Fit for one or fit for all? The normative theory of fit and the normative and distinctive decomposition of fit

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Abstract

Purpose – Central to the fit concept is that congruence between individual and environmental attributes leads to improved outcomes. However, when discussing fit, researchers often describe congruence as alignment between distinctive or unique individual and environmental attributes. We suggest that current approaches to examining fit do not adequately account for this assumption of distinctiveness because they fail to consider normative expectations and preferences. As such, we propose an alternative theoretical and methodological approach to conceptualizing and measuring fit.

Design/methodology/approach – We introduce the normative theory of fit, outline how researchers can decompose fit into distinctive and normative components and identify areas for future research.

Findings – Management researchers have largely ignored the importance of decomposing fit into distinctive and normative components. This shortcoming necessitates additional research to ensure a more accurate understanding of fit and its relationship with outcomes.

Originality/value – We provide a clarification and critical examination of a pervasive construct in the field of management by introducing the normative theory of fit, identifying areas where researchers can employ this theoretical lens and suggesting a reevaluation of the importance placed on differentiation that is traditionally employed in practice.

Keywords Person-environment fit, Congruence, Human resource management, Organizational behavior

Paper type Conceptual paper

Within the field of management, few ideas are more ubiquitous than the concept of fit between people and their environments (Edwards and Cooper, 1990). Given the complexities associated with estimating how people fit with their environment (person-environment or P-E fit), a sizable body of research exists examining how to best measure fit. This stream of research has largely been defined by Edwards (1993) during the 1990s with the introduction of polynomial regression analysis (PRA). Despite the merits of this approach, more recent studies have challenged the use of established PRA techniques as an indicator of fit. For instance, after conducting a review of the PRA literature, Su *et al.* (2019) found that only half of the studies reviewed that hypothesized congruence relationships found a significant congruence effect. This inconsistency in results is particularly problematic as it likely indicates that prior approaches to assessing fit relationships suffer from methodological artifacts, which in turn can distort and muddy the theoretical conversations surrounding fit constructs (Su *et al.*, 2019). As a result, scholars have called for greater nuance and precision in theorizing when undertaking fit research (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2023) and a movement away from the relative homogenization of estimating fit that has dominated the field since the 1990s (e.g. Subramanian *et al.*, 2022).

We enter this debate surrounding the theorizing and measurement of fit by introducing the normative theory of fit and its application through the decomposition of fit into normative

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and distinctive components. This theoretical approach can be empirically tested using profile correlations (Wood *et al.*, 2019), with the normative profile representing the average (mean) profile across a specified sample of participants and the distinctive profile representing the deviation from the corresponding normative profile.

Within this theoretical framework, *normative fit* refers to the degree to which a distinctive profile of attributes matches a normative profile of attributes. More intuitively, this can be understood as *fit to a general* or *average profile*. For example, when estimating how well a person fits with their organization (person-organization or P-O fit), we can estimate a normative profile using mean scores that describe what people tend to prefer in their organization or what they tend to see on average in their organization. In comparison, *distinctive fit* refers to the match between two distinctive profiles. For example, we can estimate how well an individual's distinctive preferences (i.e. the characteristics they prefer more or less than the average person) match an organization's distinctive attributes (i.e. the characteristics that distinguish the organization from the average organization).

Derived from work by Wood *et al.* (2019), Table 1 provides an example of an ideal and an actual normative profile within the P-O fit context. The ideal normative profile represents a consensus of what people tend to prefer (or not prefer) within their organization; values are scaled from 0 to 100, where values near 0 or 100 indicates highly unpreferred or highly preferred characteristics, respectively, and values near 50 indicate that there is no normative preference in either direction. For instance, *an emphasis on quality*, $M = 89.6$ and *having a good reputation*, $M = 89.1$, are consensually preferred organizational attributes, while *working long hours*, $M = 35.9$, is a consensually unpreferred attribute. The actual normative profile represents a consensus of what attributes are perceived as typical of the average organization, such as *being results oriented*, $M = 76.5$ and what attributes that are viewed as atypical of the average organization, such as *not being constrained by many rules*, $M = 41.9$.

Past approaches to theorizing and estimating fit have largely ignored these normative profiles. As a result, researchers generally fail to recognize normative confounds (Wood and Furr, 2016) which occur when positive outcomes associated with fit are due to the environment (or person) having normatively desirable or expected attributes as opposed to the alignment of distinctive similarities or preferences between the person and their environment. The potential impact of normative confounds spans numerous domains of research as many theoretical frameworks and models espouse normative (or to an even greater extent, universal) expectations and preferences. For example, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Research Program has suggested that there are normative expectations concerning what behaviors are associated with effective leadership and that many of these behaviors are broadly held across most cultures (Den Hartog *et al.*, 1999). Therefore, it becomes difficult to determine if a person's fit with their leader is driven by a normative confound (the leader aligns with what all leaders are expected to be) or because the person and the leader share distinctive alignment in preferences or values.

We introduce the normative theory of fit to provide researchers with a framework to examine and account for normative effects when conducting fit research. In doing so, we make three notable contributions to the fit literature. First, we provide a potential explanation for inconsistencies in the fit literature related to the importance of congruence, particularly for studies that have relied solely on PRA (e.g. Su *et al.*, 2019). Specifically, we suggest that some inconsistencies in findings are likely due to failing to account for normative confounds when estimating fit. Second, along with identifying the issue, we also introduce the normative theory of fit as a new theoretical lens. This answers recent calls to expand the types of theories used in fit research (Kristof-brown *et al.*, 2023) and presents a novel framework for conceptualizing and examining the fit construct. Third, we identify areas where the normative theory of fit can be implemented using profile correlations to examine and account

#	OCP item	Ideal ratings Mean	Ideal ratings *SD*	Actual ratings Mean	Actual ratings *SD*
43	An emphasis on quality	89.6	15.7	74.9	26.2
52	Having a good reputation	89.1	17.6	74.0	26.3
36	Fairness	88.6	19.0	62.9	29.1
50	Being supportive	88.5	17.2	66.7	28.5
47	Stability	88.3	17.8	69.6	27.5
45	Security of employment	88.0	20.4	68.1	29.6
8	Respect for the individual's rights	87.7	19.0	73.4	28.0
33	Offers praise for good performance	87.0	20.6	61.2	30.8
20	Opportunities for professional growth	87.0	21.5	57.1	31.5
15	Flexibility	86.3	19.5	66.3	29.3
14	Taking individual responsibility	86.1	19.0	69.8	28.1
1	Enthusiasm for the job	85.5	20.6	63.2	28.4
46	Paying attention to detail	84.5	18.5	73.2	26.9
30	Adaptability	84.3	18.0	67.0	26.6
48	Having a clear guiding philosophy	84.1	19.5	63.3	30.0
19	High pay for good performance	84.1	27.4	43.5	32.8
35	Being Innovative	84.0	19.2	59.2	30.1
53	Being people oriented	83.9	20.1	72.3	27.9
25	Taking initiative	83.6	18.9	66.2	28.8
54	Achievement orientation	82.2	19.0	69.3	26.9
39	Being calm	81.8	20.5	65.2	25.4
21	Being decisive	81.4	18.8	64.4	28.1
41	Being socially responsible	81.3	21.9	67.7	26.5
12	Sharing information freely	81.3	24.2	59.3	32.2
18	Working in collaboration with others	81.2	21.7	74.2	27.0
37	Having high expectations for performance	80.8	19.7	74.4	26.1
11	Being team oriented	80.6	23.0	71.2	29.4
24	Being results oriented	80.5	20.5	76.5	24.7
44	Action orientation	79.9	19.2	70.2	23.9
7	Low level of conflict	79.6	26.1	60.9	30.0
2	Tolerance	79.5	22.1	68.7	26.3
40	Being precise	79.3	18.7	69.3	27.0
6	Being highly organized	79.2	22.4	64.4	27.7
26	Being easy going	78.7	21.8	60.3	27.6
29	Being quick to take advantage of opportunities	78.6	21.1	59.4	28.2
9	Being analytical	77.4	21.5	69.6	26.5
51	Confronting conflict directly	77.0	23.1	55.5	30.7
5	A willingness to experiment	76.6	22.6	53.0	30.3
22	Autonomy	74.2	23.0	60.0	26.8
16	Being reflective	74.0	22.3	58.7	26.4
23	Developing friends at work	73.7	23.2	64.5	26.5
3	Being careful	72.1	23.6	73.8	24.1
13	Informality	70.9	23.7	58.8	26.9
34	Being competitive	69.2	25.7	58.3	28.8
4	Being distinctive-different from others	67.7	23.3	55.8	27.9
38	Fitting in	66.9	23.9	61.8	23.4
17	Predictability	64.7	24.7	63.4	25.8
10	Not being constrained by many rules	64.6	26.9	41.9	30.5
31	Risk taking	63.9	25.3	45.3	28.9
27	Being rule oriented	60.4	25.8	70.1	25.7
28	Emphasizing a single culture throughout the firm	55.9	30.2	48.8	30.4
49	Being aggressive	50.1	29.5	49.1	28.3
42	Being demanding	47.0	28.4	59.1	27.8
32	Working long hours	35.9	26.8	55.9	30.3

Note(s): # column indicates OCP number from Appendix A of O'Reilly *et al.* (1991). Values are given on a Percentage of Maximum Possible (POMP; 0–100) metric; a rating of 50 indicates "no preference" (ideal) or "neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic" (actual), <50 indicates unpreferred (ideal) or uncharacteristic (actual) and >50 indicates preferred (ideal) or characteristic (actual)

Source(s): Created by authors; data obtained from Wood *et al.* (2019)

Table 1. Organizational culture profile normative ratings

for normative effects, which answers calls for alternative methodological approaches to estimating fit (Subramanian *et al.*, 2022).

Shortcomings of traditional conceptualizations and measurements of fit

Early theorists, such as Lewin (1951), Holland (1985) and Dawis and Lofquist (1984), emphasized the importance of personal characteristics and their alignment with the environment in which people find themselves. This field of research, which can be broadly described as P-E fit, is defined as, "the congruence, match, or similarity between the person and environment" (Edwards, 2008, p. 168). Embedded within this definition is the implied assumption that a strong relationship exists between *distinctive* attributes of the person and environment with outcomes (e.g. Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005a; Verquer *et al.*, 2003). For instance, in reviewing fit within the context of implicit leadership theories (ILT), Junker and Van Dick (2014) stated that, "idiosyncratic fit, i.e. fit with the individually held implicit theories, is often superior to fit with a shared prototype" (p. 1156).

Questions, however, have been raised regarding the viability of previous conceptualizations and measurements of fit to adequately evaluate how fit with distinctive attributes might influence outcomes (van Vianen, 2018). These questions center on traditional conceptualizations of fit failing to differentiate the components of fit that are "meaningful to unique individuals" from those that are universally shared (van Vianen, 2018, p. 93) and consequently fail to account for normative confounds. Along with past conceptualizations, traditional measurements of fit also fail to account for normative confounds due to combining the distinctive and normative components. This applies to earlier methods of estimating fit (e.g. difference scores) as well as the more prevalent PRA approach.

This shortcoming in conceptualization and measurement has the potential to significantly impact findings. As an example, in their study using the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP), Wood *et al.* (2019) estimated P-O fit using the profile correlation between a person's ideal organization ratings and actual organization ratings. They found a significant and positive relationship between P-O fit and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.64$; $p < 0.01$) when using the traditional profile correlation approach used in fit research. However, when P-O fit based on congruence with the normative ideal organization was entered into the regression equation, the relationship was found to be nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.14$; $p > 0.05$). In contrast, fit with the normative ideal organization was found to be significantly related to job satisfaction within the regression equation ($\beta = 0.43$; $p < 0.01$). Therefore, normative fit accounted for nearly all of the relationship between standard P-O fit indices and job satisfaction, demonstrating a strong normative confound (Wood *et al.*, 2019). If applying a similar degree of reduction in effect size to prior studies, such as the OCP study by O'Reilly *et al.* (1991) that also found a significant relationship between P-O fit and job satisfaction ($\beta = 0.36$; $p < 0.01$), it is likely that many significant relationships found in past studies are driven by normative confounds (i.e. fit with a normative profile) instead of fit with individuals' distinctive preferences, which is what authors typically theorized as accounting for the effects they observed.

In this way, decomposing fit into its normative and distinctive components offers an avenue for exploring inconsistencies in the literature. For instance, studies that rely on measures with items that contain consensually desirable or consensually undesirable content are more likely to find significant relationships due to the strong correlation between desirability and individual outcomes (e.g. Wood and Furr, 2016). In contrast, more neutrally worded measures are less likely to have inflated relationships due to normative confounds. Therefore, inconsistencies in past studies could be a function of differing degrees of desirable or undesirable content in the measures used.

To be clear, we are *not* recommending that items found to concern normatively desirable content (e.g. working in a job that provides *fairness* and *job security*) or undesirable content

(e.g. working in a job which requires *working long hours*; see Table 1) should be excised from measures, as some have suggested (e.g. Bäckström *et al.*, 2009). Quite the opposite: including such items may be essential to understanding the characteristics people feel they need (or need to avoid) to have a sense of fit with their job. However, by separating out the distinctive and normative aspects of measures, it can aid researchers in determining if nonsignificant findings are theoretically significant or a methodological artifact due to the composition of their measure(s).

The normative theory of fit

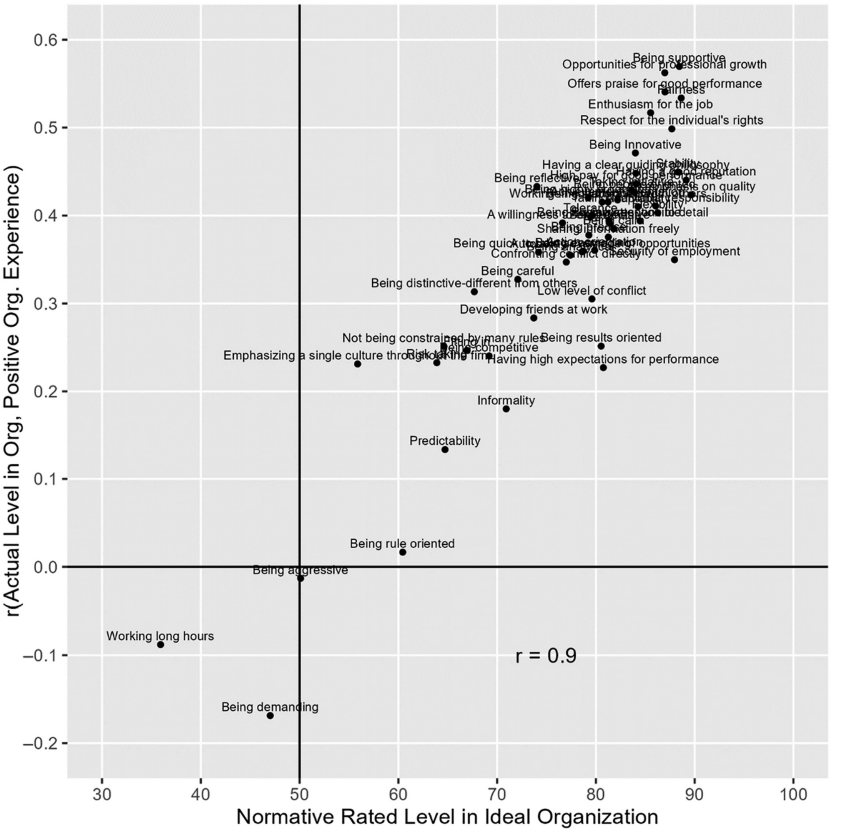
We introduce the normative theory of fit as a theoretical lens that enables fit researchers to examine and account for normative effects. Central to the normative theory of fit is the decomposition of fit into normative and distinctive components (e.g. Furr, 2008). As previously noted, *normative fit* represents the match between an individual's distinctive preferences or attributes and the average profile of a broad population, while *distinctive fit* represents the match that occurs between two distinctive profiles.

With this decomposition in mind, the core proposition of the normative theory of fit is that *the normative values of a given culture are a stronger predictor of outcomes than the idiosyncratic preferences of individuals*. Drawing again on the P-O fit context as an example, Figure 1 provides support for this proposition (figure data provided in Supplementary Materials). The figure demonstrates that what is typically viewed as main effects when using PRA (e.g. how the characteristics of the organization affect an individual's job satisfaction) are largely predicted by how much individuals typically desire or prefer those organizational characteristics. This suggests that these main effects are often, and likely in most cases, representative of normative effects or confounds (e.g. Furr and Funder, 2001; Wood and Furr, 2016). For instance, having *opportunities for professional growth* and *high pay for good performance* leads employees to be more satisfied with their jobs not simply because it matches what they want, but because those organizational attributes match what is normatively desirable or valued. Consequently, our theoretical lens suggests that prior research may be attributing too much importance to matching environments to a person's *unique* or *individuating* preferences when standard fit effects can be largely accounted for by matching to what people *generally* prefer.

Importantly, this proposition is falsifiable. It could be that some attributes of the environment have strong main effects on outcomes without being normatively preferred or unpreferred. But Figure 1 shows that for at least the job characteristics surveyed, such effects happen rarely or negligibly. In this manner, the consideration of normative and distinctive profiles, and the normative theory of fit more generally, offer more nuanced theorizing regarding when main effects can be expected to occur and how they should be interpreted.

This theoretical testing can be accomplished using a profile correlation approach, where normative and distinctive profiles are compared to estimate normative and distinctive fit. While the profile correlation approach is commonly used when investigating fit (e.g. Dineen *et al.*, 2002; Le *et al.*, 2014), a number of critiques to the approach exist (e.g. Edwards, 1993). These include concerns surrounding (1) conceptual ambiguity, where heterogeneous attributes are combined into a single profile, (2) the discarding of information, where different attributes are combined into a single index and (3) the ability to identify specific elements driving differences between profiles.

While these concerns have led to the rise of PRA and response surface analysis to assess fit, the profile correlation approach is well suited to explore issues related to disentangling the relative role of normative and distinctive preferences, which have yet to be adequately explored. Specifically, the profile correlation approach allows for the evaluation of the "array of variables" individuals utilize when making an assessment of fit and better aligns with the



Source(s) Created by authors; data obtained from Wood *et al.* (2019)

Figure 1.
Relationship between actual organizational characteristics and job satisfaction with ideal organizational characteristics

theoretical concept of fit as individuals do not rely on a single attribute or construct when determining fit (e.g. Venkatraman and Prescott, 1990). In this way, the profile correlation approach allows for broader explorations into fit regarding profiles or prototypes representing constructs (e.g. fit with an ideal organization). Therefore, we suggest that while isolated investigations into individual constructs or attributes might *not* be best suited for profile correlations, profile correlations can provide a starting point for identifying the importance of fit within a particular context.

In terms of estimating fit indices using this approach, the decomposition of fit requires first estimating the normative profile by calculating a mean score index (e.g. Table 1). This approach can also be used to create a profile of individuals' average ratings across a broader population by simply expanding the participants used in the calculation to include those in additional organizations or industries. The next step in the process involves estimating distinctive profiles, which estimates how the individual's ratings deviate from the normative profile [1]. This allows researchers to identify the variance explained in outcomes that is attributed specifically to distinctive attributes or preferences. In doing so, it provides a unique and novel perspective on the fit concept as most empirical studies of fit assume to measure distinctive fit while failing to account for the normative profile.

By decomposing fit in this manner, it allows researchers to test the central proposition of the normative theory of fit; namely, that aligning a person's environment with characteristics generally preferred by others may be more important to outcomes than aligning the environment to a person's preferences on dimensions that are truly distinctive or idiosyncratic (i.e. unshared by people in general). To advance future research more directly, we briefly review fit approaches in organizational behavior (OB) and human resource management (HRM) research and present how the normative theory of fit might be tested in these different domains of research.

Fit in organizational behavior

Given the prominent role of fit and congruence research in organizational behavior, the normative theory of fit can be applied to numerous areas within organizational behavior. For example, person-organization fit (Chatman, 1989), person-supervisor fit (Marstand *et al.*, 2017) and person-vocation fit (Holland, 1985). Here, we focus specifically on how the theory can be applied to leadership and team research.

Fit in the leadership context

The dyadic and relational aspects of leader and follower interactions are central to the study of leadership (Graen and Uhl-Bien, 1995). Two of the more common approaches to investigating leader-follower interactions are leader–member exchange (LMX) (Graen *et al.*, 1982) and ILTs (Offermann *et al.*, 1994). LMX is traditionally assessed using self-ratings, where the leader or follower rates their relationship quality. Similar to concerns with failing to separate the measurement of the person and the environment, this single-source measurement approach to dyadic relationships has received methodological critiques due to failing to measure both the perspectives of the leader and the follower (Krasikova and LeBreton, 2012), which is compounded by generally poor agreement between leader and follower LMX ratings (Gerstner and Day, 1997).

Drawing on the normative theory of fit, we propose that LMX, along with other leadership effects that are assessed by subordinate perceptions (e.g. authentic leadership), is primarily driven by leaders' alignment with normative affective profiles. This is supported by empirical work which found that leader affect accounts for a large portion of variance found in leadership measures (Martinko *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, while attributing leadership effects to distinctive leader attributes and behaviors is the traditional perspective, a more direct explanation could be that the attributes and behaviors of effective leaders are simply more closely aligned with normative profiles (i.e. a normative confound). In support of this perspective, research involving personality traits (e.g. Wood and Furr, 2016) suggests that normative profiles often reflect key socially desirable traits, as the average person tends to prefer traits like kindness, honesty and reliability as opposed to negative traits. Therefore, a normative affective profile for leadership comprised of key attributes or behaviors that drive affective responses could explain many of the leader-follower outcomes found in past studies.

As such, we argue that to effectively evaluate LMX and leader behavior more generally, it is critical to first account for the normative component of leadership measures and then utilize the distinctive component to evaluate leader behavior outside of affect and normative confounds. This could be accomplished by (1) distributing an LMX measure to subordinates, (2) creating a normative profile by averaging the individual item ratings across subordinates and then (3) comparing the normative profile to subordinates' distinctive LMX ratings. This would allow researchers to differentiate between the degree to which a leader generally has positive relationships and the specific relationships with followers which are frequently the focus of such research. Importantly, this approach also provides a novel avenue for

addressing repeated concerns in the LMX and more general leadership literature such as incremental validity over general liking and rater effects that can distort findings (Dulebohn *et al.*, 2017; Hansbrough *et al.*, 2015; Martinko *et al.*, 2018).

In contrast, ILT research is primarily concerned with the degree of fit between actual or perceived leadership behavior and the follower's expectation or cognitive representation of a leader. Fit between a follower's ILT and perceptions of their leader leads to increased follower job satisfaction, LMX, performance and well-being (e.g. Junker and Van Dick, 2014).

The measurement of ILT fit is generally estimated using difference scores (Epitropaki and Martin, 2005) or PRA (Riggs and Porter, 2017). However, we suggest that a reexamination of ILT fit utilizing a normative theory of fit and the associated normative and distinctive profiles will offer new insight into how ILTs relate to workplace outcomes. This is based on the conceptual and methodological shortcomings of difference scores and PRA and their inability to account for normative confounds. Specifically, because ILTs are directly influenced by environmental and affective factors (Lord *et al.*, 2020), there is a strong potential for ILT fit to be largely driven by a leader's fit with normatively desirable attributes instead of their distinctive attributes. Empirically, this also aligns with past findings in other areas of research (e.g. relational or personality fit) that have compared the influence of normative and distinctive components of fit to positive outcomes (e.g. Wood and Furr, 2016). As such, we anticipate that results found in past examinations of ILTs fit using the traditional approaches are not due to alignment between individuals' distinctive ILTs and the behavior of their leader (e.g. Junker and Van Dick, 2014), but instead are due to a leader's alignment with normative ILTs held by followers.

Testing this approach could be accomplished by (1) estimating the normative ILT profile for followers using a standard ILT measure, such as the 21-item measure by Epitropaki and Martin (2005), (2) creating the distinctive ILT profiles for followers and then (3) examining if the relationship between leader ratings and outcomes is more strongly associated with the normative ILT profile or the distinctive ILT profiles. Taking this approach would provide a test to determine if a follower's idiosyncratic cognitive representation of leaders has a stronger or weaker relationship with outcomes than the normative cognitive representation of leaders.

Fit in the team context

The concept of fit in the team context, generally referred to as person-team or person-group fit, posits that fit between individuals in teams plays a central role in predicting both individual and team level outcomes (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005a, b). For instance, person-team fit is related to team satisfaction (Glew, 2012), individual attraction to the team (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005b) and individual commitment and performance (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2014). Methods of estimating person-team fit are similar to those used in other fields of organizational behavior research, such as subjective measures (e.g. Li *et al.*, 2018) and polynomial regression (e.g. Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005b)

We suggest that decomposing fit would provide insight into understanding if individual and team outcomes are due to normative confounds or because of alignment with distinctive team member perceptions and preferences. For instance, is it more important for two individuals on a team to share similar distinctive values, or is it more important for individuals on a team to better align with normative team values? Given the consistency of widely shared preferences, values and ideals (e.g. Park *et al.*, 2006; Schwartz, 1992), along with the benefits associated with normative fit (Wood and Furr, 2016), it seems likely that the positive outcomes of matching on attributes that most individuals want in their team member could outweigh those with matching on distinctive preferences of a particular team member. However, the field currently lacks research that has demonstrated the importance of distinctive over normative fit empirically in the team context; therefore, many of these questions remain unanswered.

Reexamining relationships found between person-team fit and individual and team outcomes using the normative theory of fit lens could provide valuable insight into how to best manage team assignments and team composition. Additionally, it could provide an avenue for comparing self-peer ratings and meta-perceptions identified in a normative profile to evaluate team self-awareness and potential discrepancies between team member self- and peer-perceptions. To test the decomposition of fit within this context, it would require (1) creating a normative profile of attributes or expected behavior across teams, (2) estimating the average distinctive profile for each team member and then (3) evaluating the relationship between outcomes (e.g. satisfaction with team) and fit with the normative profile compared to fit with distinctive profiles. Given the team level of analysis, we note the importance of accounting for emergent team properties. Therefore, this procedure should be conducted after confirming rating agreement across team members with the team characteristics being rated at the team level as opposed to an aggregation of individual self-ratings.

Fit in human resource management

Fit within the HRM literature is often viewed from two levels. The first connects fit with outcomes relevant to HRM, such as recruitment (Yu, 2014), selection (Cable and Judge, 1997) and retention (McCulloch and Turban, 2007). The second approach examines fit from the strategic HRM (SHRM) perspective. This entails evaluating how well an organization's policies, practices and procedures demonstrate internal and external fit with an organization's environment (e.g. Werbel and DeMarie, 2005). In this way, fit in HRM provides a bridge between the individual-level concept of fit in organizational behavior and the organizational level concept of fit found in strategic management. Below we introduce how the normative theory of fit could provide new insight into three primary HRM functions on the individual level (recruitment, selection and retention), as well as how the theoretical lens might contribute to SHRM research involving High Performance Work Systems (HPWS).

Recruitment, selection and retention

In their meta-analysis of the P-E fit literature, Kristof-Brown *et al.* (2005a), found that most relationships between person-job, person-organization, person-group and person-supervisor fit with pre- and post-entry individual criteria were significant. Although subfields of P-E fit draw on different theoretical frameworks (Edwards, 2008), the underlying assumption driving these relationships is that "the compatibility between an individual and a work environment that occurs when their characteristics are well matched" leads to improved work outcomes (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005a, p. 281). In the HRM setting, this translates into capitalizing on fit to aid in the attraction, recruitment and selection of employees (Cable and Judge, 1997), as well as utilizing fit to help prevent employee turnover and improve employee commitment (e.g. Edwards, 1991; O'Reilly *et al.*, 1991).

However, as noted by van Vianen (2018) and supported by Wood *et al.* (2019), the current fit measurement techniques employed in HRM research (e.g. difference scores) might not adequately capture how fit is traditionally conceptualized. For instance, Wood *et al.* (2019) found that P-O fit with normative employee ideals has a much stronger relationship with job satisfaction and turnover intentions than fit with employees' distinctive ideals. This finding suggests that the idiosyncratic-person component in the P-E fit concept might be less integral to the recruitment, selection and retention of employees than previously thought.

Therefore, we encourage a reexamination of prior held assumptions in HRM fit research, as researchers might miss valuable information when searching for distinctive fit relationships yet failing to account for normative confounds. For example, the Attraction-

Selection-Attrition model suggests that "people's preferences for particular organizations are based upon an implicit estimate of the congruence of their own personal characteristics and the attributes of potential work organizations" (Schneider *et al.*, 1995, p. 749). We suggest, instead of attraction and selection through congruence with an individual's preferences for a particular organization, attraction and selection may be driven more by individuals selecting the best available organization that exhibits normatively desirable attributes. By integrating the normative theory of fit into this line of research, it also provides a new pathway to integrate other commonly employed theories into the fit literature, such as the Job Demands-Resource Theory which broadly suggests that certain working environments are universally more beneficial to employees than others (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001).

The normative theory of fit could also be applied to retention as a key HRM outcome, as organizations might be better served focusing on aligning with normative preferences instead of expending resources to match distinctive individual preferences. This would be particularly valuable for high-turnover industries with limited resources, such as non-profit organizations.

High performance work systems (HPWS)

The concept of normatively held ideal organizational attributes directly links with the SHRM discussion surrounding HPWS, which are defined as "an integrated system of HR practices that are internally consistent (alignment among HR practices) and externally consistent (alignment with organizational strategy)" (Evans and Davis, 2005, p. 759). Although framed within different industries or with specific strategic objectives in mind (Liao *et al.*, 2009), many of these practices are universal regardless of industry or strategy (e.g. effective staffing procedures). In this way, HPWS draws on a universalistic perspective to suggest that a relatively consistent profile of policies and practices leads to improved organizational performance and productivity (e.g. Huselid, 1995).

HPWS are often measured using a Likert-scale, where participants rate the degree to which their organization demonstrates specific organizational practices (e.g. Zacharatos *et al.*, 2005). The higher the score on the measure, the stronger the estimated direct or mediated relationship with positive organizational and work outcomes (Den Hartog and Verburg, 2004; Messersmith *et al.*, 2011). However, only relying on an additive approach fails to account for normative confounds that likely inflate relationships. This is particularly true given the universalistic theoretical foundation of HPWS. As such, while distinctive profiles can still be estimated by removing the normative component (e.g. estimating the degree to which a company deviates from normative selection practices), we anticipate that the relationships between HPWS and organizational outcomes are largely due to normative effects. Therefore, we suggest that the normative theory of fit and decomposition of fit could be used as a framework to complement the examination of HPWS. This would allow researchers to create a normative profile as a reference point and means to account for normative confounds when examining the relationship between HPWS and organizational level outcomes.

When does distinctive fit matter most?

While the central proposition of the normative theory of fit emphasizes the importance of fit with normative profiles, we also note that fit with distinctive profiles could be a stronger predictor of outcomes in certain contexts. For instance, Kallgren *et al.* (2000) found that the influence of norms on behavior changes based on the degree to which the norms are focal at the decision point for the individual. While Kallgren *et al.* (2000) utilized a more restricted definition of norms as descriptive or prescription indicators of appropriate behavior, their findings can offer insight into potential boundary conditions for the normative theory of fit. Specifically, it

suggests that the relationship between an outcome and fit with the normative profile could weaken when norms (e.g. what is typically expected of leaders) are less salient to the individual. Subsequently, this would strengthen the relationship between the outcome and fit with the individual's distinctive profile. In a similar manner, the impact of normative confounds is generally stronger when using measures that contain extremely desirable or undesirable items (Wood and Furr, 2016). This is because consistently extreme ratings suggest that individuals hold a highly salient and clear expectation for the behavior or attribute being assessed. Therefore, when item ratings for a measure gravitate towards the scale midpoint, it is more likely that fit with a distinctive profile will have a stronger relationship with outcomes. Given these potential contextual factors, we encourage fit researchers to consider the degree of norm focus and item ratings when employing the normative theory of fit.

Discussion

Introducing the normative theory of fit and the decomposition of fit into normative and distinctive components provide several important scholarly and practical contributions. Our conceptualization of fit provides a clarification and critical examination of a pervasive construct in the field of management. In doing so, we position the normative theory of fit as a more nuanced lens through which researchers can conceptualize and measure fit, and we also suggest that normative expectations and preferences likely have a sizable impact on fit-related relationships and outcomes. Therefore, accounting for these normative confounds may help resolve inconsistencies in past fit-related findings (e.g. Su *et al.*, 2019). Further, the novel approach of decomposing fit into distinctive and normative components expands the repertoire of available methods for fit researchers (Subramanian *et al.*, 2022). This presents a new avenue for methodological and theoretical considerations when developing future fit studies and expands current discussions within fit literature.

In this way, the present paper suggests a critical need for empirical reinvestigations to test commonly held assumptions and past findings in fit research. For instance, studies have found that organizational attraction is related to the congruence between a job candidate's culture preferences and the culture of an organization (e.g. Judge and Cable, 1997). This relationship is traditionally conceptualized as distinctive fit; however, the argument presented here suggests that normative fit might in fact be driving organizational attraction more so than an individual's distinctive fit preferences. Other examples such as this are common in fit research across literatures. This includes the individual level and group level but can also be expanded to the organizational level (e.g. organization-organization fit) and national level (e.g. cultural distance).

Our arguments surrounding normative and distinctive fit also suggest implications for practitioners; namely, a call to reexamine the importance placed on differentiation when implementing specific organizational practices and policies. Specifically, practitioners should weigh the costs and benefits of pursuing employees' distinctive preferences over a broader focus on normative preferences when determining how to allocate resources. This is particularly important for industries struggling with resources and personnel shortages, such as nursing (Lowman and Harms, 2022), where the benefits of establishing a strong congruence with normative preferences might prove to be a more optimal strategy than the more costly pursuit of meeting distinctive preferences.

However, we also note the importance of not completely dismissing distinctive fit, which could provide valuable insight when norms are not focal to the employee or when employees have more neutral than extreme preferences and expectations. Examining the role of distinctive fit, such as examining under what contexts it might suppress the relationship between normative fit and outcomes, could offer useful theoretical and methodological insight. Further, an oversimplification of the normative theory of fit would be to dismiss what a specific person

wants in a job; while the wants of that individual person could be normative, it is ultimately the person's wanting of that feature or attribute that drives behavior. In this way, we advocate that individual preferences do matter; nonetheless, we also suggest that many of these preferences are common across individuals and therefore we can help individuals realize their preferences by better understanding what individuals generally or typically want.

Future directions in fit research

We identified a surprising lack of communication between the fields of study we reviewed, this is despite many of the methodological issues with how to index P-E fit (e.g. Edwards, 1991) applying across literatures. We hope that the perspective and information presented here, along with placing many of these approaches from diverse fields within a single discussion, will contribute to fostering communication across fields and lead to a greater unified understanding of estimating fit. Future research should seek to better integrate approaches to fit across literatures by utilizing multiple approaches to assess fit (e.g. comparing different profile approaches or integrating the decomposition of fit with PRA).

In addition to increasing cross-pollination among distinct management literatures, a systematic approach to reexamining past empirical studies investigating fit should be undertaken. While replication studies are generally received less favorably than new studies, the call here is both (1) innovative in the application of a novel approach to estimating fit in the management context and (2) could provide original perspectives and findings on previously held assumptions and findings. Therefore, we believe that utilizing the profile correlation approach and the decomposition of fit into normative and distinctive fit to reanalyze prior studies could prove a fruitful avenue for future research, strengthening the field of management's understanding of the fit concept and offering a valuable test of the normative theory of fit.

Regarding new empirical studies, we particularly highlight testing the universal and contingency perspectives from a normative theory of fit lens (e.g. HPWS). We believe this could provide a framework for building hypotheses surrounding the importance of fit on universal or normative attributes compared with fit on contingent or distinctive attributes on the organizational level. The proposed approach could also be expanded into other individual-level domains not specifically outlined here. For instance, using the normative and distinctive concept to help individuals better understand their unique strengths and values within a coaching or career development context.

Future studies could also utilize the normative theory of fit to build and expand upon existing OB and HRM measures. A systematic review of OB and HRM measures that captures the degree to which items allow for an effective assessment of distinctive *and* normative preferences (e.g. a range of items that are undesirable, neutral and desirable) could provide insight into the pervasiveness of normative confounds from a methodological standpoint. While some measures contain normatively undesirable items; as an example, the Hazardous Organization Tool (Wang *et al.*, 2023) evaluates an individual's attractiveness to organizations with low ethical standards, our assumption is that measures tend to lean towards the use of more desirable items (e.g. the OCP; O'Reilly *et al.*, 1991). However, future research is needed to test this assumption. Once the measures that are effective at capturing distinctive and normative preferences are identified, future research should explore when and how distinctive fit matters to formally test contextual factors related to the normative theory of fit.

Conclusion

In presenting the normative theory of fit and the accompanying profile correlation approach and the decomposition of fit into normative and distinctive fit, we discuss a novel theoretical and method framework for estimating fit across multiple domains of research. Further, we

provide a roadmap for empirically testing traditionally held – yet untested – assumptions regarding fit in these fields of research. As we have shown, this understanding of how normative and distinctive components of fit can be separated and indexed has the potential to revise conclusions regarding the importance of fit, settle longstanding debates and introduce a new stream of research within various fit literatures.

Notes

1. The distinctive profile is calculated by subtracting the normative profile from the individual's ratings. Scores then indicate how the person differs from the average rating. For instance, positive distinctive scores indicate "the person rated this attribute more highly than the average person".

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Supplementary material

item	Full Item Text	mIdeal100	mActual100	r(JobSat,IdealJob)	r(JobSat,ActualJob)
ocpi1	Enthusiasm for the job	85.54633472	63.17427386	0.177671977	0.51689349
ocpi2	Tolerance	79.466759	68.74135546	0.115688296	0.398642444
ocpi3	Being careful	72.09543568	73.82434302	0.165011266	0.327552169
ocpi4	Being distinctive-different from others	67.69390582	55.84370678	0.081834054	0.313359203
ocpi5	A willingness to experiment	76.62517289	52.97372061	0.065859307	0.39160961
ocpi6	Being highly organized	79.21853389	64.41908714	0.15172425	0.420028583
ocpi7	Low level of conflict	79.5988935	60.89211618	0.067614859	0.30515513
ocpi8	Respect for the individual's rights	87.69017981	73.4439834	0.194444456	0.498527353
ocpi9	Being analytical	77.42047026	69.60580913	0.166828188	0.354939595
ocpi10	Not being constrained by many rules	64.62655602	41.94329184	0.065868664	0.251036804
ocpi11	Being team oriented	80.6362379	71.16182573	0.242235155	0.415318661
ocpi12	Sharing information freely	81.25864454	59.26694329	0.10321399	0.375552798
ocpi13	Informality	70.9197787	58.76038781	0.057917214	0.18013282
ocpi14	Taking individual responsibility	86.06500692	69.81327801	0.218207264	0.410856097
ocpi15	Flexibility	86.2724758	66.3208852	0.167855482	0.403168675
ocpi16	Being reflective	74.03181189	58.74827109	0.091703336	0.433052008
ocpi17	Predictability	64.73029046	63.40027701	0.097369903	0.133878203
ocpi18	Working in collaboration with others	81.23268698	74.16897507	0.203121363	0.415439542
ocpi19	High pay for good performance	84.09405256	43.46473029	0.093489347	0.436010491
ocpi20	Opportunities for professional growth	86.98060942	57.08852006	0.129969194	0.5624061
ocpi21	Being decisive	81.39695712	64.38450899	0.152450638	0.39127384
ocpi22	Autonomy	74.20470263	59.99308437	0.039712638	0.3582881
ocpi23	Developing friends at work	73.72060858	64.45366528	0.109118888	0.283526827
ocpi24	Being results oriented	80.53250346	76.52143845	0.171875113	0.251504558
ocpi25	Taking initiative	83.60995851	66.18257261	0.161982761	0.428962151
ocpi26	Being easy going	78.73443983	60.26970954	0.023754944	0.359556998
ocpi27	Being rule oriented	60.44260028	70.05532503	0.124168292	0.016640562
ocpi28	Emphasizing a single culture throughout the firm	55.87828492	48.75518672	0.113944738	0.231219501
ocpi29	Being quick to take advantage of opportunities	78.60110803	59.37067773	0.199946387	0.358828948
ocpi30	Adaptability	84.26694329	67.01244813	0.128973952	0.410062724
ocpi31	Risk taking	63.90041494	45.33195021	0.113216552	0.232636557
ocpi32	Working long hours	35.92669433	55.94744122	0.04705375	−0.087917016
ocpi33	Offers praise for good performance	86.99861687	61.23789765	0.131300832	0.540576761
ocpi34	Being competitive	69.19087137	58.33333333	0.106137667	0.240365654
ocpi35	Being Innovative	84.00277008	59.23236515	0.139618266	0.471193252
ocpi36	Fairness	88.64265928	62.86307054	0.119889991	0.533637894
ocpi37	Having high expectations for performance	80.75589459	74.41217151	0.187942371	0.227073423
ocpi38	Fitting in	66.94329184	61.79114799	0.136411378	0.246758799
ocpi39	Being calm	81.82132964	65.17980636	0.07643165	0.384834685
ocpi40	Being precise	79.28769018	69.26002766	0.217300837	0.377750359
ocpi41	Being socially responsible	81.32780083	67.70401107	0.067840735	0.394087755
ocpi42	Being demanding	47.02627939	59.12863071	0.078270708	−0.168659247
ocpi43	An emphasis on quality	89.62655602	74.93084371	0.160887959	0.423637725
ocpi44	Action orientation	79.87551867	70.22821577	0.233533845	0.360425901
ocpi45	Security of employment	87.96680498	68.08437068	0.104243439	0.349818205
ocpi46	Paying attention to detail	84.47441217	73.16735823	0.212465638	0.393903937
ocpi47	Stability	88.31258645	69.56371191	0.083037451	0.449405635
ocpi48	Having a clear guiding philosophy	84.05947441	63.2780083	0.156544477	0.448118714
ocpi49	Being aggressive	50.10373444	49.06639004	0.143325394	−0.013083674
ocpi50	Being supportive	88.45089903	66.70124481	0.145263378	0.569567508
ocpi51	Confronting conflict directly	77.0055325	55.49792531	0.124423593	0.347064043
ocpi52	Having a good reputation	89.14246196	73.9626556	0.17069233	0.440309293
ocpi53	Being people oriented	83.92116183	72.30290456	0.121531171	0.426313718
ocpi54	Achievement orientation	82.20221607	69.26002766	0.180166039	0.417775433

Source(s): Created by authors; data obtained from Wood *et al.* (2019)

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