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Values Congruence: More Salient to Social Networking than to Fit

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Abstract

This developmental paper looks at the issue of values congruence and the extent to which it evidences fit (for example P-O, P-G, P-P fit) or is more salient when identifying a social network which might be a more relevant construct for employees in the workplace. It takes a brief look at the background to the interaction debate as a foundation for the argument that value congruence is key to building relationships between individuals. The debate is brought up to date with a discussion of Edwards and Cable's 2009 paper which puts the case for the value in value congruence in determining employee behaviour. This paper, however, seeks to question the extent to which values congruence is more important to individuals at work in terms of their fit (on whatever level) or in terms of their social network (which might underpin a sense of 'not misfitting') which might be key for many employees. The paper goes on to consider the implications for fit research in the light of salience of social network theory.

The debate regarding human behaviour being driven by innate personality traits in the individual or that the situation and environment play the key role in affecting that behaviours (Bowers, 1973; Mischel, 1973; Pervin, 1978)) has been raging for almost a hundred years now. The most compelling evidence appears to be that interaction between traits and the situation an individual experiences is likely to affect behaviour (Lewin, 1952; Magnusson & Endler, 1977).

This issue of 'interaction' has, in turn, been applied to individuals and their workplaces and has fuelled the debate, principally since the 1980's, regarding how individuals fit with the organization they work for (Cable & Judge, 1996; Chatman, 1989; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; Muchinsky & Monahan, 1987; O'Reilly et al., 1991; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) – a Person-Organization (P-O) fit. Whilst there are a variety of fit constructs – Kristof-Brown et al (2005) present a comprehensive overview of the key constructs ((Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) – Chatman (1989) argued that P-O fit exists “when there is a congruence between the norms and values of organizations and the values of persons...Once person-organization fit is assessed, predictions can be made about specific...[and] behavioural outcomes”(pg 335). A key finding of Meglino and Ravlin suggests that value congruence is positively related to affective outcomes and point out that value congruence leads to lower employee turnover (and, by implication, associates this with outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment.) (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Equally, Schneider (1987) in his seminal paper regarding ASA theory suggested that it was individuals' attraction to an organization and the organizations' selection of individuals who would fit in (on more than a simple knowledge and skills basis) which was key. In other words P-O fit came about as

“organizations actually ...[chose] people who share many common personal attributes although they may not share common competencies” (pg 44). The argument was made that if (beneficial) outcomes such as job satisfaction and reduced employee turnover were to be achieved there had to be a P-O fit which was based on something less tangible than an individual’s mere ability to carry out a task which an organization wished to have completed. The values of both organizations and individuals had to be matched so that outcomes which were valued by both those parties might be attained.

Social Networks and Fit

The argument that values congruence is vital for fit prompts a further question about how individuals might identify the values of other individuals, groups and, indeed, the organization. Indeed, for those outside an organization what are the processes which underpin Schneider’s idea of an individual being ‘attracted’ to a particular organization? Kilduff suggests that the influence of social networks may have a more important role to play in terms of influencing organizational choice (Kilduff, 1990). Indeed, he found that “individuals who were either friends or who perceived each other as similar tended to make similar organizational choices, even if they had different academic concentrations and different job preferences” (pg 283). Granovetter suggested that information about jobs was principally passed to those looking for work through their ‘contacts’ i.e. their social network ((Granovetter, 1973)). (Scott presents an overview of the development of Social Network analysis for those who wish to investigate further(Scott, 2009)

If social networking is important in bringing a potential match between individuals and organizations then, as Kilduff and Brass suggest, it is vital in terms of maintaining that match through ‘relations between actors’ and social utility (the idea that social network connections act as a catalyst for outcomes of importance to individuals and groups) (Kilduff & Brass, 2010b)). Moreover they go on to propose that the idea of embeddedness (“the extent to which economic transactions occur within the context of social relationships” (pg323)) is built on trust...a key value in the fit literature ((Cable & Edwards, 2004; Edwards & Cable, 2009; Edwards & Cable, 2009).

Interestingly Krackhardt and Porter discuss the idea that social networking also plays its part in individuals leaving an organization. Schneider (1987) suggests that individuals who do not fit an organization will leave – the logical conclusion to his homogeneity hypothesis. Krackhardt and Porter, however, present an argument which suggests that individuals leave an organization if their friends leave (and the effect is greater if the leaver is at the centre of a social network (Krackhardt & Porter, 1985). So it could be argued that with someone leaving an organization from a fit perspective the level of P-P or P-G fit might be reduced but this should have less effect on P-O fit and certainly P-J fit. It might indicate that the importance of (or the destruction of) a relevant social network has more effect on whether an individual stays or leaves an organization.

The Importance of Relevant Values

Meglino and Ravlin present a detailed account surrounding the identification and measurement of values (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). They identify two types of values

from the literature – values which an individual places on an object or outcome; values likely to describe a person. It is more appropriate to focus on the values ‘possessed by a person’ rather than those ‘inherent in an object’ as this is more likely to reflect the social aspect of values held by individuals in organizations (Rokeach, 1973). This, in turn, is more likely to be important in affecting subsequent behaviour of those individuals at work (with the aggregate of these values making up organizational values).

Values, Fit and Social Networking

The issue of value congruence as a key facet of P-O fit has been debated with increasing interest (Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991; Cable & Judge, 1996; Judge & Cable, 1997; Rynes & Gerhart, 1990). Whilst the issue of values congruence appears to be widely accepted as vital to establish P-O fit, the specific values which are most influential have yet to be established. So, for example, Cable and Judge (1996) argued that, with regard to job-seekers, P-O fit perceptions are predicted by a congruence of the job-seekers values and their perceptions of the recruiting organization’s values but not by demographic similarity between the job-seekers and the organization’s representatives. Brown and Trevino (2009) found that demographics and occupation were of greater importance with regard to values such that “although socialised charismatic leadership is associated with values congruence...leaders and organizations should recognize the important individual (demographic) and occupational boundaries on the degree to which leaders can bring about such congruence” (pp 488, (Brown & Trevino, 2009)). O’Reilly et al (1991) hint that for outcomes such as job satisfaction and commitment to an organization the individual needs to have both task competency and a “value system congruent with the central values of the organization” (p511). This suggests that there may be an occupational (if not vocational) element to values congruence and, importantly, that there is a single organizational set of values with which an individual will align.

Edwards and Cable (2009) take the debate further by seeking to test why positive outcomes come about when both employees and organizations have congruent values (Edwards & Cable, 2009). Using data from an earlier study (Cable & Edwards, 2004) which looked at the issue of value congruence being most associated with supplementary fit - (see Muchinsky and Monahan (1987) for more detail on complementary and supplementary fit) - Edwards and Cable (2009) found that trust and communication were key explanations of value congruence effects. Whilst they had a reasonable sample size across a wide variety of technical, administrative and managerial jobs the analysis was of quite a generic nature. This generic approach meant that there was little analysis of the data on, for example, a geographic basis. The results were aggregated which led to little analysis as to whether the results were applicable across the various sites or occupations of the respondents. The question is, are these findings applicable across differing situations i.e. does a different situation lead to a difference in which values are important and therefore leads to differences in outcomes.

The issue, then, appears to be not that values congruence is a key factor if P-O fit is to be achieved but in what context it is most relevant. It seems that a major assumption in the literature is that there are a single set of organizational values with which an

individual will have congruence with or not. What has not been tested is the extent to which it is overall organizational values or specific, even local, values which are important for congruence (and subsequent outcomes such as job satisfaction, intent to stay etc).

If values may be key determinants in fit the same can be said that an alignment of values leads to the development of social networks which, by implication, could be as important to individuals as any other sense of fit. If centrality across networks is an important predictor of whether employees will stay or leave (as suggested by Krackhardt and Porter) then identifying predictors of centrality would be useful in ultimately determining intent to leave an organization. Kilduff and Brass present evidence which suggests that emotional stability (along with education) as a key predictor of network centrality (Kilduff & Brass, 2010a).

So with trust and emotional stability identified as potential key aspects in predicting behavior in organizations it could be argued that these values (when considered in social networking) are more salient than when applied to fit constructs. If individuals are inclined to leave organizations, for example, if an individual central to a network leaves then perhaps it is the values associated with individuals in the network which act as social glue and lead to a pretence of fit in stable times when the network functions 'normally'.

Conclusion

If social networking could be more salient to individuals than any sense of fit which they may have, what are the implications for research? With the array of fit constructs (not only P-O, P-G, P-S, P-J etc but also complementary, supplementary, direct, indirect and so on) it is not surprising that it is difficult to pinpoint which of the fit constructs is most salient to both individuals and organizations. It does appear that values congruence (certainly for the individual but possibly for the organization too) is key to determining individuals' behavior particularly with regard to organizational entry and exit. It would appear that the development of social networks is salient to individuals and influences behaviour, perhaps, more than a feeling of 'fit' but that the position in the network (whether central or peripheral to that network) has greater influence on behavior.

As Kilduff and Brass suggest, research can "simultaneously address actor, group, and network characteristics...[as] such analyses have rarely been undertaken"(Kilduff & Brass, 2010b). The encouragement is to view values (and values congruence) as a potential for determining both the attributes of individuals but also how this can be related to those individuals' social networks and begin to inform the debate as to whether it is the social network or the level of fit which is, indeed, most salient to individuals in the work environment.

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