Understanding Person-Environment Misfit through the Lens of Neurodiversity

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Abstract

This paper describes the influence of neurodiversity on Person-Environment (PE) misfit and the role of misfit in neurodivergent work life and careers. Person-Group (PG) fit, Person-Supervisor (PS), fit and Person-Job (PJ) fit are each influenced by neurodiversity in different ways that affect job performance, organizational commitment, and career achievements. Survey data collected from a neurodiverse sample, including neurotypical people and those with autism and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), will compare the neurodivergent and neurotypical experiences of misfit and its influence on job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and career paths. It will also assess the influence of disclosure and neurotypical knowledge of neurodiversity on the fit of neurodivergent employees and the influence of undiagnosed neurodivergence on chronic misfit.

Overview

Person environment (PE) fit describes the compatibility of an employee with their work environment (Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010). Organizational researchers have identified several dimensions of fit, including Person-Group (PG) fit, Person-Supervisor (PS) fit and Person-Job (PJ) fit, that refer to a person's compatibility with a specific aspect of that environment. These constructs are of particular interest to management scholars because they predict desirable work outcomes including increased job performance and satisfaction, organizational commitment, life satisfaction, and decreased turnover (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2010). While most people work to achieve or maintain fit (Follmer et al., 2018) and experience misfit rarely, those who experience chronic misfit report struggling to achieve fit in multiple environments and living with misfit throughout their careers (Billsberry et al., 2023). A unifying explanation for chronic misfit has eluded organizational scholars, but recent interest and neurodiversity has the potential to explain some of the most vexing and intractable forms of chronic misfit.

Neurodiversity refers to differences in cognition and perception that are characteristic of autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other similar neurological conditions. Neurodivergent talent has become sought after in recent years (Austin & Pisano, 2017), but many organizations struggle to retain these employees because they do not provide environments in which they can thrive. The rate at which neurodivergent people experience misfit has yet to be measured systematically, but emerging evidence, supported by theory, suggests that this population is especially prone to experience misfit at work (Ezerins, Simon, et al., 2023; Ezerins, Vogus, et al., 2023; Johnson & Joshi, 2016; Pence & Svyantek, 2016).

In a recent study of online accounts of misfit, Billsberry et al (2023) found that social misfit was prevalent and likely to reoccur. Research on children and adolescents with autism and ADHD has shown consistent struggles with social interaction with peers (Adams et al., 2020; Boily et al., 2017; Kasari et al., 2011; Locke et al., 2010). These struggles continue into adulthood leading to social isolation from colleagues (Pearson et al., 2022; Whelpley & May, 2022) and difficult relationships with managers (Whelpley et al., 2021). Given the importance of social interactions to fit and the struggles neurodivergent people report having with these interactions, neurodivergent people are prone to experience recurring misfit in multiple contexts throughout their lives.

Positivist exploration of the relationship between PE misfit and neurodiversity has the potential to shed light on unanswered questions in both literatures. Why do some people experience chronic misfit when others fit in easily in multiple contexts? Which types of fit are most and least challenging in neurodiverse environments? Under which circumstances do neurodivergent employees find fit?

Person-Group misfit

Person-group (PG) misfit describes an individual's compatibility with the group of people with whom they most frequently interact at work. Fit researchers have identified social interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and customers as a key facet of fitting in at work. These are the very social interactions that become challenging when neurodivergent and neurotypical people interact. For this reason, PG misfit is one of the most predominant ways that neurodivergent employees experience misfit at work (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). PG misfit in neurodiverse environments is characterized by differences in communication style, social norm sensitivity, and values congruence.

Most descriptions of PG fit involve an individual's perception of similarity between themselves and their group. This kind of similarity-based compatibility, or supplementary fit (Kristof, 1996), is central to the lay understanding of how people fit in at work. People have high PG fit when they perceive themselves to be similar to their coworkers. Organizational scholars have also described complementary fit as the compatibility achieved when the person's membership in the group fills a need. In this way, differences between group members complement each other and differences provide value. Individuals experience complementary PG fit when their unique talents, abilities, and personality traits are seen as beneficial to the group (Kristof, 1996; Li et al., 2019). When individuals see their differences as valuable and necessary contributions to the group, neurodivergent employees will experience higher levels of fit.

Hypothesis 1: Neurodivergence predicts lower levels of PG Fit.

Hypothesis 2: Neurodivergent employees report higher levels of complementary PG fit than supplementary PG fit.

Person-Job misfit

Person-job (PJ) fit describes the compatibility between an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAOs) with the requirements of their job. Neurodivergent people often do not fit the rigid expectations about model employee behavior (Patton, 2018) built into the job demands that determine PJ fit. Most job descriptions include a mix of cognitive, social, and physical tasks. The common expectation that those who have the cognitive ability to perform one kind of task (e.g., working memory) at a certain level will perform other cognitive tasks (e.g., processing speed or pattern recognition) at a similar level is based on a neurotypical distribution of abilities. Unlike their neurotypical peers whose abilities tend to fall within one or two standard deviations of each other, neurodivergent people often exhibit a "spiky profile" of abilities (Doyle, 2020). A "spiky profile" is characterized by an uneven within-person distribution of aptitudes where the individual has high aptitude in some areas and low aptitude in others, making them overgualified for some job tasks and underqualified for others.

Heightened sensory sensitivity is a hallmark of several forms of neurodivergence. Because neurodivergent people, especially autistics, often perceive sounds, lights, textures, and other sensory input more acutely, they often find levels of sensory input that are comfortable to their neurotypical colleagues to be overwhelming (Pfeiffer et al., 2017). Thus, sharing physical space with neurotypical peers often means trying to work in an environment that is too bright, too loud, and too distracting to allow task engagement. This puts neurodivergent people at greater risk for PJ misfit because the physical environment of work is often an inflexible element of the demands of a job. Even if a neurodivergent employee's abilities fit an established set of job demands, their inability to tolerate the physical characteristics of the workplace, such as noise or lighting, can be a misfit with the demands of many jobs. Decoupling the rigidity of a physical environment from the needs of a specific job is essential to facilitate in PJ fit in a neuroinclusive organization.

Hypothesis 3: Neurodivergence predicts lower levels of PJ Fit.

Person-Supervisor misfit

The social challenges that lead to PG misfit and the other challenges that lead to PJ misfit are compounded in consideration of person-supervisor (PS) misfit in this population. Supervisors are

essential to fit for most neurodivergent employees because they are in the position to ameliorate many of the difficulties with communication and social expectations and rigidity of job descriptions that lead to misfit in other areas.

Hypothesis 4: Neurodivergence predicts lower levels of PS Fit.

Disclosure's double edge

Increasing understanding and awareness is essential for this community because common knowledge of neurodivergent conditions remains mired in inaccurate stereotypes about extreme behavior and deficits in intelligence. These stereotypes feed the societal stigma against neurodivergence and a fear of disclosing these conditions, especially at work. Neurodivergent employees who disclose their identity at work report noticing that they are seen as less capable and less intelligent by coworkers with limited knowledge of neurodiversity (Whelpley et al., 2021; Whelpley & Woznyj, 2022). Fear of this reaction drives many to conceal their neurodivergent identity at work. This limits the employees' access to disability accommodations such as changes to the environment that may help them to alleviate misfit.

Thus, neurodivergent employees face a dilemma when considering which parts of their identity to share with their colleagues. One option is to conceal their neurodivergent identity entirely and sacrifice access to accommodations and the possibility of being understood by colleagues who understand neurodiversity or are willing to learn. Alternatively, they can disclose and risk being underestimated and ostracized. Although disclosure brings with it the potential to alleviate misfit under the right conditions, it is likely to result in exacerbation of misfit when neurotypical colleagues see neurodiversity exclusively through a deficit lens.

Disclosure can alleviate misfit when organizations are prepared to respond with appropriate accommodations and supervisors and colleagues understand neurodiversity and the needs of neurodivergent adults. This level of neuroinclusion is still quite rare. All too often, disclosure results in negative consequences. As awareness of neurodiversity spreads and more managers and organizations understand the talents and needs of neurodivergent people, disclosure will carry less risk and become an avenue to finding environments in which neurodivergent people can fit.

Hypothesis 5: The relationships between neurodivergence and PG, PJ, and PS fit will be moderated by disclosure and knowledge of neurodiversity, such that neurodivergent employees who disclose will experience higher levels of fit, only when their colleagues understand neurodivergence.

Neurodivergent misfit shapes careers

One of the often-cited benefits of neurodivergent employees is that they tend to have higher organizational commitment and lower turnover (Bury et al., 2020). Evidence from research on women's careers reveals that changing jobs and organizations accelerates career progression (Brett & Stroh, 1997) and those who are unwilling or unable to change jobs or relocate earn less over the course of their careers (Brett et al., 1993). Thus, the neurodivergent tendency for low turnover and higher organizational commitment is a benefit to employers but may do neurodivergent employees themselves a disservice by stagnating their careers.

Neurodivergent resistance to job change can be attributed in part to the difficulty that many neurodivergent people have in finding a job where they fit. Neurodivergent employees may be more tolerant of misfit because they have come to expect it. Those who see even a marginally well-fitting job as a victory are unlikely to abandon such a position in search of something better, which may seem illusory or even impossible. For this reason, neurodivergent employees are less likely to leave a job where they misfit and less likely to see fit as necessary for a job to feel satisfactory. The relationships between fit and job satisfaction and intention to quit will, therefore, be stronger for neurotypical employees.

Hypothesis 6: PG, PJ, and PS fit predict higher job satisfaction and lower intention to quit.

Hypothesis 7: Neurodivergence will moderate the relationships between PG, PJ, and PS fit and job satisfaction and intention to quit, such that these relationships will be stronger for neurotypical employees.

Neurodivergent adults report being terminated for cause at a much higher rate than neurotypicals. Termination is an extreme outcome of misfit that most who experience temporary misfit never face as they are more likely to resolve misfit through effort or to choose to leave the organization (Follmer et al., 2018). In a study of employer-initiated terminations of autistic employees, poor job performance, social difficulties, and attendance were listed as reasons for termination (Pezzimenti et al., 2023). Each of these problems, indicates an area of misfit for that employee. Among those being fired for social difficulties some reported "being a bad fit" as the reason they were given for termination. Depending on the requirements of the job, social difficulties could manifest themselves as PG, PJ, or PS misfit.

Those terminated for performance or attendance reasons are likely to have experienced PS or PJ misfit. Misfit with job demands can lead to poor performance when accommodations cannot be made. Experiencing extreme stress due to misfit can also lead to autistic burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020) and poor attendance. Employees with ADHD experience higher rates of termination than those without it (Kleinman et al., 2009) and are likely to be terminated for similar reasons, because autism and ADHD share many of the same social difficulties (Mayes et al., 2012).

Hypothesis 8: Neurodivergence predicts involuntary termination of employment.

Hypothesis 9: The relationship between neurodivergence and termination of employment will be mediated by PG, PS, and PJ fit.

Neurodivergent career trajectories have received little attention from researchers, but are likely to differ substantially from neurotypical careers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many neurodivergent people report having held a variety of different kinds of jobs over the course of their careers. These winding career paths are the result of a trial-and-error approach to career choice which is complicated by the fit challenges described above. Those who do not struggle with chronic misfit are likely to move into jobs with increasing responsibility over time, but remain within the same industry or profession. Those searching for a new job to replace one where they misfit are likely to seek out different working conditions and job demands in their next position. Misfits are likely to search for a different kind of job, while those who fit well will search for jobs similar to ones they have previously held with more responsibility. Neurodivergent people experiencing chronic misfit are likely to change jobs more frequently resulting in working in a higher number of different jobs and different types of jobs over time.

Hypothesis 10: Neurodivergence predicts a higher ratio of job changes to years working.

Hypothesis 11: Neurodivergence predicts a higher ratio of changes in type of work to years working.

As public attention to neurodiversity has increased in recent years, so has the number of adult diagnoses of these conditions (Doyle, 2020). Adults who unaware that they are neurodivergent are likely to experience many of the fit challenges described above, but would not be able to understand their fit challenges as a function of their neurodivergence. Thus, undiagnosed neurodivergent adults are likely to experience misfit more frequently than neurotypical adults.

Hypothesis 12: Employees who identify as neurotypical but have low PG, PS, or PJ fit are likely to have higher scores on assessments of autism and ADHD than neurotypical employees with high levels of PG, PS, or PJ fit.

Methods

Data collection plan

A sample of 400 working adults, split evenly between neurodivergent and neurotypical, will be invited to complete an online survey via Prolific. Participants will be compensated for their time. In addition to basic demographic information (i.e. race, gender, education, age, socio-economic status), participants will be asked to provide information about their knowledge of neurodiversity, neurodivergent diagnosis (self or professional), current employment, number and titles of jobs held, number of years employed, number of voluntary and involuntary terminations of employment, current disclosure, and accommodations.

Measures

The RAADS-14 (Eriksson et al., 2013) is an autism screening tool that assesses social anxiety, sensory reactivity, and cognitive differences, hyper focus on details, difficulty reading others' emotions and non-verbal communication, which it describes as "mentalizing deficits." It was recently psychometrically validated as a self-report measure that can distinguish neurotypical from autistic respondents, including self-diagnosed autistics (Sturm et al., 2024). Sample items include "I focus on details rather than the whole idea" and "I often do not know how to act in social situations."

The Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS) is an 18 item measure of ADHD symptoms in adults, that measures inattention, "How often are you distracted by activity or noise around you?," and hyperactivity-impulsivity, "How often do you feel restless or fidgety?" (Kessler et al., 2005).

The measure of Multidimensional Perceived Person-Group Fit (MPPGF) developed by Li and colleagues (2019) assesses PG fit within 7 subdimensions: needs-supplies, shared interests, perceived demographic similarity, complementary attributes, values congruence, goal similarity, and common workstyle. Example items from this scale are: "My group shares my values," "Outside of work, I like to do the same things as other members of my group," I contribute unique talents to my group."

The Perceived Person-Environment Fit Scale (PPEFS) assesses fit with several aspects of the work environment (Chuang et al., 2016). The PS and PJ fit subscales of the PPEFS will be used to measure their respective constructs. The PS fit subscale contains 5-items, for example: "How would you describe the match between your personality and your supervisor's personality?"; "How would you describe the match between your supervisor's leadership style and the leadership style you desire?" The PJ fit subscale contains 4 items, for example: "How would you describe the match between your professional skills, knowledge, and abilities and those required by the job?"; "How would you describe the match between the characteristics of your current job (e.g. autonomy, importance, and skill variety) and those you desire for a job?"

The survey will measure Job Satisfaction using a 3-item measure, which includes items such as, "In general, I like working here" (Messersmith et al., 2011).

The survey will measure Intention to Quit using a 3-item measure, which includes items such as, "I am actively looking for a job outside my current company" (Ballinger et al., 2010).

Analyses

Hypotheses will be tested using regression, ANOVA, and structural equation modelling.

Conclusion

This proposed research has the potential to clarify the connections between the PE misfit and neurodiversity at work literatures, which have been suggested by previous conceptual work, but never empirically tested. Exploring the role of neurodiversity in PE misfit may reveal the reasons for chronic misfit. Deeper understanding of the role of misfit in neurodivergent work life can support the development of interventions that foster neuroinclusive organizations.

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