RESOLUTION, RELIEF, AND RESIGNATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF RESPONSES TO MISFIT AT WORK

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Research has portrayed person–environment (PE) fit as a pleasant condition resulting from people being attracted to and selected into compatible work environments; yet, our study reveals that creating and maintaining a sense of fit frequently involves an effortful, dynamic set of strategies. We used a two-phase, qualitative design to allow employees to report how they become aware of and experience misfit, and what they do in response. To address these questions, we conducted interviews with 81 individuals sampled from diverse industries and occupations. Through their descriptions, we identified three broad responses to the experience of misfit: resolution, relief, and resignation. Within these approaches, we identified distinct strategies for responding to misfit. We present a model of how participants used these strategies, often in combination, and develop propositions regarding their effectiveness at reducing strain associated with misfit. These results expand PE fit theory by providing new insight into how individuals experience and react to misfit—portraying them as active, motivated creators of their own fit experience at work.

"I fit because I make myself fit." Research Participant #15

"A round man cannot be expected to fit in a square hole right away. He must have time to modify his shape." Mark Twain (1897)

Research over almost 100 years has established person–environment (PE) fit as a complex antecedent of work-related outcomes (Arthur, Bell, Villado, & Doverspike, 2006; Chatman, 1989; French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974; Murray, 1938). For individuals, good fit is associated with less stress and more trust, team cohesion, and job satisfaction. Organizations also enjoy the benefits of employees who fit well, including reduced employee deviance, cynicism, withdrawal, and turnover (Harold, Oh, Holtz, Han, & Giacalone, 2016; Mulki, Jaramillo, & Locander, 2006; Naus, Van Iterson, & Roe, 2007), as well as better contextual and task performance (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Oh et al., 2014). Schneider's (1987) attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) model proposes that natural tendencies of self-selection and similarity attraction compel individuals and organizations toward homogeneity and fit. Yet, more recently, scholars have suggested that some degree of *mis*fit is present in most employees' work situations (Wheeler, Gallagher, Brouer, & Sablynski, 2007).

Misfit is generally conceived as the negative end of the fit continuum, and is associated with discomfort

or incompatibility. Scholars have recently advocated that greater attention be paid to the misfit condition to better understand how people experience and navigate through it (Shipp & Jansen, 2011; Yu, 2013). These scholars have portrayed misfit as partially malleable and subject to modification by employees' cognitions and actions. Viewing employees as arbiters of fit invites new research on how they manage misfit at work. In this study, we use qualitative methods to better understand how people become aware of and experience misfit at work, and what they do in response to it. By doing so, we can assist employees and supervisors in managing fit, thereby reducing the negative consequences of misfit, such as withdrawal, stress, and turnover.

Although quantitative studies have documented the association between PE fit and outcomes, they have shed little insight into what employees do when they experience misfit. Pratt (2009: 856) noted that "qualitative research is great for addressing 'how' questions – rather than 'how many'; for understanding the world from the perspective of those studied (i.e., informants); and for examining and articulating processes." Therefore, a qualitative approach is useful for exploring employees' experiences of misfit through their own detailed descriptions and for understanding how they respond to these experiences.

The first question we address is "How do people become aware of and experience misfit at work?" Empirically, fit scholars have defined misfit as occurring when the person and environment lack correspondence on commensurate dimensions (e.g., Harrison, 2007), or when there is a generalized sense of incompatibility with some element at work (Kristof, 1996; Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). These conditions reflect objective misfit and perceived misfit, respectively. Yet, these relatively sterile definitions do not adequately capture the experience of being a misfit at work. Participants' descriptions can provide a deeper level of insight into the experience of misfit as it occurs naturally (Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005; Kristof-Brown & Guay, 2011; Shipp & Jansen, 2011). This approach can help align points of contention between academic and lay understandings of the concept.

It has been well established that turnover is associated with low levels of fit (Arthur et al., 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Yet this relationship is often weak, with average true score correlations rarely exceeding .20. In addition, considering that misfit can occur with any aspect of the environment—job, supervisor, workgroup, or organization—and that leaving an organization is a complex decision involving many factors, it is not surprising that many occurrences of misfit do not result in turnover. Therefore, the second question we address is "What do people do in response to misfit?" Yu (2009, 2013) suggested that employees are highly motivated to resolve misfit, yet existing research has primarily emphasized poor attitudes and turnover as typical reactions. By allowing people to describe how they have reacted to and handled misfit at work, we shed light on a set of actions that may be overlooked by focusing exclusively on turnover. Specifically, we seek answers to questions such as "Can misfit be resolved by the intentional action of employees?" "Does misfit ever result in positive consequences, such as personal growth or organizational change?" and "What happens if a person cannot resolve misfit?" By better understanding the array of strategies people use to respond to misfit, we hope to provide suggestions for how to reduce the misfit–turnover association.

Through semi-structured interviews with two sets of respondents, we explore people's personal descriptions of their experiences of, and reactions to, misfit at work. Based on these descriptions, we develop a conceptual framework of the range of employee responses to misfit. Using both preliminary and follow-up interviews, we also form testable propositions regarding the use and efficacy of various approaches for addressing misfit.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Over the years, researchers have developed a multifaceted picture of PE fit that accounts for fit with different aspects of the environment, including person–organization (PO), person–job (PJ), person–group (PG), and person–supervisor (PS) fit. These types of fit have been quantitatively evaluated in a number of different ways (Edwards, Cable, Williamson, Lambert, & Shipp, 2006), including objective approaches that have compared measurements of attributes of the person to attributes of the environment, and perceptual approaches that have asked individuals to assess their fit directly. Meta-analytic evidence has demonstrated that fit perceptions are more predictive than objective fit assessments for almost all outcomes (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Thus, studying individuals' perceptions and experiences of fit is empirically justified.

Just as perceived fit is assumed to be desirable, misfit is presumed to be an unpleasant and stressful

experience (Edwards & Shipp, 2007). Schneider's (1987) ASA model predicts that, in general, employees with poor fit will voluntarily or involuntarily leave their work environments. Although meta-analytic evidence largely supports this assertion (Arthur et al., 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Oh et al., 2014; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003), there are differential relationships between fit and attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors. For example, Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) reported strong correlations between perceived measures of PO fit and job attitudes ($\rho = .67$ for job satisfaction, $\rho = .77$ for organizational commitment), moderate correlations with cognitions (for intent to quit), and statistically significant, albeit weak, relationships with turnover. Although one reason for the effect size differences may have been the common method bias typically associated with attitudinal measures, the decline in effect sizes from attitudes to cognitions to behaviors also implies that people do not immediately act on their attitudes. Thus, although employees who perceive misfit are likely to be dissatisfied, they are somewhat less likely to consider leaving, and even less likely to leave.

Existing research has suggested that the decision to live with misfit, rather than leave for other opportunities, is complex. Wheeler et al. (2007) investigated the perceived job mobility of those with poor fit and found that they often remain in poorly fitting positions due to a lack of other alternatives. Embeddedness—defined as the combined influence of connections to the environment, the desire to avoid turnover-related sacrifices, and the level of perceived fit—also contributes to an employee's decision to stay (Hom, Mitchell, Lee, & Griffeth, 2012). Furthermore, Shipp and Jansen (2011) suggested that employees consider their fit *in media res*, assessing whether their current situation is better or worse than that of the past, and if improvement is likely in the future. Thus, a present state of misfit may be insufficient to prompt turnover if it is perceived as better than past misfit or if future improvements are expected.

These studies have suggested that employees often live with a dynamic tension between experiencing misfit, yet without actively pursuing new positions. Scholars have long proposed that mental health and adjustment depends on the attainment of fit between what employees want from work and what they receive (French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974; Harrison, 1978). If fit is not experienced, "a lack of satisfaction, a persisting experience of frustration and deprivation, and an inability to achieve valued goals in

a specific set of environment conditions" will begin to exist (French & Kahn, 1962: 45). Yu's (2013) motivational model of PE fit theorizes, therefore, that employees are highly motivated to reduce misfit-induced tension. He suggested that employees use conscious and unconscious efforts to manipulate their experiences of misfit into ones of fit. In this study, using employees' own words elicited through semi-structured interviews, we describe the experience of misfit and develop a holistic model of the strategies used to survive, ameliorate, or even benefit from the painful experience of being a misfit at work.

METHOD

Our design employed two phases of data collection using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) conducted by research teams in the United Kingdom and the United States. We designed the first phase of interviews to explore employees' experiences of misfit, addressing our first research question: "How do people become aware of and experience misfit at work?" Participants in this phase discussed their experiences of fit and, in doing so, revealed that these experiences were characterized not only by emotional gravity, but also by significant efforts to address misfit. The insight that the effort exerted to fit in was a core part of the misfit experience led us to design a second phase of interviews to validate and elaborate on the specific types of effort identified in Phase 1. Thus, in Phase 2 we concentrated on addressing the second question, inspired by Phase 1: "What do people do in response to misfit?" Figure 1 illustrates the sequencing of the data collection and analyses, in which we use data from both phases to respond to both research questions. We describe the method and analyses involved in each phase separately, because each phase had a different sampling strategy. We then report the findings together, because interviews from both phases provided material and insights into both research questions.

Phase 1 Sampling Process

The U.K. research team approached 11 organizations located in a town outside of London where unemployment was low (an indicator of job availability) and industries were diverse. We sent letters introducing the study to human resources (HR) directors, four of whom responded by allowing us to announce the study in their company's electronic newsletter, staff bulletin board, or manager

FIGURE 1
Data Collection and Analysis Progression, Formatted after Harrison and Rouse (2014)
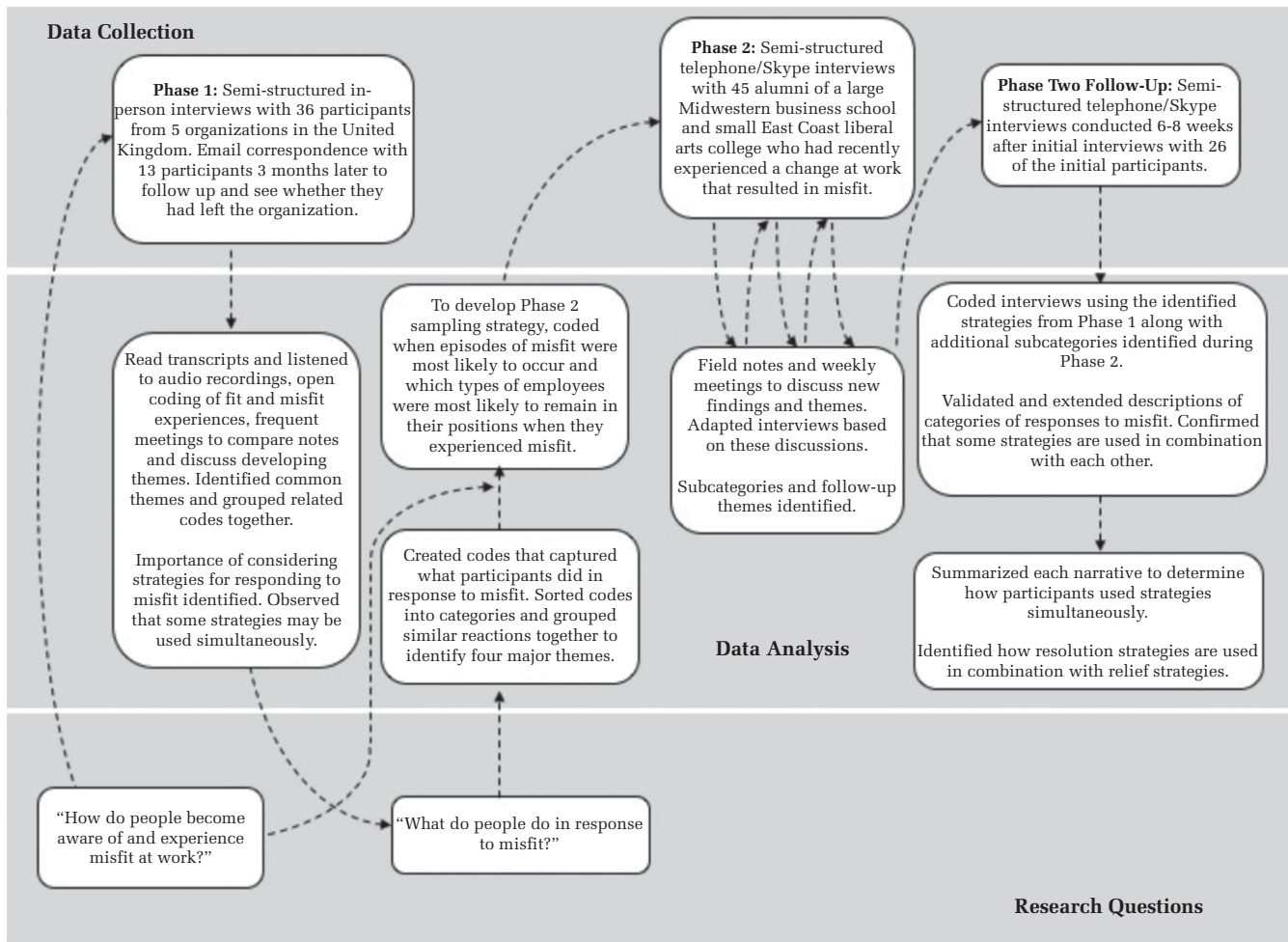
meetings. A fifth company enrolled after the researcher presented at a local HR forum. We invited participants to take part in an interview designed to "increase our understanding of what makes people fit in at work, and why some people don't fit in." We included people from all levels and jobs, with a final group of 36 employees participating from five organizations (a manufacturing plant, a retailer, a local government agency, a consultancy, and a university). Participants held supervisory ($n = 18$) and nonsupervisory ($n = 18$) positions, in jobs including: accountants, factory production workers, shop assistants, cleaners, social services providers, research consultants, and junior and senior managers. Fourteen participants were male (39%) and 22 were female (61%), ranging in age from 19 to 59 ($M = 43$, $SD = 10.3$) and averaging 23 years of work experience

($SD = 10.6$) with an average of seven years in their current positions ($SD = 9.1$).

Phase 1 Interviews

The majority of interviews lasted about one hour, ranging from 31 minutes to 2 hours 17 minutes. The interviewer started by asking: "Thinking about the things that make you fit or misfit at work, are there any things that immediately spring to mind?" The interviewer also asked participants to elaborate on themes and explain connections between their ideas. They were invited to describe episodes of fit or misfit in their current jobs and in past jobs to capture a broad array of experiences. Open-ended questions were used to avoid preconceived ideas about fit or misfit, in sharp contrast to the nomothetic

approaches typically used in fit research (e.g., O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991).

When participants finished describing their experiences of fit and misfit, the researcher verbally summarized the key points from the interview, allowing participants to elaborate on answers that were incomplete and to correct any errors. This helped to validate the understanding of what had been shared (Kvale, 1996; Lee, 1999). Reliable written records of the interviews were obtained through audio recording and professional, local transcription, which was reviewed for accuracy by the authors. In the weeks following the interview, the interviewer contacted all subjects by email to provide the written summary of their interviews; 13 subjects replied with updates on how their fit had changed since the interview had been conducted.

Phase 1 Data Analysis

The U.K. research team invited the U.S. researchers to the project to bring an informed, but external, perspective to the data. First, each of the U.S. authors read the transcripts while listening to the audio recording and identified individual mentions of fit and misfit using the qualitative research software program NVivo 10.0. Second, within each code of fit or misfit, they used an open coding process to develop unique codes for each new experience (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The participants described episodes of fit and misfit in their current jobs and in past jobs. In some cases, fit and misfit occurred simultaneously, with fit occurring with some parts of their environment and misfit with others. In other cases, they described fit slipping into misfit over time. The three coders met at regular intervals to compare notes and definitions of emerging codes. Descriptions of low pay, poor working conditions, and abusive management were excluded from the misfit codes because they were circumstances that would be universally dissatisfying to all employees, rather than indicators of poor fit for particular individuals.

After all codes were generated, the U.S. and U.K. teams met to discuss the data. Both groups concurred that the misfit experiences were more novel, emotionally evocative, and involved more elaborate stories than did stories of fit. We then decided to delve more deeply into the misfit experiences. The U.S. team began identifying common experiences and grouping related ones together to form codes of misfit experiences (e.g., "Misfit: lack of challenge" and "Misfit: lack of variety" were collapsed into one code).

The Phase 1 interviews contained accounts that were consistent with extant conceptualizations of fit—including descriptions of painful incompatibility between the self and specific parts of the environment. Yet, virtually all participants revealed that the efforts they used to address misfit were also essential to their experience. These efforts involved a complex set of reactions that were not simply emotive responses, but included motivated cognitions and actions. Misfit inspired strong arousal and corrective action in nearly all respondents. The enthusiastic and detailed descriptions of what they did to address misfit encouraged the research team to revisit the data to explore a second research question: "What do people do in response to misfit?"

To address this question, the coders returned to all misfit experiences and coded people's actions in response to perceived misfit. A process similar to live coding was used, in which codes were compared to one another as they developed and continued to be revised based on evidence (Locke, Feldman, & Golden-Biddle, 2015). We then reduced these codes by comparing each one to the others and grouping similar codes together (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Out of 25 preliminary "reaction to misfit" codes, we identified a set of core approaches used in reaction to misfit. We designed a second data collection process to explore these approaches in more depth.

Phase 2 Sampling Process

We used responses from Phase 1 to design the sampling approach for Phase 2 by evaluating when episodes of misfit were most likely to occur and who was most likely to try to address misfit, rather than quickly leave the organization. We found that most incidents of misfit occurred after a change in the workplace, such as organizational restructuring, personnel change (supervisors or coworkers), or a change in job responsibilities. This is consistent with research by Caldwell, Herold, and Fedor (2004) that found lower levels of PE fit after organizational change. We also found that people who responded to misfit by leaving quickly tended to come from lower-level positions with prevalent local job alternatives. Those who stayed and worked to resolve misfit tended to be in higher-level or professional positions, and had made investments in education and career progression.

In light of these factors, we pursued a theoretically driven sampling strategy for Phase 2. We sought people who were likely to be experiencing misfit and using a variety of approaches to address it, while staying with current employers. Although leaving is

one viable response to misfit, our particular interest was in people who chose to remain in poorly fitting environments. Therefore, we approached people who had recently experienced a change at work and those who had invested in their careers through obtaining a higher-level degree. To gather this sample, we recruited from the LinkedIn and Facebook groups for the alumni associations of a college of business in a large, Midwestern, state university and a small, East Coast, liberal arts college. Respondents qualified for the study if they were currently employed at least part-time and were experiencing misfit due to a recent change at work. We received responses from 61 volunteers, 45 of whom met the eligibility requirements and gave consent to be interviewed. Eligibility was determined by respondents' answers to an online survey about their employment status and demographics. The researchers conducted the interviews either via telephone or an online video conferencing service (Skype) to allow sampling from different geographic areas.

Participants were employed in a wider range of industries than the Phase 1 sample, including: finance, insurance, and real estate (22%); services and consulting (20%); technology, science, and healthcare (18%); education (18%); nonprofit management (9%); manufacturing (9%); and government and military (4%). The sample was more educated than Phase 1, with all participants having at least a bachelor's degree and 56% having had some post-graduate education. The average job tenure was 2.2 years and the average organizational tenure was 5.5 years. The sample included individual contributors (49%) and employees with some level of management responsibility (51%). They were 87% European American, 7% Asian, 4% African American, and 2% Hispanic, ranging in age from 22 to 58 years old ($M = 36.8$, $SD = 10.0$), and were 58% female. We compensated participants for their time with a $25 gift card.

Phase 2 Interviews

The interview protocol for the second sample consisted of two stages: an initial interview and a follow-up interview two months later. The interviews were recorded and transcribed, except in a few cases where the participant did not consent to be recorded. In these cases, the interviewer took extensive notes, and asked participants to repeat some responses to allow verbatim quotes for particularly illustrative responses. The 45 initial interviews averaged 40.7 minutes and ranged from 16 to 86 minutes in length. The 26 follow-up interviews averaged 21.3

minutes and ranged from 10 to 72 minutes in length. The follow-up interviews were designed to allow participants to describe how their approach to addressing misfit had changed over time, and whether they had been successful at ameliorating misfit.

To verify that a misfit experience had occurred, interviewers began by asking participants to describe what had changed in their work environment, and how that change had contributed to a sense of not fitting at work. Interviewers asked participants to distinguish between changes that were unsatisfactory to everyone in the organization, and those that specifically created misfit for them personally. The remainder of the questions focused on how the person had experienced misfit (i.e., when they first realized it; how it made them feel) and the thoughts and actions they engaged in as a response. The interview then included probing questions such as: Did you consider making any changes to resolve the misfit? Did you ever consider leaving the organization? The interviewers next asked participants if the misfit had been resolved or if it remained. Finally, the interviewers shared the general approaches derived from the first round of interviews, and asked which, if any, described the interviewee's response to misfit, or if they had done something else. This question allowed us to determine whether the approaches represented a comprehensive set of misfit responses. The interviewers met regularly during the data collection process to compare notes and discuss what the participants had revealed in recent interviews. This resulted in adding a question about whether particular approaches were time-bound, because some participants had suggested time was a relevant factor in their strategy choice.

Follow-up interviews, conducted two months later, contained questions to assess changes in the approach used to address misfit, and whether it had been resolved. In these interviews, we asked whether participants were still using the strategies they described in the initial interview and whether they had started using any new strategies not previously mentioned. We also asked how the use of these strategies had affected their sense of fit, and whether the misfit they described in the initial interview had changed since we first talked to them.

Phase 2 Data Analysis

Using a method similar to Phase 1, the recordings of the Phase 2 initial and follow-up interviews were transcribed, and we coded the transcripts using NVivo 10.0. Phase 2 interviews

generally validated the approaches identified in Phase 1, but allowed us to expand the definitions to reflect the full breadth of experiences described by all participants. An additional level of coding was added to describe specific strategies within each approach.

Once we had identified the full set of strategies (see Table 1), we reviewed each interview to confirm that

TABLE 1
Strategies Used in Response to Misfit: Definitions and Example Quotations

Resolution Approach	
Leaving Strategies	**Example quotes**
Exit	"I want to wrap up the one project that I'm working on right now, which I think would look really nice on my resume, and then I will probably head out." (#130)
Leaving the organization to restore fit	"I think if the right opportunity presented itself, I think I would leave but it would definitely have to be something I knew was a really good fit because I'm getting to that stage where I don't want to switch positions. I don't want to keep moving around." (#108, Follow-up)
Internal transfer Seeking internal movement or assignment within the current organization to restore fit	"So, I will be switching functions and I feel fortunate, because if I hadn't, I would have been looking for a new job." (#135)
Adjustment Strategies	**Example quotes**
Changing the environment Working to adapt jobs or others' behaviors or expectations to restore fit	"I'm just sharing some articles that I find as far as how millennials fit into the workplace, all that kind of stuff, so increasing his knowledge or trying to. So, it's a subtle way of doing it, I guess, saying, hey, look, I found this interesting article you might be interested in." (#106, Follow-up)
Changing the self Working to fundamentally change the self to restore fit	"I made the decision, I can either run away from this, or I can do everything I can to communicate more effectively. These people aren't health care providers. They're coming from the business perspective. So, I kind of put on my big-girl pants and learned that language." (#133)
Relief-seeking Approach	
Strategies	**Example quotes**
Surface-level behavior change Making minor changes in outward behavior to convey the impression of fit to others	"Nobody here knows how goofy I really am, because it's just not that kind of culture. . . I've not necessarily been wearing those kinds of things on my sleeve, like I did in my previous job where it was just, again, dynamic, more fun. You could be goofy, you could be silly and you didn't worry about anybody judging you, because it was just a much more intimate relationship. The people knew the quality of your work." (#113)
Buffering Focusing on fit in one area to compensate for misfit in another	"So, the fact that I'm able to not have to pay so much attention to the day-to-day and I'm getting an opportunity to meet different people in different countries, have these relationships, and the fantastic thing is there's so much opportunity around the world. That's the thing that's very exciting." (#145)
Temporal framing Viewing misfit as a temporary condition with an endpoint	"I know that I wouldn't be doing this job responsibility for the next seven years. I know there's an end, because I'm in a rotational program. . . that would be harder if it was like, hey, it's your job and you're not doing anything else until you decide to leave the company." (#112)
Resignation Approach	
Strategies	**Example quotes**
Distancing	"I started to withdraw. Part of it is because I needed to, to make it easier to cut ties. I only interacted with the people that had been through the same struggles as me." (#123)
Separating self from work and work identity	"I stopped making as many comments to offer ways to make it better. So, I disengaged." (#129)
Taking pride in misfit Reframing misfit as resulting from something negative about the organization, and unique and positive about themselves	"I had a predecessor who got along very well with my current manager because my boss would always say 'pound prospects, just pound them with stuff, just phone constantly.' And that's not my style. I'll give them information. I'll send them economic updates, whatever it is that applies to their business and ask for a meeting, but I'm going to do it in an appropriate and professional way." (#125)

at least one of the strategies adequately described each participant's description of their response to misfit. This process confirmed the comprehensiveness of the coding scheme, because every participant described using at least one, and in most cases more than one, strategy either in sequence or simultaneously. The follow-up interviews were particularly useful for identifying the strategies that were effective, versus ineffective. They also demonstrated that most participants sequenced multiple strategies or used them simultaneously. Thus, Phase 2 provided more focused data that allowed us to develop a comprehensive model of how individuals responded to misfit over time. In this way, the Phase 2 data both validated and extended the findings of those in Phase 1.

FINDINGS

In the following section we outline our findings, including descriptions of the misfit experience and the strategies that employees used in response to it. Overall, we found strong evidence that misfit was a painful experience, which stemmed from growing discomfort or sudden changes, and was sometimes signaled from others. Once experienced, the pain of misfit motivated three general responses: resolution, relief-seeking, and, when the first two failed, resignation. The *resolution approach* contained strategies aimed at reducing the sources of misfit, whereas the *relief-seeking approach* contained strategies seeking to reduce the pain associated with misfit, without changing its underlying sources. Those who achieved neither resolution nor relief turned to *resignation,* which involved acceptance of misfit as painful but unavoidable. These strategies are highlighted in Figure 2, which also shows that our participants often used multiple strategies simultaneously or sequentially. When reporting our findings, we have combined Phases 1 and 2 because all participants contributed to our answers to both research questions. Phase 1 includes participants #1–38; Phase 2 includes participants #101–161.

Research Question 1: How do People Become Aware of and Experience Misfit at Work?

Our interviewees had no difficulty describing past and present experiences of misfit. They easily launched into discussions of why they perceived fit with certain parts of their environment, but not with others. These descriptions were largely consistent with types of fit discussed in the literature (PO, PS, PG, and PJ), with several participants reporting having experienced more than one type of misfit. They commonly reported experiencing fit with some aspects of work (i.e., job or organization) while simultaneously experiencing misfit with other aspects of work (i.e., group or supervisor).

The ways in which people became aware of their misfit varied. Individuals from both phases of data collection described the addition of new managers or coworkers, restructuring of the company, and promotions into new positions as triggers of perceived misfit. One executive-level employee described the shock of misfit that results from such changes by saying, "I was moved from something I was fantastic at and well received and well known as an expert at into something completely out of left field and different" (#149). Having previously felt like a good fit at work, the changes were more than just uncomfortable; they made her feel like a misfit with the new position because the demands of the position no longer matched her abilities. Similarly, another respondent reported misfit occurring when she was promoted during a departmental reorganization: "the change in fit is more because of the fact that we were a really small department and now we've doubled in size… it's really been challenging for me to figure out how I fit in to the team hierarchy" (#134). These examples indicate that role changes cue employees to reassess their fit, because their personal characteristics seemed less compatible with their new roles. Fit reassessments after role changes were particularly jarring for employees with more tenure in the position, as noted by one participant who stated, "When you have done something for 13 years it is trying to change direction" (#12). Just as misfit could be a surprising outcome from a positive event such as promotion, it could also result from changes that employees sought out, as one participant, who had recently taken a new job, said, "When I moved here, I became an instant misfit" (#38). Thus, regardless of whether the original change was positive or negative, employer- or employee-induced, the change itself triggered a reassessment of fit, which often resulted in misfit perceptions.

Proposition 1. Changes in the work environment prompt reassessments of fit, which often result in the employee perceiving misfit with the new conditions.

Existing research has suggested that fit perceptions result from people making mental calculations to determine whether their personal attributes are compatible with the environment (Edwards et al., 2006). Some participants described this process as a continual assessment–reassessment process, which

FIGURE 2
Interrelationships of Misfit Resolution, Relief-seeking, and Resignation
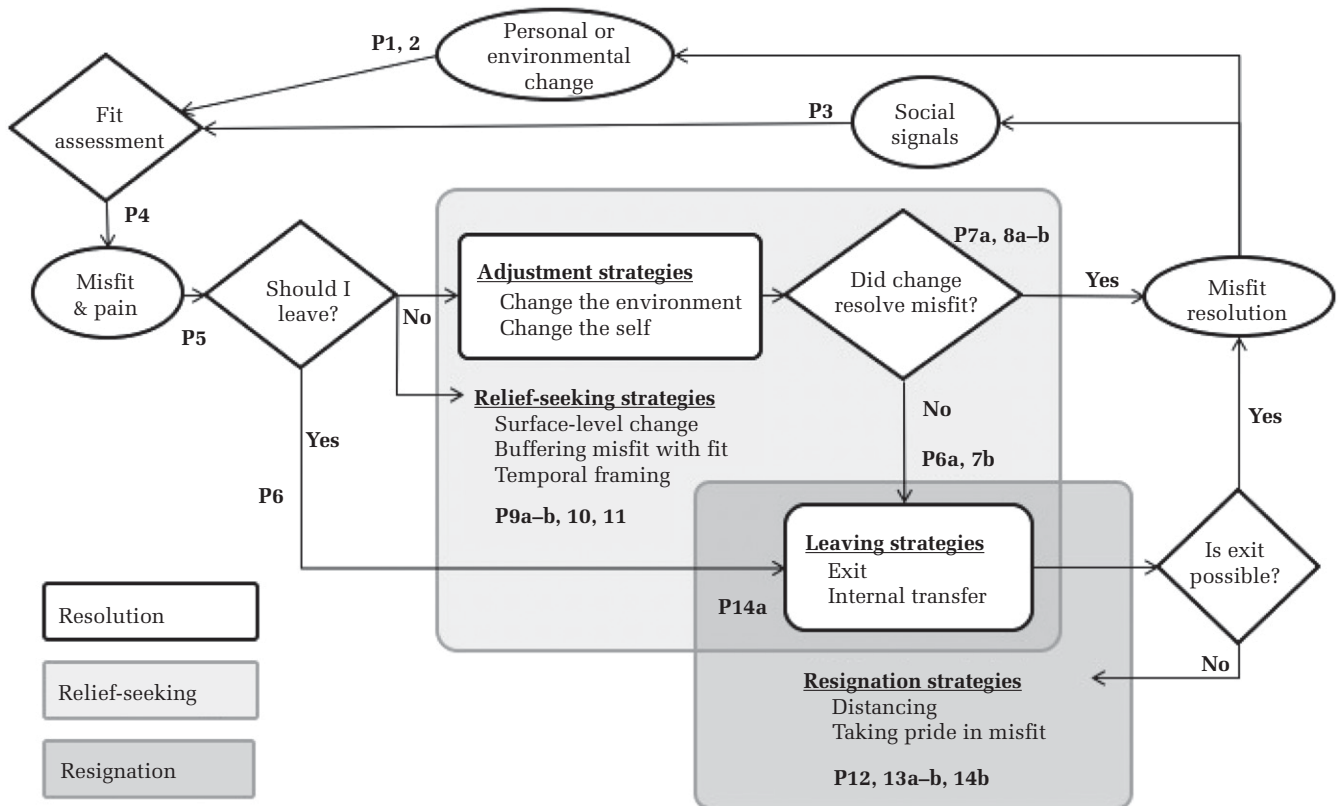
only drew their attention when areas of misfit began to emerge. One participant described the gradual recognition that she was a misfit as she encountered more and more practices that were designed to assimilate people to the company culture, such as standardized formatting requirements, dress codes, and schedules. She described her appraisal of the change in culture by saying, "I think the more they impose a corporate culture the more I think I should look for another job" (#31). Particularly for PO misfit, the recognition was described as a gradual realization that the stated values that originally attracted participants to their organizations, were not the values in use in those companies. For example, one project manager experienced misfit with the mission of the organization because "there used to be a lot of emphasis on building your skills and exploring education, [but] they have cut the budget for that, so they don't seem to value it as much" (#102). Once the organization stopped funding the previously articulated support for employee development, she began to worry that her values were not consistent with those of the organization. Participants who observed creeping

changes in their workplace described a gradual disillusionment and feelings of increasing misfit.

Proposition 2. Perceived misfit can occur through gradual recognition that the articulated values are different from the values in use of the work environment.

Although the traditional view of perceived fit is that it stems from a comparison of self to environment, we found that some participants became aware of misfit only after they had been treated as such by their coworkers. This suggests that fit and misfit perceptions may be socially constructed. For PG misfit, participants reported being treated like outsiders. One government employee felt that she had been "labeled a bit of a freak" (#38) after sharing some of her outside interests with her coworkers. Another, who worked as a road safety officer, said, "People treat me a lot differently and what I've found is that there are a couple of people who really felt that I shouldn't be in work and were complaining about me and finding little things to pick on" (#36). In these cases, the participants did not identify misfit until

others called attention to it. Coworkers also sent signals of misfit when the participant did not enact a professional role in expected ways, for example: "in terms of stereotypical characteristics of an accountant, I would be a misfit. And this is just feedback I've been given" (#16). Even simple statements from coworkers calling attention to differences, such as "It's really nice to have somebody here who is not like everybody else" (#124), were enough to trigger our participants to question their fit, because a coworker called attention to differences.

Others discovered misfit when supervisors told them that they were not meeting performance expectations. As one participant described,

[My supervisor] gave me a two-page list of behaviors that they wanted to see out of me. I'm a goal-oriented person and I like to think that I'm always doing a really great job and frankly I didn't see anything wrong with what I was doing. (#125)

This person was blindsided by a negative performance assessment that suggested she was not meeting the demands of her job. Until that point, she had felt like she had a good PJ fit because she had met all previously identified expectations.

Finally, some participants clarified that social signals did not necessarily trigger perceived misfit for them, but exacerbated feelings of misfit that had already started to form in their own minds. One participant said, "*I was getting my assignments with lower expectations or getting easy tasks*" (#114). He felt that this feedback, in the form of lowered expectations, indicated that he was not capable of higher-level responsibilities, which increased his worry that his abilities did not fit the demands of his new job. These experiences suggest that misfit perceptions can be socially induced or exacerbated, particularly regarding PG or PJ misfit.

Proposition 3. Misfit perceptions can be triggered or exacerbated by social signals sent by others.

Phase 2 participants were specifically sought out because they experienced misfit, but it was notable that nearly all participants from Phase 1 also described some degree of misfit in their current or past work life. Although these experiences were a temporary annoyance for some, they were a persistent, defining, and disruptive feature of working life for others. Misfit descriptions were richer and more emotionally laden compared to the fit descriptions, suggesting the salience of these experiences to our participants. One retail employee experiencing PG

misfit said: "I was so miserable ... so unhappy. I kept crying, kept going to the bathroom crying, crying, crying. It was awful" (#25). Another employee described the emotional toll that misfit took on his daily life:

It makes me feel I'm worthless. It makes me feel I'm useless. In fact, there's a time that I walked out and I didn't feel like coming back to the office to work. This is really depressing. Sometimes it's really hard. I can't sleep. It's hard when you just struggle to be accepted to fit in. It's not a good thing. (#34)

Many participants described misfit as "uncomfortable" (#108, 143, 160) or "frustrating" (#1, 109, 112, 115, 130, 134, 147, 149). Others used more evocative words, indicative of the emotional weight of not fitting in: "miserable" (#25), "isolated...withdrawn...stagnating" (#27), "completely shut out" (#33), "afraid" (#3), "feeling like we don't matter" (#102), "I felt regret" (#103), "[I was] really scared" (#105), and "It's annoying as hell" (#131). Still others described misfit as debilitating, to the point of preventing them from engaging in their work: "it affected me to where it was hard to get up, want to show up. I got to where I wouldn't show up on Mondays" (#116). These examples indicate the degree to which misfit disrupted their working lives and the intense motivation they felt to relieve it. It was noteworthy that the people who provided most of these descriptions simultaneously experienced good fit with other parts of their work environment. For example, some described good fit with their jobs, but misfit with coworkers or supervisors. Given the salience of misfit, and negative events in general (Taylor, 1991), we expect that individuals will spend more time thinking about misfit-related issues than fit-related ones. The perceived area of misfit overshadowed all other types of fit, defining their emotional experience at work. Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 4. Employees' emotional state at work will be more influenced by perceived misfit with one aspect of the environment than fit with other aspects.

The feeling of misfit being a condition in need of correction was evident in responses from all the interviews. Employees discussed fit as a state that was subject to frequent change and reevaluation. When they became aware of misfit they immediately began considering what they could do about it. Participants portrayed misfit as a problem they were attempting to solve, and they used a wide variety of strategies to attack it. After a reorganization, one director-level

employee said, "I'm grappling with this and I am going to be forced to really choose what it is that I want to do. It's weighing on me a lot" (#145). Another employee stated firmly, "It was clear that I was in the wrong place and I had a lot of decisions to make" (#157). Once misfit was perceived, all our participants indicated a strong motivation to address it.

Proposition 5. Employees who experience misfit will view it as a problem, and be motivated to address it.

Research Question 2: What do People do in Response to Misfit?

Reaffirming the strength of Schneider's (1987) ASA model, in both of our samples leaving was one of the first options considered as a response to misfit; however, participants usually did not follow through on it. Although a handful of participants resolved their misfit by quickly leaving their positions, most dismissed leaving as an unfeasible or undesirable option and responded to misfit in other ways. We identified three general responses to misfit: *resolution* and *relief-seeking approaches* represent the more positive end of a response continuum, and *resignation* represents the more negative end. Resolution and relief-seeking are analogous to cures and palliative measures; the first fixes the problem, while the second reduces pain and makes the person more comfortable (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Within each approach, we identified specific strategies. Resolution involved strategies including leaving and making adjustments to the self or environment. Relief-seeking involved the use of strategies such as surface-level behavior change, buffering misfit with fit, and framing misfit as short-term. When these strategies failed, our participants expressed a sense of resignation at their inability to correct misfit and employed strategies including distancing the self from work and taking pride in misfit. See Table 1 for definitions and examples of each.

Resolution Approach

Leaving strategies. Consistent with Schneider's (1987) ASA model, almost all participants mentioned leaving as an option they considered when they perceived misfit. Yet, in the vast majority of cases, leaving was used as a last resort because the ability to leave was limited by other factors. Below, we describe two ways of leaving: exit and internal transfer.

When the push to leave was strong, and there were few counterpressures pulling the employee to stay, the decision to exit the organization entirely was relatively quick and painless. An example comes from one lower-level supervisor in a manufacturing plant who had recently given notice of his departure prior to our interview (#12). He described a lack of PJ fit because the work felt repetitive and quickly became boring. When he began to feel low levels of PG fit as well, he decided that it was time to look elsewhere. He found a new position quickly and gave his notice as soon as possible. His experience supports Wheeler et al.'s (2007) contention that opportunities and job mobility contribute to the use of organizational exit as a first response.

Yet, more often than not, exit was dismissed as an unfeasible or undesirable option. For some, the choice to stay was influenced by a perceived lack of job mobility. In some instances, this was because exit would require relocation: "If I decide to change my employment, I might end up getting something, or I might have to move out of [this city]" (#105). In other cases, employees were worried about the signal it would send other employers if they left too soon. "I just feel like my generation is notorious for hopping around to different jobs within short periods of time. So... I feel locked in, because I'm not even at that two-year mark" (#109). Others expressed that ties to the community prevented them from searching for options in a wider geographical area: "I can't move far. My wife's got a great position where she's at" (#116). These examples demonstrate some of the reasons that early exit was frequently discarded as a reaction to perceived misfit. Participants' justifications for staying included many concepts well-known to turnover scholars, including fear of the unknown, embeddedness (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001), and career investment (Tschopp, Grote, & Gerber, 2014), as well as concern about exit creating a poor impression on future employers.

A few participants used a tempered leaving strategy by seeking internal movement or reassignment, rather than exiting the organization completely. One participant described the option as first in a sequence of possible solutions: "My first preference would be to look for opportunities internally. If not, I would consider other opportunities as well" (#105). Internal transfer to another supervisor or department is a form of leaving, but in a more confined way to specifically address the area of misfit. Internal

transfers were viewed as less risky and less costly than moving to an external employer.

Proposition 6. Employees will resolve misfit through exit when barriers to exit are low, and through internal transfer when barriers to exit are high, but internal opportunities are available.

For most participants, leaving was viewed as a complicated process that was held in reserve to be used as a last resort if other strategies did not work to resolve or relieve the misfit. After having set aside leaving as a feasible short-term solution, most participants tried other approaches to reduce misfit.

Adjustment strategies. Because many participants dismissed the feasibility of an exit strategy, a substantial number tried to resolve their perceived misfit by addressing its underlying sources. They worked to change either the environment or themselves in such a way as to restore a sense of fit. Below, we describe two related ways to restore fit: changing the environment and changing the self.

One way to resolve the underlying incompatibility of perceived misfit is through making changes to the environment. Participants using this strategy made two important assumptions: (1) misfit was resolvable, but action on their part was required to make it happen, and (2) the environment was, in some way, malleable.

One way participants changed their environment was job *recrafting*—or redesigning their jobs or teams to be a better fit with their capabilities and traits. One new manager experienced PJ misfit following a promotion, because it required him to focus his attention on new administrative tasks that were outside his area of expertise. When he "learned that he could give other people more responsibility" (#103) by delegating parts of his job to others, he found that he could focus on the parts of the job that better fit his skills and abilities. He described this adjustment of the task assignments in his department as "very successful."

Other participants described changing the environment by *shaping others' behaviors or expectations*. For example, one consultant described resolving misfit with an aggressive, new manager. Although she was tempted to "get angry and disengage" (#3), she approached the manager with the help of someone from HR and eventually resolved the misfit by convincing him to change his behavior and expectations.

When the environment is not open to change, this strategy is unlikely to be successful. Moreover, repeated, unsuccessful attempts to change the environment can produce even greater levels of frustration and perceived misfit. One program manager described his experience trying to improve his environment by bringing ideas from his MBA coursework into his organization:

> It seemed like the more I was trying to learn or share [what I've learned], the more I would be kept, basically beat down... I feel like an outcast. But when I wasn't going to school and challenging, it seemed like I got along with them more because I was drinking the Kool-Aid, saying "yes, yes, yes." (#116)

Similarly, one executive communicated the frustration she experienced after unsuccessful attempts to resolve misfit: "I kind of clammed up at the end, because I felt like I had alerted them to a lot of concerns, and I didn't see any change. They're not listening, so why am I talking?" (#129). These examples reveal that the effectiveness of this approach depends on the malleability of the environment and that trying it in an inflexible environment can result in growing frustration and increases, rather than decreases, in perceived misfit.

When the environment is malleable, however, this strategy can be successful because it brings the environment more in line with the person's needs and expectations. When a person successfully changes their environment in this way, misfit can be substantially reduced or eliminated. For example, the consultant mentioned above, who effectively used this strategy, concluded that: "Actually, I'm enjoying the job now more than I have in quite a few years. That's interesting to [feel so] low and then come out the other side" (#3). Resolving the misfit with her new boss resulted in her staying in her position and recommitting to her work with new vigor. However, not all participants achieved this level of success. Furthermore, even when successful, negotiating environmental change takes time. During this time, participants often used relief-seeking strategies, which we describe below, to make misfit less painful in the short term.

Proposition 7a. Employees who seek to resolve misfit by changing their environments will have success depending on the malleability of the environment.

Proposition 7b. Employees who are unsuccessful in resolving misfit by trying to change their environments will experience frustration, growing levels of perceived misfit, and increased intention to leave.

Several participants focused on aspects of their own behavior, perceptions, attitudes, or skills as key contributors to misfit. Thus, to resolve perceived

misfit they chose to fundamentally change themselves to become more compatible with the environment. These changes were typically characterized by a period of reflection, followed by long-term, sustainable personal change. Upon reflection, they concluded that their own behavior had contributed to their misfit and that changing themselves would reduce misfit and provide the added advantage of personal development in the process. Their assumptions reflected the idea that: (1) misfit was resolvable, and (2) personal change was both possible and desirable.

A key element of engaging in personal change was *reflection and introspection*. One manager described how she reflected on her past behaviors and decided a change was needed in her management style to fit the demands of her new position. She reported, "In the past, I would want everybody to report to me. I'd want to know those details... I'm not the big driver that I was a year ago because I know I've got people [who] will take care of it" (#145). Another described how introspection helped her to diagnose what changes were necessary to fit: "I've done a lot of internal soul searching, looking at my own talents and strengths to see where I could I make changes for myself if I couldn't make changes in the organization" (#147). These employees used personal reflection to modify their behavior to fit their positions, coworkers, or organizational cultures.

In addition to reflection, several participants *sought advice* or solicited guidance from others about what would help facilitate fit. People enlisted the help of coworkers or mentors to help them identify how they needed to change, as per the following employee: "I spoke with my manager about what kinds of education I could get to help me ... And then my teammate was really helpful with some of the technical stuff, too" (#160). In another example, a project manager who was struggling to fit in his new role said,

> I looked for a formal mentor and I used him as a sounding board of ideas and took his recommendations on how to handle certain situations. I presented to him the situations with the customer that I had faced and asked him how he would have managed them in a different way. And he gave me really, really good tips, and I attribute [my ability to] get back on track to that mentor relationship. (#114)

In these cases, the employees had identified the need for personal transformation and enlisted the help of supervisors and coworkers to help determine what changes would be most beneficial.

Finally, many participants who opted to change themselves *framed misfit as an opportunity for growth*. This resulted in the deliberate decision to "beat" the misfit and become better or stronger as a result of it, usually through skill development. One senior manager, who was experiencing misfit during a merger, observed that he thrived during periods of uncertainty because he had "the right attitude to try something new, [seeing the current change as] the best opportunity of [his] whole career" (#126). Surprisingly, some participants took this approach even when misfit resulted from overqualification. One young professional experienced misfit with her job because the responsibilities in her job rotation were narrower in scope than she had expected. She resolved this by embracing the narrow role as a learning opportunity by deciding to "embrace this, move forward—really dive into it and learn more" (#112). By framing misfit as a growth opportunity, these participants deliberately chose to engage misfit as a challenge.

Personal change was often an effective strategy for resolving misfit, although it required significant effort and time. The project manager discussed above, who sought out training and mentoring, described reacting to PJ misfit by seeking out training and mentoring to augment his skills and expertise. He described the process as follows: "the transition period is super-uncomfortable. It's a very steep learning curve and it's a journey full of doubts and questions" (#114). When we conducted the follow-up interview with him, he indicated that it had taken him about 18 months to adapt to the new division, but that he finally felt like "a perfect fit at this point, [the change] no longer keeps me awake at night." (#114, Follow-up). He commented that the experience of having successfully resolved his misfit left him more confident in the face of future changes. Thus, for these individuals who changed themselves, not only was misfit successfully resolved, but they experienced personal growth and grew in confidence.

Proposition 8a. Employees who engage in introspection, seek the help of mentors, and frame misfit as an opportunity to grow will try to resolve misfit through personal change.

Proposition 8b. Employees who use personal change to resolve misfit will experience improvements in fit, as well as benefits of personal growth and development.

Summary of the resolution approach. In contrast to the evocative, pain-filled descriptions of misfit, our participants described intense feelings of relief when they resolved their misfit either through leaving or adjustment. Many accounts of resolution came from follow-up interviews, conducted two months after our initial conversations. They described the feeling of resolution as "having a significant weight lifted" (#104, Follow-up). Importantly, the most common reaction to resolving misfit was feeling able to focus on their work instead of their misfit. For example, one manager said he was "feeling ready to get up and go in and be productive" (#108, Follow-up), whereas another who struggled with PG misfit said, "now I can focus on my work instead of interpersonal issues" (#132, Follow-up). Similarly, a manager who had struggled in a new role reported that since resolving the PJ misfit he had not "felt as much pressure, it's been a lot less stressful and I like that I have been able to perform at a higher level" (#134, Follow-up). Together, these descriptions suggest that there are substantial gains in both well-being and productivity at stake for those who successfully resolve their misfit.

Relief-Seeking Approach

Rather than resolving the underlying sources of misfit, the relief-seeking approach includes strategies aimed at mitigating the pain associated with perceived misfit. It involves doing things behaviorally or cognitively to reduce the level of discomfort associated with misfit. The specific strategies included in this approach are: surface-level behavior change, buffering, and temporal framing. Participants frequently reported using these relief-seeking strategies while simultaneously working to resolve misfit.

Surface-level behavior change. One of the most commonly mentioned responses to misfit was making minor changes in one's outward behavior to convey the impression of fit to others. Unlike the personal changes described previously, these are surface-level changes that do not address the underlying condition of misfit. The goal of these behaviors is to convince others that the person fits, so that he or she stops being treated like a misfit at work. One way our participants addressed PG misfit was by reaching out in a purposeful way to build relationships—herein called *instrumental socializing*. They identified their misfit as essentially relationship-based (Eberly, Holley, Johnson, & Mitchell, 2011), and acted on this attribution by increasing and improving

their interactions with others. This often involved small changes to conversation topics, such as one participant who forced himself to learn about football to fit in better with coworkers:

> Personally, I try [to] find things I can relate to them on—out-of-work activities. I've got one or two football nuts... So, I tend to look at football results and things like that. That is going the extra mile for me because I've got no interest in sport or football. (#30)

Additional examples included seeking out people and opportunities to interact in ways that did not come naturally. One senior manager in manufacturing said, "It is worth putting effort into people you wouldn't necessarily, naturally, want to spend time with in business" (#4).

Surface-level behavior changes also included deliberate *norm adaptation* to the expectations of the job, organization, or supervisor. One participant, experiencing PS misfit, began including her supervisor in more conversations, while not otherwise changing the way she did her work. "I'm just literally spending two hours a day overcommunicating with [him]. But, yes, he thought it was progress" (#125). This participant reported that overcommunicating had improved her perceived fit with her supervisor, but was not a change that she would continue once she had a new supervisor. Another participant, an executive director (ED) who had been told by her board of directors that her predecessor had been a better fit, began mimicking the communication style of that predecessor: "I faked it...[The previous ED] had passed on to me some examples of her [weekly emails], and they were like, 'Woo Hoo! to this board member for bringing in a $500 check from a friend! Rah-Rah!'" (#156). She wryly explained that her natural style of communication would have been more matter of fact and less like a "cheerleader," but that the behavior change made her appear to be a better fit. In all of these cases, the participants reported that their efforts had resulted in others treating them like they fit in, thus reducing some of the discomfort from perceived misfit. Yet, in all cases they remained personally cognizant that the underlying conditions of their misfit had not changed.

Those who made surface-level behavior changes saw them as temporary fixes to mitigate the pain resulting from misfit. However, an unintended consequence of this strategy was the additional strain that it placed on employees to try to act like someone they were not. One manager who felt the need to hide parts of her personality to seem credible in her role as an authority figure said that it caused "anxiety"

when she was "not herself and had to hold back or suppress something" (#113, Follow-up). Similarly, the ED who conformed to the expectation that she be a cheerleader felt that her new behavior was disingenuous. She reported, "I am doing it way more than I'm comfortable with, because I know that's what is required" (#156). In these cases, surface-level behavior change did reduce some of the pain caused by misfit—particularly the pain induced by others' treatment—but it came at the cost of feeling that they could not "bring [their] authentic self to the workplace" (#113, Follow-up). This additional strain served as a reminder of the misfit, which remained unresolved.

> *Proposition 9a. Employees who make surface-level behavior changes to address misfit will decrease others' perceptions of their misfit, thereby reducing the likelihood of being treated as a misfit.*

> *Proposition 9b. Employees who make surface-level behavior changes to address misfit can create higher levels of stress and increased personal feelings of misfit due to their inauthentic behavior.*

Buffering. Many participants reported experiencing misfit with one aspect of the workplace, while simultaneously enjoying good fit with other aspects. They described a delicate balancing act where they used good fit in one area to compensate for misfit in another. They consciously chose to buffer themselves from misfit by focusing their attention on areas where fit was high. In effect, they tried to "tune out" the bad by turning up the volume on the good. The good fit that was present created a motivation to resolve misfit in other areas. For this reason, buffering is a strategy used frequently in conjunction with the resolution strategies of changing the self or environment.

One frequent type of buffering occurred when PJ and PO misfit was perceived. In those conditions participants described using *social buffering*—focusing on positive relationships with coworkers or supervisors—to reduce the attention they paid to misfit in other areas. Their coworkers became active distractions, pulling their attention from the areas of misfit and discomfort and focusing it instead on high levels of PG or PS fit. Several participants were quite explicit that their coworkers were the only thing keeping them from leaving:

> [My coworkers are] probably the remaining reason I'm there. (#147)

> If I didn't get along so well with the coworkers, and it was hard to work with them, I feel like I'd be looking for a different job even right now. (#110)

Others turned to the good fit they felt with their managers: "my manager is really helpful. . . it helps to have that positive environment around you" (#160). Participants sought to shift the balance from misfit to fit by concentrating on the positive social elements of work.

Alternatively, when participants felt a poor PG or PS fit, they focused instead on something they liked about their jobs, whether it was a job characteristic or the higher-level mission or purpose of their work. We call this *task-buffering*. One employee discussed the importance of flexibility in her current job, saying, "that [flexibility] was one of the perks that made some of the BS of being there worth it; these were things that had kept me there longer, and as soon as that started getting pulled—no, no, no!" (#133). When administrative work or difficult coworkers caused feelings of misfit, other participants focused on their deep connection to their vocations or organizational mission. One social work assistant who described significant PG and PS misfit, but identified strongly with his organization's mission, found comfort in knowing that he improved the lives of the clients of the organization. "It's not something that I'm just doing. It's something within me" (#34).

One government employee described balancing misfit with the job and fit with the organization by consistently reminding herself about the parts of the job that were a good fit (i.e., the opportunity to develop her skills), and the prospect of being able to transfer within the organization after one year. She described this process of looking for areas of fit in this way:

> I was introspective about the possibilities for this opportunity and really focusing on things that I'm thankful for in this job because there's a lot to be thankful for. . . and also quieting my own cynicism, or perhaps reexamining my own beliefs about what's possible. (#132)

By actively looking for parts of the job that were compatible with her goals, and reassuring herself of the benefits of staying with organization, she was able to reduce the attention she paid to misfit. This made the misfit tolerable while she looked for opportunities for internal transfer. In her follow-up interview, she revealed that she had successfully transferred to another part of the organization and fit much better in her new role.

> *Proposition 10. Employees who use buffering can temporarily reduce the discomfort of misfit by focusing instead on areas of fit.*

Temporal framing. Many participants who were working to resolve their misfit through adaptation or leaving simultaneously engaged in self-talk that described misfit as time bound. Temporal framing allowed misfit to be viewed as temporary, a finite condition that would not go on past a certain point. For example, one participant said, "I'm going to probably give it another 30 to 60 days of trying to work around it" (#104). Another participant who knew that he would eventually be leaving his position articulated temporal framing:

> When you are stuck in a situation, the best thing to do is to give yourself a deadline, "okay, I'm going to be here for another 6 to 12 months and then I'm going to be out of here." And knowing that makes you feel freer and that allows you to work better and actually achieve more instead of just becoming passive and disgruntled. (#157)

This strategy was especially relevant for those who had identified a future event that would either drive a decision to leave or would trigger a change in the underlying conditions of misfit. For example, one employee said, "until I reach the one-year mark I won't be able to transfer anywhere within my organization" (#132). Knowing that opportunities for transfer would be available soon mitigated the negative consequences of her current misfit.

> *Proposition 11. Employees who use temporal framing can reduce the impact of perceived misfit if there is a future point at which they anticipate misfit ending.*

Summary of the relief-seeking approach. Unlike resolution, relief-seeking strategies were used as ways to minimize the damage done by misfit, rather than remove it. Relief-seeking strategies are defensive, aimed at mitigating the negative feelings stemming from misfit, rather than removing the underlying sources of it. The strategies involved cognitive and behavioral approaches that shift attention away from misfit. They were often used simultaneously with resolution strategies, as ways to wait out the period of misfit. Because they do not deal with the underlying incompatibility that produced misfit, however, these strategies have drawbacks including inauthenticity, increased stress, and exhaustion.

Resignation Approach

The framing of misfit as temporary was often sufficient in the short-term, but when there was no end in sight, a shift in responses occurred. Participants who had tried unsuccessfully to resolve or relieve their misfit turned to different strategies. These individuals began to accept misfit as a reality of their condition that could not be fixed or alleviated; it could only be endured. They were unable to buffer misfit with fit because it was so extreme that other types of fit could not compensate. They did not view misfit as temporary, and could not alleviate it by simply changing others' perceptions. They also believed that environmental change was impossible, and personal change was not desirable or feasible. Thus, they gave up on trying to improve their fit, resigned themselves to their condition, and began using strategies of distancing and taking pride in misfit.

Distancing. Participants who felt stuck in their positions and were unable to resolve or mitigate misfit described disengaging from their work and distancing themselves from their work identities. One department manager described this deliberate distancing as follows:

> A little bit of me has become disenfranchised, so I just want to keep a distance now... Hopefully I'll get to a tipping point where I do something about it. It's not really good living life very frustrated that you don't want to be somewhere. (#1)

Although he spoke of fit as ultimately desirable, his comments voiced a resignation that misfit was likely inevitable for him. He hoped to get to a tipping point of doing something about it, but had no idea of when that would happen or what action he would take. As a result, he distanced himself from his work and gradually put less and less effort into his work, professional development, and workplace relationships. "I've got to the point where I engage very little about my personal life with colleagues and that might be a personal representation of feeling different" (#1). He withdrew from his workplace identity, going so far as to refuse to tell people he met outside of work what he did for a living.

Those using a distancing strategy had usually tried resolution and relief-seeking approaches, but had been unsuccessful. For example, one mid-level manager who struggled with coworkers and superiors, who did not share his values, described his decision to give up his efforts to resolve misfit and accept it while he looked for another position. "I've come to realize that I just gave up . . . I hit that point where no matter what I do, it doesn't matter. I just shut down" (#116, Follow-up). Realizing that he could not resolve the misfit, he decided that ultimately he must leave. Meanwhile, he would tolerate

the current misfit and "be patient to find the right opportunity" (#116, Follow-up) in order to prevent himself from moving too quickly and landing in another poorly fitting position. This participant is representative of those who resigned themselves to living with misfit. He unsuccessfully tried to resolve it, and then endured misfit during the lengthy process of looking for other employment. These employees articulated indifference about their environment, feeling like they had "one foot out the door" for an extended period of time. For example, an administrator who felt stuck in a poorly fitting position while waiting for another job opportunity described it this way: "in the meantime, I am just keeping the pilot light on" (#131).

Participants who reached this point of disengagement often expressed regret and shame about their circumstances. This was especially true for those who had previously fit in their work environments. For example, a senior proposal writer who had lost most of her team in a reorganization was surprised to find herself in the position of feeling like a misfit and disengaging from her work: "I never thought I'd feel that way at a job. It's demoralizing to feel like you don't really care as much anymore" (#147). This sense of demoralization and disengagement was typical of those who believed that there was no way to resolve the misfit.

Proposition 12. Employees using a distancing strategy will experience the strain of both misfit and reduced engagement.

Taking pride in misfit. Rather than withdrawing from their lack of fit, some participants opted to take pride in it. They resented the work environment for making them feel unusual and came to view and publicly discuss their misfit as a "badge of honor"—a signal of their uniqueness and refusal to assimilate. In contrast to the negative tone with which misfit is usually described, these people framed misfit in terms of positive qualities: "vocal in a needed way" (#122, Follow-up), "appropriate and professional" (#125), and "a crap liar" (#131, Follow-up). They portrayed misfit as the result of incompatibility between their positive personal characteristics and the environment's negative characteristics. They touted the fact that they did not want to be like other employees who did whatever it took to fit in: "I see through the games and I don't want to play them" (#27). When participants reframed misfit as a source of pride, they often did so after making unsuccessful attempts to resolve or relieve it. Having failed, they embraced their misfit and expressed that fitting in, or

even pretending to fit in, would come at too high of a personal cost.

The distinction for those who took pride in misfit, rather than sought to resolve or relieve it, was that they believed fit would require them to change something good about themselves. This belief was captured best in the story told by a senior accountant who was asked to produce financial analyses that he did not believe to be accurate. Although he had previously resolved some degree of misfit by willingly changing his communication style, he would not change his values. He characterized employees who did comply with these requests as follows: "We like to have people here who are 'yes men,' people who just go along with it and I'm *not* one of those, so that helps me not fit" (#8). Another participant, a medical professional who had been denied a promotion to an administrative promotion, articulated disdain for the person who was promoted because of better fit:

> Seeing who they selected made me realize that, if this is the kind of person that they want, there's no way I was ever going to be a good fit. They're picking the sort of person that is going to toe the line, drink the Kool-Aid, and that they want to play golf with, not necessarily picking someone who's a good advocate for the other employees in our part of the organization. So, if that's what they're looking for, I would have been a really bad fit. (#133, Follow-up)

This assertion that fitting in would require them to adopt negative characteristics was typical of those who took pride in misfit. This strategy was nearly always accompanied by a desire to leave, but a lack of immediate opportunities to do so.

When these "proud misfits" sought new jobs, they were determined to avoid similar misfit in their next position. One participant who wanted to move to a new organization described how he now prioritized organizational culture when considering a new employer:

> Culture is just such a priority, and this sounds like the exact opposite of where I'm working now; and it sounds like exactly what I would want from a company—one that values their employees, values employee well-being. That is definitely a key talking point for me in my interviews. (#118)

By designing his job search around value congruence, he hoped his next employer would provide a better fit. Therefore, those who experienced this intractable misfit often described very thorough and extended job searches, which required them to keep

their status as misfits for longer than they would have liked.

Proposition 13a. Employees who believe misfit to be due to their own positive traits will resent suggestions that they change and will reframe misfit as a source of pride.

Proposition 13b. Employees who reframe misfit as a source of pride will continue to experience the strain of misfit and seek to leave as soon as possible.

Summary of the resignation approach. Although many participants were able to resolve or mitigate misfit, some accepted that misfit was a necessary and unavoidable condition of continued employment. When misfit was ultimately unresolvable, resignation strategies took prominence and became the last line of defense. Participants who used these strategies described the negative consequences of unresolved misfit, including defensiveness, feelings of isolation, and fatigue. It is not surprising that, in follow-up interviews, we learned that employees who used these strategies continued to try to leave and only felt relief from misfit when an opportunity to leave eventually became available.

Integrating the Strategies in Practice

We have identified three general approaches consisting of multiple strategies that participants used in response to misfit. When we asked participants in Phase 2 which strategies described their response to misfit, many of them reported that they were using most or all of them. This point came through strongly in the follow-up interviews as participants relayed what they had done since our last conversation. Virtually every story represented a blend of two or more strategies used either simultaneously or in sequence to address the issue of misfit. More often than not, these strategies had been effective at resolving or relieving the pain of misfit by the time of our follow-up interview.

Figure 2 models how our participants used these strategies in tandem to address misfit, and the decisions they made when determining which strategies to use. All paths through this model begin with the perception that misfit exists. This may follow a fit assessment triggered by a change, a growing sense of misfit, or social signals indicating misfit. Once misfit was perceived, virtually all the participants considered, even if only briefly, leaving. Their decision about whether leaving was possible and desirable shaped their subsequent responses. For those who achieved a resolution to their misfit, fit assessment

may reoccur at any time when the environment or person changes or when new social signals are introduced. Thus, the model represents a continuing cycle of fit reassessments in response to misfit. In this section, we describe five prototypical paths through the model, each of which is characterized by a different group of participants: fast leavers, adjusters, eventual leavers, chronic pretenders, and malcontents. For each category, we provide an exemplar individual who best characterizes the journey through a particular path.

The first type is the *fast leaver*, who had few ties to the organization and perceived that external opportunities were available. These fast leavers quickly determined that leaving was a desirable and feasible option, and turned to exit strategies as the first response to perceived misfit. They typically had relatively little investment in their current career path and were willing and able to leave when misfit became apparent. One manager described following this path when a new CEO changed her job description, creating PJ misfit. She spoke to us the day after giving notice and explained that she was able to leave quickly because she had another career opportunity that was immediately available. She described her decision in this way: "*I am just not going to deal with it*" (#139). This path was unique to those with high job mobility and low investment in the current position.

The other paths through our model were taken by those who considered leaving as a response to misfit, but found it to be an unfeasible or undesirable option. That is, they answered the question "should I leave?" with "no," or at least "not yet." The second type, *adjusters*, successfully used strategies to resolve misfit without leaving their current positions. One manager (#103) simultaneously used relief-seeking strategies, such as temporal framing, while making adjustments to his environment to make the transition less difficult. In his follow-up interview he revealed that this had allowed him to take the opportunity to "create [his] ideal role" (#103, Follow-up), in which his skills and abilities were a closer match to the demands of his position. He demonstrated that his use of resolution and relief-seeking strategies had led him to obtain a new, acceptable level of PE fit.

The third type, *eventual leavers*, left their positions after making several, unsuccessful attempts to resolve misfit. These employees struggled to achieve fit and ultimately determined that the only way to do so was through exit. One participant, a data analyst who felt that his position did not allow him to use or

develop his skills, demonstrated the complexity of leaving a poorly fitting position. When he first experienced misfit due to his employer's lack of interest in the results of his analyses of the company's operations, he considered leaving, but first attempted to convince his employer that he could provide value to the organization. When these efforts to change the environment failed to resolve his misfit, he turned to leaving. The misfit he experienced with his former employer then informed his job search, leading him to find a better fit elsewhere because he was able to seek out an employer that was more compatible with his values and skills. In his follow-up interview, he described his new employer as follows: "I feel like this has been the right move and I still hope to be here for a very long time. I have no regrets about joining this company" (#157, Follow-up). This was typical of those who left after a long struggle with misfit; they described intense feelings of relief in their new positions.

The fourth type, *chronic pretenders*, includes those who chose neither to leave, nor to engage in the effort necessary to achieve a real resolution to their misfit. In these cases, the individuals employed surface-level change or buffering as primary responses to misfit. As a result, they never quite felt like they fit in, but they also never felt that their misfit was strong enough to make them leave. For example, one mid-level manager described himself as a "positive character" who likes to "have some humor, have a laugh" (#33). His manager asked him to "try to keep it under wraps just a little bit more" (#33). As is typical of those who engaged only in surface-level changes to convince others that they fit in, he made some visible adjustments in response to the manager's feedback. He believed that remaining in his position required him to maintain these surface-level behavior changes, which he was willing to do. These chronic pretenders are distinct because they mitigate the consequences of their misfit without trying to remove the conditions that created it. Therefore, they never achieve the sense of relief that the adjusters feel, nor the persistent sense of being out of place experienced by those who resign themselves to living with the pain of misfit.

The final category, *malcontents*, includes those who had tried everything to resolve or relieve the pain of misfit, but to no avail. They resigned themselves to misfit as a condition of employment, and either withdrew or reframed their misfit as a source of pride, while biding time until they could leave. For example, participant #147 responded to our question about which strategies she was using with "I *was*

[using] all of them; right now, [I'm] trying to leave." She also indicated that she had tried to adjust both herself and her environment, and when that was unsuccessful, she found herself withdrawing from her work. In the follow-up interview, we asked if her feelings of misfit were resolved and she said "No, and I don't think they will be until I find another job" (#147, Follow-up). She was stuck in a cycle of looking for work unsuccessfully, while being forced to accept misfit as an unresolvable state. The malcontents are distinct from the eventual leavers because they remain stuck for an extended period of time and resort to resignation strategies during this period. The eventual leavers successfully employed a leaving strategy to resolve their misfit and relief-seeking strategies to lessen the pain in the meantime, without resigning themselves to living with misfit.

Although we have highlighted five prototypical paths through the model, there are other, more unique paths that individuals pursued. We describe these five to illustrate that our participants used multiple strategies, simultaneously and sequentially, to address misfit until it was resolved or tolerable. Numerous strategy combinations exist, but what is common to everyone is the intense motivation to regain a sense of fit at work.

Proposition 14a. Employees will use multiple strategies in response to misfit, often pairing resolution strategies with relief-seeking strategies.

Proposition 14b. Employees will turn to resignation in response to misfit after resolution and relief-seeking strategies have failed.

DISCUSSION

One benefit of qualitative research is the unique access it provides to phenomena through the eyes of participants. For years, fit researchers have talked about misfit as "incompatibility," "incongruence of person and environment," and "the lower end of the fit scale." These terms describe a mean score or a quadrant on a three-dimensional graph, but they do not do justice to the experiences of pain, stress, worthlessness, isolation, stagnation, and fear that misfit involves. Recent theory (Yu, 2013) has described misfit as an activating condition that drives efforts to reduce misfit. Our data illustrate just how motivating the pain of misfit can be, and the kinds of reactions it motivates.

Our participants' descriptions open the door to a deeper understanding of how people assess their fit and misfit with their work environments. Their

descriptions provide insight into the multidimensionality of PE fit, triggers that induce misfit perceptions, and the actions people take in response to misfit. Most recent PE fit research has focused on two primary reactions to misfit—being dissatisfied and exiting the organization. Our data demonstrate that although these consequences occur, the range of strategies used to address misfit is much more complex.

Theoretical Contributions and Future Research Opportunities

Our first contribution is that we offer new insight into how employees become aware of their personal misfit at work. Our results solidify organizational "shocks" (Lee & Mitchell, 1994) as instigators of misfit perceptions. Although we found some evidence for growing disillusionment with organizational values, often individuals attributed misfit to a change that had occurred at work. These findings, coupled with the finding of Caldwell et al. (2004) that lower levels of PE fit occur after organizational change, support the benefits of incorporating studies of misfit and organizational change. Despite the plethora of articles on managing change, there has been surprisingly little attention to helping employees resolve misfit after such changes. As leaders craft change messages to be disseminated throughout the organization (Armenakis & Harris, 2001), an emphasis on addressing misfit with the "new" organization, job, or workgroup may encourage employees to reestablish fit following the change. Because shocks can also be personally induced, as when individuals seek out and accept job promotions, misfit as an outcome of career planning and progression is also an area ripe for additional research (Carlson & Rotondo, 2001). Theories of careers may benefit from expanding to include anticipated interludes of PJ misfit.

We also found that social cues from others in the work environment can trigger or exacerbate feelings of personal misfit. As highlighted by the earliest research on human relations at work (e.g., Mayo, 1933; Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939; Whitehead, 1938), the social dimension represents a critical component of employees' work experiences, and this includes their perceptions of fit. Participants reported becoming aware of misfit when their peers treated them as outsiders. Much has been made about the weak relationship between perceived and actual (i.e., objectively determined) fit (Edwards et al., 2006). Our results suggest that social signaling

may be one explanation for this gap. Employees may feel like misfits because of how they are treated, rather than because of objectively assessed PE misalignment. Signaling theory (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011) may hold potential for better understanding when and how misfit is perceived. Research on workplace bullying and abusive supervision may provide additional insight into how misfit is perceived by others, and then signaled back to employees. If perceived misfit induces bullying, then strategies aimed at changing perceptions of fit may hold an answer to reducing abusive treatment at work (Glomb & Liao, 2003).

A second contribution is greater insight into the experience of misfit. Virtually all participants shared emotionally laden, pain-filled stories involving misfit with jobs, coworkers, supervisors, and organizational cultures. They were quite capable of describing parts of the environment with which they fit and those with which they did not, reinforcing the idea that "individuals are simultaneously embedded in multiple aspects of the environment" (Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006: 197). Multidimensional studies of PE fit (e.g., Harold et al., 2016) that include more than just PJ and PO fit are still relatively rare, despite repeated calls for their addition to the literature. Our results provide further evidence that multidimensional studies are more consistent with individuals' lived experiences of fit and misfit. By focusing on just one type of fit or misfit in exclusion of others, important predictors of attitudes and behaviors are likely to be missed. Given the depth of emotion in their stories, broader outcomes, including life satisfaction, depression, aggression, and even suicidal thoughts, should also be explored.

Our third contribution is empirically demonstrating the connection between the perception of misfit and the motivation to reestablish fit. In their influential work on stress and coping, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described a process that people go through in response to threats. Primary appraisal occurs when the individual determines that a threat exists. In our study, this primary appraisal was participants' becoming aware of misfit and determining that it posed a threat to their well-being. After a threat is perceived, secondary appraisal assesses whether there are resources available to minimize, tolerate, or eradicate the stressor and the stain it induces. Our participants described a broad set of considerations that they went through after perceiving misfit, including questions of "Should I leave?" and "Could I leave?" as well as "Is the environment likely to change?" and "Should I change something about

myself?" followed often by "Would I be willing to change that about myself?" These questions reflect the secondary appraisal process used to determine the most appropriate reaction to perceived misfit. Thus, our results validate the stress responses articulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), and elaborate the theory to include specific appraisals relevant to misfit remediation.

A fourth, and perhaps most important, contribution is the development of a comprehensive model of approaches for dealing with misfit. We report on two approaches—resolution and relief-seeking—aimed at reducing the negative consequences of perceived misfit, and a third approach—resignation—aimed at simply living with misfit. Dawis and Lofquist's (1984: 237) theory of work adjustment describes fit as a "continuous and dynamic process by which a worker seeks to achieve and maintain correspondence with a work environment." Almost like a person trying to balance a bicycle while riding over rough terrain, our participants could be described as "effortful fits." They described extensive effort devoted to maintaining and conveying perceived fit at work. We demonstrate that fit is not merely a matter of finding where one belongs during the organizational entry process (Judge & Cable, 1997), but rather a complex sequence of adjusting cognitions and behaviors to maintain PE compatibility. When those attempts do not work, we illustrate the sense of resignation that follows.

Reinforcing the tenets of the ASA model (Schneider, 1987), we found that many people considered exit as an early option. Yet, most of them discarded it as a strategy to resolve misfit due to lack of opportunities, embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001), or motivation to "stick it out" to avoid looking like a quitter. Thus, we demonstrated that many people defer leaving until after they have tried a variety of other options to resolve or relieve misfit. Exit remains an important strategy, just not one that many people saw as feasible in the short term.

Our results provide some empirical support for Wheeler, Buckley, Halbesleben, Brouer, and Ferris' (2005) conceptual paper on misfit reactions. They theorized five general reactions to misfit: exit, voice, adaptation, impression management, and inaction. Using participants' vivid stories of how they approached misfit, we elaborate on Wheeler et al.'s (2005) ideas. Exit and adaptation would map onto the resolution approach. We broaden this to include seeking to leave through organizational exit or internal transfer, and changing self through introspection, mentors, or framing misfit as a growth

opportunity. Their concept of impression management is similar to our strategy of surface-level behavior change, which we specify as focused on changing others' perceptions of misfit, rather than misfit itself. Wheeler et al. (2005) described voice behaviors used to express dissatisfaction with misfit. Our participants used their voices, but with the explicit goal of changing their immediate work environment to improve fit—a resolution strategy. Finally, unlike Wheeler et al.'s (2005) category of inaction, our participants who were not working to resolve misfit displayed a number of strategies to cope with it, including buffering and framing the misfit situation as temporary. Thus, far from being inactive, people who may appear to have accepted misfit were still actively engaged in strategies to mitigate its consequences. Even those who used a resignation approach were still actively engaged in experiencing misfit—they were miserable, regretful, and in pain. Any opportunity for relief would be acted upon quickly. Recent quantitative work has suggested that people experiencing misfit at work may also turn to nonwork activities to buffer the pain of misfit (Vogel, Rodell, & Lynch, 2016). This idea is highly consistent with the use of the relief-seeking approach within the work environment that we describe. Future research bridging work and nonwork responses to misfit is needed.

Overall, our findings reflect some of the fundamental tenets of early stress and coping theories. Misfit has long been viewed as a stressor (French, Rodgers, & Cobb, 1974; Harrison, 1978), to which people respond using coping and defense mechanisms to reduce the strain it causes (Edwards, Caplan, & Harrison, 1998). In their own words, our participants reinforced the potency of these approaches by describing what they did to resolve underlying conditions of misfit and relieve the pain that it induced. Buffering, temporal framing, and reframing misfit as a source of pride are consistent with Harrison's (1978) definition of defense mechanisms because they primarily address the subjective perception of misfit. Leaving and adjustment strategies are coping mechanisms because they address misfit by changing its underlying causes. However, our results suggest that there is often crossover between the approaches, such as individuals who framed the experience of misfit as temporary (a defense mechanism) to allow them to tolerate misfit while they worked to resolve it (a coping mechanism). Similarly, engaging in surface-level behavior change is certainly aimed at changing the perception of misfit, yet it does nothing to resolve the underlying

conditions of misfit. Manipulating others' fit perceptions blurs the line between coping and defense mechanisms. Thus, although our results generally confirm the early models of stress and coping, they also provide new insight into specific misfit remediation strategies and the goals of their use.

By illustrating specific strategies used in response to misfit, we generate preliminary ideas about when particular strategies are likely to be used in response to misfit. When social signals of misfit are perceived, the response of surface-level behavioral change was a typical reaction to reduce being treated like a misfit. Deeper personal change was more likely to be invoked when the person perceived misfit and wanted to do something to resolve it. The choice of strategy may also be shaped by the attributions that individuals make about the causes of misfit (Martinko, Douglas, & Harvey, 2006). If individuals believe their own limitations contribute to misfit, they may be more likely to view it as an opportunity to develop and choose to make personal changes. Alternatively, if misfit is seen as being caused by limitations or flaws in the environment, the willingness to change should be lower. Individuals may make minor behavior changes, such as instrumental socializing, but are unlikely to make large overhauls to themselves. In more extreme cases, negative attributions about the environment paired with positive attributions about the self are associated with taking pride in misfit, which makes those who feel stuck more likely to embrace the identity of a misfit. These results begin to address contextual factors that influence which strategies are selected to address misfit. Additional work incorporating individual differences and contextual factors is also needed.

Finally, our results contribute some surprising new perspectives on misfit and the reactions it induces. Although our participants clearly articulated the painfulness of a misfit experience, they also highlighted potential benefits that could result from it. Framing misfit as an opportunity for personal growth demonstrates that misfit can have positive consequences, not previously described. Misfit encouraged some individuals to introspect and seek advice from mentors and peers to identify behaviors or characteristics that were holding them back. They viewed misfit as a time to learn, rather than to wallow in self-pity or complain about their work environments. Future research exploring what leads people to frame misfit in these terms, rather than as an unresolvable problem or someone else's problem (i.e., "they should change for me") may provide key insights into how sensemaking and sensegiving (Weick, 1995) could be used collaboratively to coach and mentor employees who are currently struggling with misfit.

We also found evidence of some unintended consequences of the relief-seeking strategies. Individuals who used surface-level behavior changes frequently reported feeling that they were inauthentic at work, and had to put on a façade around others. Studies on conformity (Hewlin, 2009) and emotional labor (Grandey, Foo, Groth, & Goodwin, 2012) have illustrated that emotional exhaustion, burnout, and reduced performance can result from such demonstrations of inauthentic behavior at work (Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013; Hewlin, 2009). Thus, a strategy used to reduce the negative consequences of misfit may provide temporary relief but create negative consequences in the long term. We also do not have a sense of the consequences for career progression of reframing misfit as a source of pride. Although it may provide temporary protection of the employee's sense of self, it may damage relationships and job opportunities. Being able to direct employees to more sustainable strategies, such as changing the environment, buffering, or internal transfer, could prevent making a bad situation worse.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Like any research, our approach has strengths and limitations. Our sampling strategy necessarily limits to whom the findings can be generalized. In Phase 1, our goal was to learn about a wide range of fit and misfit experiences. We approached a sample from five organizations that represented different jobs, industries, and levels. All participants responded to a solicitation to discuss their experiences of fit and misfit at work, which may have oversampled those who had considered their fit extensively. Although employees in five diverse organizations participated, we cannot know whether their experiences are representative. In Phase 2, we used a purposive sampling approach that honed in on individuals who had experienced recent changes at work that led to misfit. This sampling strategy allowed us to delve deeper into the responses to misfit that we previously identified. It also provided a sample from a wider range of organizations in more industries. However, it is limited by focusing on individuals with investments in their careers who had already identified themselves as misfits.

Overall, the approach of first sampling a wide range of jobs and experiences and then focusing on those likely to address misfit is in line with the

progression of our theory. However, future research should test the propositions we developed on broader samples. We also note that our data collection began in the United Kingdom and ended in the United States. We did not deliberately model culture as a factor and did not observe differences in the strategies used in one country versus the other. Future research, however, could seek to broaden our model beyond these countries, and particularly into Eastern cultures, which have been theorized to view fit differently than Western cultures do (Lee & Ramaswami, 2013).

Practical Implications

Keeping in mind these limitations, our results can guide managers engaged with employees experiencing misfit at work to facilitate retention and development. Managers can learn to recognize when employees are working to resolve misfit through personal change and can provide them with additional development opportunities, such as mentoring, to facilitate the transition. Identifying opportunities for internal transfer, where their fit may be higher, is also advisable. Because fit is multidimensional, individuals who fit poorly with part of the work environment may benefit from bolstering fit in other areas.

Our participants painted a vivid picture of the dynamic nature of demands–abilities misfit in response to changes in individual capabilities and job expectations that result from promotions or transfers. Their descriptions underscore the need to pay close attention to the match between abilities and demands, and offer fresh opportunities to employees as their capabilities grow. Similarly, although being stretched by new responsibilities is expected after a promotion, attending to whether employees are making the necessary changes and receiving adequate training for the new position is advised. PJ fit and misfit can produce an exciting spiral of development for employees, but only if their managers are attentive to those tipping points.

Managers have a time window during which they can work with people who are trying to resolve misfit because those who are making these efforts understand that they may need to tolerate discomfort in the short term to achieve fit in the long term. Managers who pay attention to this dynamic may be able to mitigate the negative effects of change, but if these efforts are delayed they may come too late to prevent turnover. Communicating with employees about their reactions to organizational change may provide astute managers with opportunities to turn periods of discomfort into opportunities for growth, learning, and recommitment.

Finally, managers should be cognizant of the kind of changes that are necessary for people to fit in. Misfit is not insurmountable, and often even minor adjustments in both the person and the environment can create a subtle shift that improves fit. Simple shifts in work arrangements or a minor modification to job demands may make people feel substantially more comfortable. However, by asking people to change values or ethics, managers may do little more than create proud misfits who resent the organization. Understanding that these employees resist change due to the pressure to sacrifice of their authenticity or integrity may allow managers to provide more constructive alternatives, such as environmental reform. We suggest engaging employees by encouraging them to voice their concerns. This may resolve their feelings of misfit, in the same way that encouraging authentic self-expression in newcomers improves retention (Cable et al., 2013). Organizations may be able to benefit from such misfits by embracing the changes recommended by employees who challenge the status quo.

Our results suggest that although misfit is generally perceived as a negative state, it can result in positive outcomes. These include minor behavior changes to facilitate workplace relations (e.g., finding common ground to build relationships), personal growth and development (e.g., new skill acquisition), and environmental change (e.g., structural changes or reforms to the environment). Sometimes, even leaving a position or organization is beneficial to the person and the organization (Zimmerman & Darnold, 2009). By focusing on the positive consequences that may result from efforts to resolve misfit, managers can make the best of a difficult situation that would likely lead to negative outcomes for the organization if left unmanaged.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study provides new insights into how employees experience misfit and fit. Most of our participants identified fit as something that they attend to and strive for in their work lives. They engaged in myriad misfit management strategies, with some focused on resolving the underlying sources of misfit, and others focused on simply relieving the negative consequences of misfit. Some misfits leave, but often at the end of a more complicated journey than the literature has traditionally conveyed. Fitting

in does not appear to come easily to most people, but instead relies on active, effortful processes requiring cognitive and behavioral components and a large dose of persistence.

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