Perceptions of misfit: A study of South African employees

MK WILLIAMSON *

University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Management, Information Technology and Governance

williamsonm@ukzn.ac.za

* corresponding author

K PERUMAL

University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Management, Information Technology and Governance

perumalkr@ukzn.ac.za

Abstract

Research into person-environment fit has focused on fit and the many positive benefits that have been associated with achieving high fit. Misfit on the other hand, has been given scant attention. To date, not much is known about what exactly misfit is and how individuals experience this phenomenon at work. Moreover, there has been a paucity of studies that have explored misfit in countries outside of North America, the United Kingdom and Western Europe. This study aimed to address this gap in the literature by exploring how South African employees perceive and experience misfit at work.

The study embraced a qualitative research design using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Following a non-random sampling process, a sample of 40 employees was selected and subjected to in-depth, face-to-face interviews in which they were asked to relate their perceptions of misfit in the South African organisational context.

The sample of South African employees perceived and understood misfit in a variety of different ways. Misfit was perceived as being a label attached to people, a non-conformist, an internal psychological experience or a multi-dimensional phenomenon. A novel finding related to the perception that misfit is a "state of mind" that is idiosyncratic to each individual. The participants further emphasised race, personality and gender as the top three causal factors of misfit. The findings of this study make a significant contribution to misfit research, theory and practice.

Key phrases

Constructivist grounded theory; fit; misfit and person-environment fit

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of person-environment fit, hereafter PE fit or fit is fundamental to research in industrial/organisational (I/O) psychology, organisational behaviour (OB) and human resource management (HRM) (Edwards 2008:167-230; Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert & Shipp 2006:802-827; Edwards, Caplan & Van Harrison 1998:28-67; Kristof 1996:1-49). PE fit is broadly defined as the congruence, match, similarity or correspondence between the person and different facets of their work environment (Kristof-Brown & Guay 2010:3-50; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman & Johnson 2005:281-342). Pervin (1968:56) maintains that "a 'match' or 'best-fit' of individual to environment is viewed as expressing itself in high performance, satisfaction, and little stress in the system, whereas a 'lack of fit' is viewed as resulting in decreased performance, dissatisfaction, and stress in the system."

A great deal of published research has demonstrated that employees who exhibit high levels of fit are generally satisfied with their jobs, perform better, are less inclined to engage in counterproductive work behaviour, and are committed to and remain with their organisations much longer (Arthur, Bell, Villado & Doverspike 2006:786-801; Harold, Oh, Holtz, Han & Giacalone 2016:1513-1535; Hoffman & Woehr 2006:389-399; Kristof 1996:1-49; Kristof-Brown *et al.* 2005:281-342; Oh, Guay, Kim, Harold, Lee, Heo & Shin 2014:120; Verquer, Beehr & Wagner 2003:473-489). Consequently, many organisations desire to enhance PE fit. The research to date has typically focused on the impact of selection and socialisation practices on raising fit levels in employees (Adkins, Russell & Werbel 1994:605-623; Bowen, Ledford & Nathan 1991:35-51; Cable & Judge 1997:546-561; Cable & Parsons 2001:1-23; Chatman 1991:459-484; Cooper-Thomas, Van Vianen & Anderson 2004:52-78; De Cooman, De Gieter, Pepermans, Hermans, Du Bois, Caers & Jegers 2009:102-107; Kim, Cable & Kim 2005:232-241; Wright & Cooper-Thomas 2009:1-33).

In one of the most widely cited theories in person-organisation (PO) fit research, the attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) framework, Schneider (1987:445) posited that "people are differentially attracted to, selected by, and retained by organisations when they have similar characteristics to other people in the organisation." When individuals discover that they do not fit or are misfits, they tend to leave the organisation. However, it is unclear whether these employee misfits always leave the organisation (Wheeler, Buckley, Halbesleben, Brouer & Ferris 2005:265-304; Wheeler, Gallagher, Brouer & Sablynski 2007:203-219). Scholars have argued that misfits will not always leave an organisation, but remain, "acting as centres of

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rebellion, disaffection, and malcontent in order to express feelings of stress, dissatisfaction and frustration" (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Marsh, Moss-Jones & Van Meurs 2005:12)

Wright and Cooper-Thomas (2009:1) defined a misfit as "a person who differs from the social or organisational norm, either in terms of their demographic status, personal attributes, or their work-related behaviour." While the literature on PE fit as a positive and desirable state has flourished, misfit on the other hand, has been given scant attention by researchers (Cooper Thomas & Wright 2013:21; Vogel, Rodell & Lynch 2016:1561; Wright & Cooper-Thomas 2009:1-33). Kristof-Brown and Guay (2010:38) concluded that "misfit is a subject that has been largely (sic) overlooked by researchers." Judge (2007:419-445) had previously made a similar observation.

Despite the surge in interest in the phenomenon of misfit in recent years, many questions have still not satisfactorily been answered. For example, what exactly is this phenomenon called misfit? How do people define and understand it, especially in the context of different countries? What causes individuals to be misfits at work? (Billsberry & De Cooman 2010:1-5; Harrison 2007:389-416; Kristof-Brown & Guay 2010:3-50; Wheeler 2010:1-6). Against this background, this study heeds the call for more research into the phenomenon of misfit.

2.   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Misfit has thus far predominantly been investigated in countries such as the United States (US), United Kingdom (UK) and Western Europe (e.g. Devloo, Anseel & De Beuckelaer 2011:453-465; Edwards & Billsberry 2010:476-493; Robert & Wasti 2002:544-566; Simmering, Colquitt, Noe & Porter 2003:954-963; Wheeler *et al.* 2005:265-304; Wheeler *et al.* 2007:203-219). These countries have developed economies and apart from a few language differences, share similar social and cultural norms and possibly similar organisational experiences. Further investigating misfit issues in these countries might be likened to "re-inventing the wheel" and thus not eliciting a richer and deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Instead, it might be fruitful to explore the phenomenon in a country that has hitherto been under-researched. South Africa fits this profile.

Despite being a developing country, South Africa has become a major player in the global economy. It offers a unique social and cultural context. Its inimitable history, having successfully emerged from a period of institutionalised racism known as apartheid, to a

constitutional democracy, provides fertile ground to explore issues such as misfit in the workplace. During apartheid, job reservation forced the majority of employees (Black, Coloured and Indian) into job roles that they were ill-suited to. In addition, the fair treatment of all employees was largely non-existent (Horwitz, Browning, Jain & Steenkamp 2002:1107-1108).

The post-apartheid era has brought its own unique challenges. Several pieces of new labour legislation around employment equity (EE), affirmative action (AA) and black economic empowerment (BEE) were introduced after the 1994 democratic elections in order to redress workplace imbalances that existed under apartheid. However, many organisations are still controlled by the white minority population and merely pay lip service to this legislation by making token appointments to fulfil the required quotas. As a result, previously excluded population groups (Black, Coloured and Indian) are still working in positions that they are ill-suited to be in (Oosthuizen & Naidoo 2010:1-9).

This suggests that South African organisations may be a breeding ground for employee misfits and that such employees by sharing their perceptions of misfit, may offer an indigenous, idiosyncratic view of the phenomenon.

3.   RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following research objectives guided this study:

- to explore how South African employees define and understand misfit;
- to explore the factors that influence South African employees' sense of misfit;
- to develop a theoretical model of misfit as perceived by South African employees.

4.   LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1   Conceptualising misfit

One of the critical and challenging questions emanating from the PE fit literature is the question of what exactly misfit is (Kristof-Brown & Guay 2010:3-50). This area of research has been marked by significant differences in the understanding and usage of the term (Billsberry & De Cooman 2010:1-5; Harrison 2007:389-416; Wheeler 2010:1-6). There appears to be no readily available, universally accepted definition of misfit, thus making it difficult to generalise findings from one study to another (Talbot & Billsberry 2008:1-6).

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Billsberry and De Cooman (2010:1-5) and earlier Billsberry *et al.* (2005:1-16) have noted several reasons for this state of confusion: (a) the existence of multiple definitions; (b) colloquial uses of the word; and (c) a failure to explore what misfit really means to individuals at work. A further factor highlighted by Billsberry and De Cooman (2010:1) has been "an enduring tension in the literature between the way the words 'fit' and 'misfit' are used."

Wheeler (2010:1-6) emphasised the need to define clearly what we mean by fit and misfit and highlighted the need to explore the similarities and differences between PE fit, lack of PE fit and misfit. He further supported the notion that fit and misfit may be considered highly personal and idiosyncratic experiences.

While Wheeler previously felt that misfit represented a lack of fit (e.g. the polar opposite of PE fit), he has now gravitated towards the idea that misfit could represent a distinct construct. Pursuing this line of research, scholars (i.e. members of the Fit Project team) in the UK have presented a series of conference papers examining how individuals perceive fit and misfit using qualitative methods (Talbot & Billsberry 2007:1-7, 2008:1-6, 2010:1-6; Talbot, Billsberry & Marsh 2007:1-20). For example, Talbot and Billsberry (2010:1-6) explored the differences between fit and misfit using causal mapping and concluded that although fit and misfit have common causal factors, there are other factors that are unique to fit and misfit. They suggested that misfit should be seen as a qualitatively distinct construct from that of fit and recommended further qualitative research to explore how people perceive and experience misfit in the workplace (Talbot & Billsberry 2010:1-6).

To further compound the misfit definitional conundrum, Billsberry and De Cooman (2010:1-5) introduced a translational element to the conceptualisation of misfit in a joint research project. Misfit was seen as "a negative, unwanted and unpleasant condition akin to a disorder such as stress or anxiety" by the English researcher, whereas the Belgian researcher's understanding had "fewer emotional connotations and was more about being an outsider of a group e.g. a non-conformist" (Billsberry & De Cooman 2010:2-3). Thus, it was suggested that misfit is perhaps "not understood similarly across national, cultural and linguistic borders". The authors recommended that further research be undertaken in the context of different countries to shed light on this significant issue (Billsberry & De Cooman 2010:5). More recently, Follmer, Talbot, Kristof-Brown, Astrove and Billsberry (2018:441) have noted that existing definitions of misfit (objective and perceived) did not satisfactorily capture individuals' experiences of being misfits in their organisations. Their qualitative study

in both the US and UK provided fresh insight into how employees become aware of, experience and respond to misfit in their workplaces.

4.2   Factors influencing individuals' perceptions of misfit

In a conference paper entitled: *What are the Causes of Organisational Misfit?* Hollyoak (2010:1) stated that "we know quite a lot about fit, but very little about misfit." She goes on to argue that a decisive step into the future is to explore vigorously the essence of misfit and how it might accurately be defined. Thereafter, the decisive challenge will be to look at the attributed causes of not fitting in at work (Hollyoak 2010:1-4). Notwithstanding these observations, research investigating the causes of misfit is still in its infancy.

In the past few years, members of the Fit Project team in the UK have actively pursued scholarly research into the possible causal factors of misfit in the workplace. For example, Talbot and Billsberry (2007:1-7) explored the differences between fit and misfit on a sample of 10 employees from a UK university's human resources (HR) department through in-depth interviews, in which causal mapping and a projective device known as the "Blob Tree" were used to elicit responses. The 10 causal maps produced were coded by looking at similar concepts across maps.

The majority of participants identified "flexibility in their role" and "their hours of work" as factors that were important in assessing their sense of fit. Turning to the causes of not fitting in, a large number of the respondents mentioned that, "frustration caused them to feel that they do not fit, although, this was not always caused by the same stimuli" (Talbot & Billsberry 2007:3). In addition, more than one participant cited "a lack of feedback and decision making, meetings, others' negative behaviour, unfair treatment and politics" as factors causing them not to fit (Talbot & Billsberry 2007:3). A total of 44 root causes of misfit were identified by the participants, of which the majority originated from the organisation (36%) (i.e. the organisation's culture, policies and procedures) and management (25%) (i.e. managerial action or inaction e.g. lack of support). Other root causes of misfit identified by the respondents stemmed from the individual (18%), colleagues (11%), and their jobs (9%).

Continuing with this theme, Talbot and Billsberry (2010:1-6) presented a conference paper entitled, *Comparing and Contrasting Person-Environment Fit and Misfit*. Based on a sample of 38 employees occupying a diverse range of jobs, causal maps were put together to show how these participants come to fit and misfit at work. The primary objective of the study was

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to establish whether employees experienced fit and misfit in similar or different ways. These researchers compiled a coding schedule by using the extant measures (i.e. person-job fit, person-organisation, etc.) from the PE fit literature. The study findings have revealed some important differences between fit and misfit. Firstly, when speaking about their misfit perceptions, participants emphasised negative organisational and group factors whereas they cited positive job factors when talking about their fit at work. Secondly, strong perceptions of misfit were believed to be caused by poor organisational practices, mismanagement and by the imposition of petty bureaucracy. On the other hand, alignment and subscription to the organisation's values were shown to cause perceptions of fit, albeit at lower levels.

Thirdly, job embeddedness dimensions, particularly links to their communities, were mentioned more often by those individuals' who perceived that they fitted in well at their workplaces. Fourthly, regardless of whether participants were misfits or fitted in well at work, they tended to speak about misfit perceptions in the negative, whereas fit was positively phrased. These findings lend credence to the conception that misfit is an adverse experience and potentially harmful to individuals (Talbot & Billsberry 2010:1-6).

Research has shown that misfit on demographic variables (e.g. age, gender and race) represents a significant surface-level dimension influencing a person's sense of misfit. For example, Chattopadhyay (1999:273-287) investigated the impact of demographic dissimilarity on organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) and found a negative association between these variables. In another study, Sacco and Schmitt (2005:203-231) examined an employee's demographic misfit in relation to co-workers' demographics as a predictor of turnover risk over time. The findings demonstrated support for this relationship. Based on an extensive review of the literature, Wright and Cooper-Thomas (2009:1-33) suggested that misfit causal factors can be conveniently grouped into personal (e.g. demographic and individual differences) and organisational (e.g. structural and social) factors. Lovelace and Rosen (1996:703-722) explored whether or not the experiences of white male managers, white female managers, African-American managers, and Hispanic managers are similar with respect to the achievement of fit. They proposed that "because of the differences in cultural, life, and organisational experiences, minority managers may perceive that they fit in less well within their organisation than do other managers" (Lovelace & Rosen 1996:704).

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It was also further proposed that "many women may perceive that they fit less well in a predominantly white male environment than do their male colleagues because they have different outside interests, different definitions of appropriate work-family balance, different communication styles, and different definitions of career success" (Lovelace & Rosen 1996:704). Misfit has also been demonstrated as being influenced by being in and out of sync with the general pace of the social environment at work. In this regard, Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2005:93-105) examined how fit and misfit between individual and aggregate work group hurriedness impact on satisfaction, psychological strain, and citizenship behaviour. Recent research has explored misfit on the basis of personality dissimilarities between co-workers and how these could impact on their organisational commitment (David, Avery, Witt, Tonidandel, McKay, Brown & Crepeau 2018:1-15); differences between a leaders and followers' communication styles and the effect this incongruence has on followers' job outcomes (Fan & Han 2018:1083-1100); and employees' overqualifications (qualifications exceeding job requirements) and the influence this has on counterproductive work behaviour (Liu, Luksyte, Zhou, Shi & Wang 2015:250-271).

5. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

5.1 Research design

The field of misfit has thus far been dominated by studies that have investigated the consequences of misfit using quantitative methods (Chan 1996:194-207; Cools, Van den Broeck & Bouckenooghe 2009:167-198; Devloo *et al.* 2011:453-465; Ford 2012:412-421; Jansen & Kristof-Brown 2005:93-105; Trautman, Voelcker-Rehage & Godde 2011:399-447).

However, there have been calls for more investigations to shed light on how individuals perceive misfit at work using qualitative approaches (Talbot & Billsberry 2008:1-6; Talbot & Billsberry 2010:1-6). It has been argued that, since misfit is a relatively new area of investigation and not much is known about it, qualitative methodology appears to be the most appropriate in terms of capturing the essence of what misfit really means to employees (Talbot & Billsberry 2010:1-6).

Indeed, one of the major benefits of qualitative research is its potential to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell 2012:16-20; Bryman & Bell 2007:401-438; Merriam 2009:13). Qualitative research is useful when we require a "complex, detailed understanding of an

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issue" (Creswell 2007:40) such is the case with employees' perceptions and experiences of misfit. Generally, qualitative research is flexible in nature, uses non-random samples and is richly descriptive (Merriam 2009:16). The sensitive and emotional nature of misfit lends itself to more interactive data collection approaches such as those found in qualitative research where the researcher has the opportunity to meet face-to-face with participants and probe into matters that need further clarification. This backdrop provided motivation for the adoption of a qualitative approach to investigate the objectives set out in this study.

One of the objectives of this study was to develop a theoretical model of misfit based on the contextualised data acquired from the study participants. Grounded theory was considered the best qualitative method to achieve this objective (Glaser & Strauss 1967:1-18). More specifically, this study embraced an adaptation of the original Glaser and Strauss' (1967:1-18) version of grounded theory, namely, constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006:1-12). Constructivist grounded theory acknowledges the role of the researcher and the researcher's past experiences of the phenomenon under investigation when interpreting the data obtained from the participants (Charmaz 2006:1-12).

This study was positioned within the constructivist paradigm. Mills, Bonner and Francis (2006:2) state that "constructivism is a research paradigm that denies the existence of an objective reality." According to Broom and Willis (2007:16-31), scholars who align themselves with the interpretivist, or constructivist paradigm are inclined to use qualitative techniques (e.g. in-depth interviews, focus groups or ethnographic observation).

5.2   Selection of participants

The sampling strategies used were based on the recommendations of Glaser and Strauss (1967:45-77). During the initial stages, a purposive sampling strategy was adopted. Potential participants were identified for the purposes of accumulating rich, in-depth data that could satisfactorily address the research objectives. Thus, the major criteria used to screen participants were whether they were currently experiencing or had previously experienced misfit at work. Participants were approached through word-of-mouth or email correspondence. Using purposive sampling at the outset was slow in eliciting potential participants as many misfits were not keen to reveal themselves and voluntary agree to be part of the study. Consequently, it was necessary to use the snowball sampling technique where additional participants were identified through referral networks. As the data collection

process proceeded, purposeful and snowball sampling was superseded by a theoretical sampling strategy.

Glaser (1978:36) described theoretical sampling as "a process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses the data and decides what data to collect next and where to find it, in order to develop new theory as it emerges." In order for grounded theory studies to have any credibility, data collection and analysis should be carried out simultaneously (Glaser & Strauss 1967:101-115). This requirement is critical because of the need to adjust continuously the direction of data collection and pursue fresh evidence as it emerges from the data. To adhere to these guidelines, after the participant had been interviewed, the recorded data were transcribed, analysed and categorised within a stipulated time frame.

The information acquired from one interview subsequently informed the next interview and this process of data collection and comparative analysis continued until saturation of the various themes had been achieved. It was difficult to estimate accurately the appropriate sample size at the outset of this study due to the evolving nature of qualitative research. At the point of saturation, a total of 40 participants had been interviewed. Due to the fact that statistical inferences and generalisability of results are not the primary objective of qualitative research, smaller samples are in most cases considered adequate to acquire rich and in-depth data from participants (Creswell 2012: 204-212; Marshall 1996:522-525).

5.3 Data collection

Qualitative in-depth, face-to-face interviews were used as the primary data collection instrument to collect data from the participants. DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006:315) stated that "the individual in-depth interview allows the interviewer to delve deeply into social and personal matters." They add that "the in-depth interview is meant to be a personal and intimate encounter in which open, direct, verbal questions are used to elicit detailed narratives and stories" (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree 2006:317). Charmaz (2006:25) supports the use of intensive interviewing in grounded theory and asserts that "intensive interviewing permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience."

The interview dates and locations were set in advance. All participants were given reminders either by telephone or email a few days before the interviews took place. A variety of locations ranging from offices to boardrooms were used to conduct the interviews,

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depending on their suitability and the convenience for the participants. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. As is customary in grounded theory studies, the data collection process was governed by the emerging theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967:101-115). Consequently, it was difficult to have advance knowledge of how many participants would be required to reach a point of saturation (Glaser & Strauss 1967:45-77). The purpose of the interviews was to ask each participant to share their perceptions of being a misfit in the workplace. The initial review of the literature and consultations with members of the Fit Project team in the UK, who had some experience of working with misfit issues, guided the design of the questions included in the interview schedule.

5.4   Data analysis

A constructivist approach to grounded theory was adopted. This constructivist approach was initially articulated by Charmaz (1995:27-49, 2000:509-535, 2005:507-535, 2006:1-12) and, as stated by Daniel (2009:109), it "lies squarely in the constructivist/interpretive tradition, meaning that the understanding gained from the theory developed rests squarely on the researcher's interpretation of the studied phenomenon." The grounded theory approach suggests 4 steps in the coding of data: initial open coding, refining the open coding, axial coding and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006:42-71). This study was guided by these steps as discussed below:

Initial open coding: All 40 interview transcripts were read a number of times in an attempt to gain a deeper comprehension of participants' responses provided and to ensure their accuracy and completeness. The data was subsequently coded using the interview questions as a guide. While undertaking this first stage of coding, each response was scrutinised and abbreviated codes were created to match the data. This process culminated in the generation of a number of open-codes that represented a broad range of participant responses.

Refining the open coding: The next stage involved further in-depth examination of the initial open-codes for redundancies and conceptually similar responses which had previously been coded separately. This step was necessary for the sake of parsimony and to avoid the unnecessary duplication of similar responses labelled under different themes. After a series of consolidations, participants' responses were eventually clustered into 2 meta-themes i.e

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misfit conceptions and attributed causal factors. Each of these meta-themes was made up of a number of themes.

Axial coding: The meta-themes and themes that were identified in the open coding processes were further re-examined for further insight and meaning. This process involved a further re-configuration of the meta-themes and themes to make meaningful sense of the data. These meta-themes and themes were validated by an independent person experienced with grounded theory coding processes. At this juncture, after further and careful examination of all interview transcript data, it was concluded that the meta-themes and themes were conceptually saturated and exhaustive (Glaser & Strauss 1967:101-115).

Theoretical coding: In this final stage of the coding process, various inputs from the literature review, interview data and coding processes completed thus far were combined to create a theoretical model that demonstrates how South African employees perceive misfit and the attributed causal factors impacting on these perceptions (refer to figure 1 for theoretical model).

5.5   Reliability and validity

Careful attention was paid throughout the research process to issues that might compromise validity and reliability standards. The questions presented by Miles and Huberman (1984:278-279) served as a checklist to ensure that this study met acceptable standards of validity and reliability. The need to judge qualitative studies according to different criteria from quantitative studies was also recognised. Consequently, use was made of Strauss and Corbin's (2008:297-312) 8 criteria for evaluating grounded theory studies.

6.   RESULTS

6.1   Demographics of sample

A total of 40 employees who regarded themselves as misfits participated in the study of which 24 (60%) were female and 16 (40%) were male. These misfits' ages ranged from a minimum of 22 years to a maximum of 68 years, with a resulting mean age of 35 years. The race group profile of the participants included: Indians, 20 (50%), Blacks, 14 (35%), Whites, 5 (13%) and Coloureds, 1 (2%).

The average tenure was 7 years and this ranged from a minimum of 1 year to a maximum of 33 years. A variety of industry sectors were represented: financial services, 8 (20%), higher

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education, 7 (18%), marketing/sales, 7 (18%), retailing, 7 (18%), supply chain/logistics, 4 (10%), health/pharmaceutical, 3 (7%), manufacturing, 3 (7%), and government, 1 (2%).

6.2   The focal meta-themes and themes of this study

6.2.1   Meta-theme: Misfit conceptions

As the coding process unfolded, the "misfit conceptions" meta-theme was formed and comprised 5 themes, which illustrated how the participants described their understanding of misfit. These themes will now be discussed.

6.2.1.1 Theme: Label

This theme focused on misfit as being akin to a "label" that is attached to a person. The term label refers to the phrases or words that people use to describe misfits. A total of 18 out of 40 (45%) participants shared these sentiments. Employee misfit 3 was one of the individuals who expressed this view by stating that:

It's a label that is given to people. If he/she is a misfit, then he/she is considered an oddball, a maverick or a square peg in a round hole.

6.2.1.2 Theme: Non-conformist

This theme refers to misfit as being someone that "does not conform" to some standard or norm. These individuals usually stick out in their communities or workplaces because they do not fit into societal traditions, cultural or work practices. A total of 18 out of 40 (45%) participants viewed misfit from this angle. Employee misfit 10 captured this sentiment below:

…so, I think misfit for me, is someone who doesn't really live in accordance with culture and therefore does not fit into the culture of that particular organisation. So, people will look at him/her and using myself as an example, they would look at me as someone who is not making an effort to fit in within what they perceive as a perfect employee.

6.2.1.3 Theme: Multi-dimensional phenomenon

This theme refers to misfit as being "multidimensional" in its nature. Misfit is perceived to occur between person and environment on multiple dimensions, thus rendering it a highly intricate concept to understand. A person could misfit with his/her job functions/roles, with other members in work teams, the organisational culture, manager, etc. A total of 13 out of 40 (33%) of participants expressed this opinion. Employee misfit 8 had this to say:

You could look at misfit as a multidimensional phenomenon. You could fit in your job but not fit in with the organisation in the sense of being a team player… Even as managers, it may be that your management style differs from what your subordinates' desire or there are communication styles that don't gel well. It doesn't always mean an employee at a lower level is a misfit. You could come into a management position and not fit the organisation or the employees can't relate to you.

6.2.1.4 Theme: Psychological experience

This theme centres on the perceptions of misfit as being "a psychological experience," and usually a negative one which individuals undergo. A psychological experience of misfit transcends to a much deeper level and usually affects individuals' emotions. Moreover, people usually experience symptoms of depression and other-related conditions due to the impact of this negative psychological experience of misfit. A total of 11 out of 40 (28%) participants expressed this understanding. Employee misfit 25 alluded to this view below:

…It is a psychological experience because it starts to play on your mind…I haven't been to work for three weeks because I don't have the time and effort to deal with all the issues.

6.2.1.5 Theme: State of mind

This theme refers to misfit as being "a state of mind." The mental state or mind-set of individuals predisposes them to believe that they do not fit in even though in reality, this is not the case. After a period of time, these individuals come to accept that they are misfits without any factual basis. A total of 7 out of 40 (18%) of participants expressed this viewpoint. Employee misfit 13 had this say:

…people generally believe that they are misfits because of their state of mind. Negative people constantly think that they don't fit in…coming back to experiences, as a person, it is how you see yourself, what is your achievement rate, have you set goals for yourself, and so forth. It can be a state of mind and to a point where it can start to consume you.

6.2.2   Meta-theme: Attributed causal factors of misfit

On further reading and analysis of the interview transcripts, a second meta-theme emerged, namely, that of the "attributed causal factors" affecting individuals' perceptions of misfit. A total of 6 themes were identified as significant factors influencing misfit perceptions and these are discussed next.

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6.2.2.1 Theme: Race

This theme focused on the "race" groups in which people belong to as a significant causal factor of perceived misfit. Race in this context refers to the four main race group classifications in South Africa: Black, White, Indian and Coloured. A total of 30 out of 40 (75%) participants cited issues related to race. Employee misfit 11 stated that:

One of the issues in South Africa for me is race, without a doubt…you will misfit if you belong to a certain race group…It's a reality…we haven't really accepted different races yet, but we are slowly getting there.

6.2.2.2 Theme: Personality

This theme referred to the "personality" traits of an individual as being a significant causal factor of misfit perceptions. A total of 27 out of 40 (68%) participants expressed this view. One such participant, employee misfit 7, had this to say:

Personality traits will make you feel uncomfortable or misfit. For example, you could be an extrovert with particular values and the workplace just doesn't suit your personality and values.

6.2.2.3 Theme: Gender

This theme articulates the view that the "gender" of a person is a significant causal factor of perceived misfit. A total of 23 out of 40 (58%) participants expressed these sentiments. In this regard, employee misfit 19 said that:

In South Africa, I would say gender because most industries are still dominated by males. The males still have the old perception that females should stay at home, do the cooking, the cleaning and that is their place. Consequently, on entering the workplace, females tend to be downgraded despite the fact that they are intellectually fit to do the job. This creates a perception in them that they do not fit in. So, I am convinced that gender plays a role in the perception of misfit.

6.2.2.4 Theme: Individual culture

This theme refers to "individual culture" as a significant causal factor of misfit perceptions. A total of 15 out of 40 (38%) participants articulated this view. One such participant was employee misfit 15 who had this to say:

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Also, it is the different cultures within South Africa. The high population of misfits in South African organisations could be attributable to the cultural mismatches between these employees and their co-workers and between these employees and their organisations.

6.2.2.5 Theme: Social status

This theme relates to the "social statuses" of individuals as an important causal factor of misfit perceptions. A total of 10 out of 40 (25%) cited this factor. Employee misfit 8 stated that:

From my experience, people with a higher or lower social status than their work colleagues are often isolated. This may lead to these people developing perceptions of misfit.

6.2.2.6 Theme: Language

This theme pertains to the "language" that individuals use to communicate with in the workplace as being an important causal factor of misfit perceptions. A total of 3 out of 40 (8%) participants cited this factor. Employee misfit 6 had this to say:

…also language barriers can cause people to misfit. For example, I know in Johannesburg, there is a major problem with the Afrikaans language. Many White employees still use Afrikaans as a primary language of communication. To the Black man, this can be insulting as the Afrikaans language has been viewed by them as a language of the oppressor. So, Black people, in a predominately Afrikaans organisation, will perceive a misfit with that organisation.

7.   DISCUSSION

7.1   Discussion of how South African employees define and understand misfit

Participants understood misfit both in terms of an external and an internal dimension. In terms of an external dimension, a number of participants (18 out of 40) perceived misfit to be synonymous with a label or tag that is attached to persons who are somewhat different from what society or some organisations expect them to be. The same number (18 out of 40) understood a misfit to be someone that does not conform to some norm or standard. Viewing misfit through this external perspective has elicited several nouns that have been used to describe these individuals such as retards, oddballs, troublemakers, square pegs in round holes, rebels, and so forth. Each of these terms carries a negative connotation,

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signifying that misfit may be something that is undesirable. The above findings are consistent with the outside-in approach highlighted by Billsberry and De Cooman (2010:1-5).

In terms of misfit being viewed from an internal perspective, fewer participants (11 out of 40) perceived misfit to be a psychological experience, albeit a negative one. This finding lends support to previous research that examined misfit from the "inside-out" (Billsberry *et al.* 2005:1-16; Talbot & Billsberry, 2007a:1-7; 2010:1-6), "where the thoughts, feelings and desires of the individual are paramount" (Billsberry & De Cooman 2010:1). Furthermore, the participants' conceptualisation of misfit as a negative psychological experience appears to echo the view held by Billsberry (2008:3) that "misfit may be seen as an abnormal and undesired psychological state."

Misfit has also been perceived as a multidimensional concept (13 out of 40 participants). The participants indicated that individuals could simultaneously experience misfit with several aspects of the environment. This finding appears to echo the rationale behind Wheeler *et al.*'s (2005:265-304) multidimensional fit/misfit model which proposed that individuals may perceive misfit with different dimensions of the environment such as the organisation, vocation, job, culture and team. Furthermore, this result supports the findings of the causal mapping studies undertaken by Talbot *et al.* (2007a:1-7) and Talbot and Billsberry (2010:1-6), which suggested that employees could distinguish misfit along a number of different dimensions.

A novel finding relates to the perception that misfit is a "state of mind." Seven out of 40 participants presented this view. Conceptualising misfit as a "state of mind" has not been mentioned in the literature thus far. Various participants alluded to the fact that in some instances, highly negative individuals will constantly see themselves in a bad light. Consequently, they will assume the worst in every situation and thus, see themselves as not fitting in. The view that misfit is a "state of mind" raises the question of whether misfit could be more illusory than real. Future research could explore this angle of misfit and thus shed more light on this conundrum.

The sample of South African employees who regarded themselves as misfits appeared to perceive and understand misfit in very much the same way as their Western counterparts in the US and UK. However, there are few idiosyncrasies worth highlighting. The view held by some South African participants is that misfit may indeed be a "state of mind" that is unique

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to each and every individual. This is a novel finding that could introduce a new research direction.

7.2 Discussion of the factors that influence South African employees' sense of misfit

Race was cited by the largest number of participants (30 out of 40) as influencing a person's sense of misfit. This finding seems to contradict the views held by Elfenbein and O'Reilly (2007:109-142) and Jackson and Chung (2008:37-62) who suggested that "a person's fit or misfit in an organisation is not due to people being similar or dissimilar at a superficial level but rather that whether one fits or not at a deeper, psychological construct" (Talbot & Billsberry 2010:3). Furthermore, Talbot and Billsberry's (2010:3) research showed that "demographic factors were infrequently cited, either in relation to fit or misfit perceptions, which suggests that neither fit nor misfit results from people being similar or different in race, age, gender religion education or socio-economic background." However, the importance of demographic factors in influencing misfit was highlighted by Wright and Cooper-Thomas (2009:1-33) and, Lovelace and Rosen (1996:703-722). The overwhelming endorsement of race as a major predictor of misfit in this study reflects the prevailing discourse relating to race in the South African work context. Gumede (2018:1) argues that "institutional racism" is still prevalent and is "deeply engrained in the corporate culture of many South African organisations." South African's fixation with race was expressively captured by Stokes (2009:1-4) in his commentary on employment equity.

The preoccupation with race in South African workplaces has further been highlighted by Oosthuizen and Naidoo (2010:1-9) in their study that investigated attitudes to and experience of employment equity. They found that "reverse discrimination and racism were demarcated as the main experience of non-management employees" (Oosthuizen & Naidoo 2010:1). It was also further noted that "people who are stuck in this race mind-set often play the 'blame game' when things don't go according to plan or when they discover that they are not in alignment with other members of society or with organisations" (Oosthuizen & Naidoo 2010:1-9).

Personality was the second most cited causal factor (27 out of 40 participants) of misfit. This result echoed Wright and Cooper-Thomas's (2009:21) assertion that "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." Personality was

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also alluded to by Talbot *et al.* (2007:7) who stated that "…, the participants looked within themselves for the causes of misfit and gave examples such as being shy, highly qualified or having an illness." Participants in this study mentioned various personality characteristics as possible predictors of misfit such as: negative, shy, aggressive or assertive individuals. In the literature, the five-factor model (FFM) has been a popular framework to describe the prominent features of an individual's personality (Goldberg 1990:1216-1229). The FFM comprises the personality dimensions of neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness (Trull & Sher 1994:350-360).

The first FFM dimension listed is considered pertinent to a discussion of personality as a predictor of misfit. Judge, Heller and Mount (2002:531) note that "because of their essentially negative nature, neurotic individuals experience more negative life events than other individuals, in part because they select themselves into situations that foster negative affect." They add that "to the extent that such situations occur on or with respect to the job; they would lead to diminished levels of job satisfaction" (Judge *et al.* 2002:531). Thus, it can be claimed that neurotic individuals will tend to view themselves in a negative light in the workplace and thus have a greater propensity to perceive misfit than more positive people.

Gender was the third most cited causal factor (23 out of 40 participants). The issues of gender still dominate the dialogue in South Africa (Booysen & Nkomo 2014:131-182). Commenting on the sorry state of gender equality in South Africa, De Matos-Ala (2012:1) asserted that "culturally, the patriarchal status quo remains relatively unchanged, and unless the mind-set behind gender discriminatory practices is challenged through debate, media campaigns, education, and so forth, nothing much is going to change." The issue of gender inequality is still prevalent in South African workplaces (Bosch 2015:1; Hearne 2014:1). Davis (2006:1-2) reported that women continue to be unfairly discriminated against in terms of lower salary scales for doing the same jobs as their male counterparts, being overlooked for promotion in favour of far less qualified and experienced male colleagues. Thus, study participants raising gender as a critical predictor of misfit perceptions is considered relevant. It should, however, be noted that the majority of study participants were female (60% i.e. 24 out of 40) and this could have played a role in highlighting the significance of gender as a potential predictor of misfit perceptions.

The other demographic variables that were mentioned as potential predictors of misfit such as individual culture, social status and language are features of the multicultural South

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African society. One would therefore expect these issues to be salient in this context, especially in instances where people are discriminated against because they differ from the majority in terms of the aforementioned demographic factors. For example, language seems to be an issue that creates tension in the workplace and this could trigger feelings of misfit in individuals.

Although South Africa has 11 official languages, English appears to be the primary language of communication in the workplace. An employee that is conversant with one of the ethnic languages such as Xhosa may feel ostracised on entering the workplace and this could lead to the person developing feelings of not fitting in. A similar argument could be presented for other demographic variables such as social status, religion, and so forth. According to Human (1996:46-64), the concepts of managing diversity and multiculturalism are not fully understood in most countries in the democratic world and more particularly in South Africa. Effectively, managing diversity "is often hampered by an over-emphasis on 'national culture' at the expense of broader individual identity and power relations" (Human 1996:46).

While it has been noted that "deeper" dimensions such as a person's values were considered more important than "surface" factors such as social demographics in influencing misfit (Elfenbein & O'Reilly 2007:109-142), other studies have acknowledged the significance of demographic factors in causing misfit (Wright & Cooper-Thomas 2009:1-33).

8.   THEORETICAL MODEL OF MISFIT

The culmination of the theoretical coding process produced a theoretical model represented in figure 1. This model shows the various conceptions of misfit and suggests that an employee's sense of misfit may be influenced by a variety of factors such as race, personality, gender, individual culture, social status, and language.

Based on the feedback obtained during the interviews, the researchers have constructed the following definition of misfit that, in their opinion, accurately sums up participants' sentiments of the concept:

Misfit is a "state of mind" or a "psychological experience" or an "external dissimilarity" that differentiates one person from the next either in a positive or negative way.

The above definition offers three lenses through which misfit could be perceived: state of mind, psychological experience or external dissimilarity. In addition, it portrays an individual

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misfit in either a positive or negative way. This contradicts the view that misfit is an undesirable, negative condition that should be avoided at all costs.

FIGURE 1:   Theoretical model of misfit
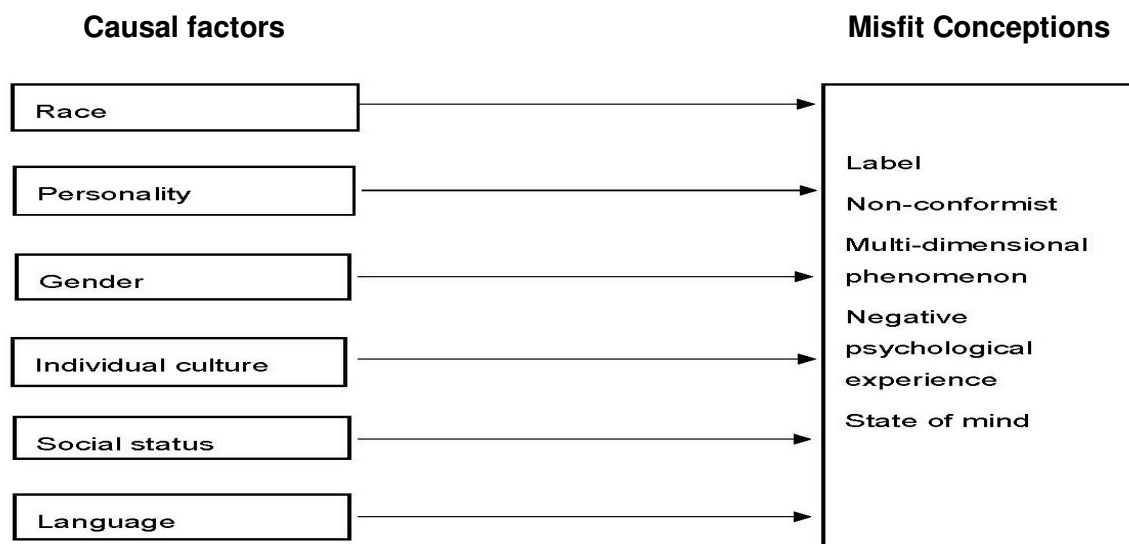
Source: Authors construction from study findings

9.   LIMITATIONS OF STUDY, IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

9.1   Limitations of the study

Although this research study has achieved its aims, there were a number of possible limitations. These included the following:

The subject of misfit is an emotional one. Individuals who participated in the interview process may not have been forthcoming on certain misfit issues because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the fear of reprisals. Thus, it would be naïve to assume that all the responses obtained from the interview data accurately depicted these individuals' experiences. Accepting that you are a misfit is akin to admitting that you have a weakness or personality disorder, thus making this an extremely difficult concept to explore in depth. During the interview process, the researchers used various probing techniques to elicit responses to the questions. This could have unconsciously infused some bias into the responses obtained.

The sampling method used in qualitative studies has always been a contentious issue. A purposive and snowball non-random sampling techniques were used to select the study participants in the initial stages of the research. Thereafter, theoretical sampling was adopted in accordance with the principles of Glaser and Strauss's (1967:45-77) classical grounded theory. These non-random sampling approaches have restricted the generalisability of the study findings.

The size of the sample is another issue that has been the subject of considerable debate among qualitative researchers. While the goal of sampling in qualitative research is not to aim for generalisability of the findings, it is nevertheless difficult to state with extreme confidence that the sample selected is adequate for the purposes of a study. In this study, the sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was reached. A final sample size of 40 participants was obtained. Although the sampling process was carried out in accordance with generally accepted grounded theory principles, it is difficult to state with outright confidence that the sample size chosen was indeed the right size for this type of study as the field of misfit has very few precedents to draw on due to the fact that it is relatively unchartered territory.

9.2   Implications of study

The findings of this study have several implications for theory, research and practice in the fields of OB, I/O psychology and HRM. There is a notable contribution to the building of theory through this specific country-context investigation of misfit. As previously highlighted, misfit has predominantly been investigated in the UK, US and to a lesser extent Western Europe. By exploring misfit using a grounded theory approach in a heretofore under-researched context such as South Africa, this research produced a new and richer understanding of this phenomenon. The emerging new country-context sensitive theory could play an important role in refining and enhancing misfit theory. In terms of research, the constructivist grounded theory approach used may encourage other researchers to try out other novel techniques to explore misfit. In so doing, a far deeper understanding of the construct may be realised. From the perspective of practice, the findings of this study will provide managers with a deeper understanding of what misfit means and its causes so that they can deal effectively with this phenomenon in the workplace.

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9.3 Suggestions for future research

Wheeler (2010:1-6) and Kristof-Brown and Guay (2010:3-50), pointed out that misfit is an area of study that is wide open to researchers. This sentiment still holds today. Notwithstanding the fact that the current research study has made considerable strides in demystifying the concept of misfit, several areas need further investigation.

Future research in the area of misfit should extend to other countries, particularly those outside of the US, the UK and Western Europe. This will provide a universal understanding of misfit. A comparative study of how individuals perceive and experience misfit in different countries may deepen our understanding of this elusive and amorphous construct.

Another possible direction for future research is to explore misfit using other qualitative techniques such as storytelling, observation, focus groups and causal mapping. These techniques could elicit information about misfit that has not previously been forthcoming from empirical studies.

As highlighted previously, future research could explore further the perception that misfit is a "state of mind." This could go a long way in addressing the question of whether misfit is more illusory than real.

10. CONCLUSION

South African employees appear to have an eclectic view of what the phenomenon of misfit means to them personally. They viewed misfit as being synonymous with a label that one attaches to individuals, a non-conformist or a negative psychological experience. Misfit was also perceived as a multi-dimensional concept. These results appear in line with the extant literature. A novel finding relates to the perception that misfit is a state of mind that is idiosyncratic to each individual. A wide range of individual and external factors were perceived to influence a person's sense of misfit. Race, personality and gender were cited as the top three causal factors of misfit. The misfit conceptions and causal factors were demonstrated in a theoretical model of misfit (see figure 1).

What is this phenomenon called misfit? This question has intrigued organisational fit researchers in the past. It is hoped that the findings of this study have untangled some of the mysteries surrounding this elusive construct.

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Perhaps, it is time for misfit to emerge from the shadows of PE fit, assume its own identity and take its rightful place in the academic arena. In so doing, people will cease having "fits about misfit."

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