine onderbroek aan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somebody wearing too small underpants
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In het Engels wordt dat ook vaak gebruikt om een freak aan te duiden: Zo'n klein asociaal trolletje dat eigenlijk stiekem mee wil spelen met de andere kindjes, maar zij vinden hem een rare. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In English this word is frequently used to denote a freak, a small antisocial creature that sneaky wants to play along but all other kids see him as an oddity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEM: een model waarbij de parameters niet goed fitten ... 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SEM: a model which parameters do not fit well
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iemand die ergens niet thuis hoort, die wel probeert erbij te horen maar daar niet de "kwaliteiten" voor heeft. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Somebody who does not belong anywhere, somebody who tries to fit in but who does not have the qualities for it.

These responses (the humorous ones obviously excluded) seem to confirm that there is no direct analogue. Most of these interpretations have an *outside-in* aspect to them as they make assessments of people deemed to be misfits, rather than the *inside-out* experience of misfits. All of these definitions miss the emotive element contained in Jon’s definition.

At this point, we have begun to wonder whether the absence of a direct analogue might (1) mean that Dutch people do not have the experience of being a misfit (although Jitse comments, “I think that it is unlikely that our experience of fit or misfit would be different when compared to people from the UK. ... Can we ever really compare experiences / sensations, even within the same language and culture?”), (2) cause us to rethink and re-evaluate fit and misfit research conducted in Dutch and possibly other languages, (3) bring into question whether ‘fit and ‘misfit’ when expressed as nouns are related (let alone being opposites), and (4) question whether Jon has a idiosyncratic view of misfit that is out of step with the rest of the world. Are we all talking about the same thing?

Future Research

The above ‘research’ is light-hearted and clearly not conducted to standards that would pass muster in peer-reviewed journals. Instead, we have written this paper to illustrate an important feature in organisational fit research that does not appear to have been addressed previously. As there are popular usages of the words ‘fit’ and ‘misfit’ in common parlance, there is a natural tendency to think that everyone has the same understanding of these terms. However, as we have shown, these words are not understood similarly across national, cultural and linguistic borders. It would be interesting to explore if they are universally understood. To this end, we would like to invite conference delegates to offer their own definition of the word ‘misfit’ and engage in the debate.

Looking to the future, our first intention is to conduct research that attempts to define the word ‘misfit’ as a noun and as a personal psychological experience, i.e., from an inside-out, interpretivist perspective, and to explore how people define the concept differently. Our first endeavour will be to explore the emotional component of misfit by presenting people who have been a misfit at some point in their lives with a taxonomy of emotions and ask them to say which and how much each emotion was experienced when they felt like a misfit.

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