Does employee perceived person-organization fit promote performance? The moderating role of supervisor perceived person-organization fit

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To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2018.1485734

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Published online: 18 Jun 2018.

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Does employee perceived person-organization fit promote performance? The moderating role of supervisor perceived person-organization fit

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has shown inconsistent and mostly nonsignificant relationships between employee person-organization fit (P-O) fit and in-role performance. In this study, we examine whether the strength of the relationship between employee perceived P-O fit and supervisor-rated performance depends on the perceived P-O fit of the supervisor. We propose that (a) in-role task-related processes are facilitated when both supervisor and employee share a common frame of understanding about what is important for the organization and (b) that high P-O fit supervisors attach value to the work behaviours of high P-O fit employees, both of which should translate into more positive performance evaluations. The results of a field study among 155 employees and their supervisors provided support for this proposition: employees’ perceived P-O fit was positively associated with their performance evaluation when supervisor perceived P-O fit was high, whereas this association was absent when supervisor perceived P-O fit was low. Our study contributes to the P-O fit literature by unpacking whether and when employee perceived P-O fit is important for functioning and performance evaluations.

Perceived employee person-organization (P-O) fit, conceptualized in this study as the fit that employees experience between their own values and those of the organization, is associated with a range of beneficial attitudinal and affective outcomes (see Arthur, Bell, Villado, & Doverspike, 2006; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Oh et al., 2014; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). However, in contrast and contrary to what practitioners tend to assume (cf. Arthur et al., 2006), the relationship between employees’ perceived P-O fit and supervisor-rated performance is less straightforward. That is, meta-analyses have shown overall small and inconsistent levels of perceived P-O fit effects on in-role performance evaluations (e.g., average $r$ of .18 in Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; average $r$ of .08 in Arthur et al., 2006). As such, it is important to determine whether P-O fit is in fact as influential for employee functioning and performance evaluations as is often assumed. With this study, we therefore aim to unpack whether and when perceived P-O fit is important for employee performance evaluations.

The beneficial attitudinal outcomes of perceived P-O fit can be partly attributed to the sharing of organizational values, which creates effective communication and trust between individuals and organizations, and promotes employees’ affective responses to the organization (Edwards & Cable, 2009). This effective communication and trust also seems important for employee functioning, especially when it comes to their supervisors (e.g., Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, & Chen, 2005). Because supervisors communicate, assign, and manage employees’ in-role tasks, they affect employees’ task perceptions and behaviours. Hence, actual task functioning of employees will also depend on the communication that they have with their supervisor and the trust they place in their supervisor’s guidelines. If employees with high P-O fit receive guidelines from a supervisor who also supports the values of the organization, employee supervisor communication and trust will be fostered. This, in turn, should promote employee functioning. In addition, given that supervisors evaluate the task functioning of their employees (for a recent example, see Alessandri, Borgogni, & Latham, 2017), supervisors’ performance ratings may be influenced by the extent to which supervisors and employees share similar organizational values. Supervisors with high P-O fit may favour employee work behaviours that are in line with organizational values. Because high P-O fit employees are more likely to show these work behaviours, high P-O fit supervisors will evaluate the performance of high P-O fit employees positively. Hence, employee in-role performance evaluations are likely to be highest when employees, supervisors, and the organization have similar standards about what is important at work. This is the case when both employees and supervisors report a high P-O fit.

In this study, we examine whether the relationship between employees’ perceived P-O fit and their supervisor’s performance evaluation is moderated by the perceived P-O fit of the supervisor. We propose that this relationship will be positive when supervisor perceived P-O fit is high but will not

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Author Notes

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, MRWH, upon reasonable request.

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exist when supervisor perceived P-O fit is low. As such, this study contributes to the fit literature in several ways. First, by unpacking the joint role of employee and supervisor P-O fits, we provide a first attempt to advance the literature on the relationship between employee perceived P-O fit and in-role performance. Second, this study may inspire new research elucidating the processes and moderators associated with the relationship between P-O fit and specific outcomes. Third, while the apparent lack of a relationship between P-O fit and performance might caution practitioners against the use of P-O fit in employee selection (Arthur et al., 2006), identifying conditions under which employee perceived P-O fit does relate to performance evaluations can nuance such recommendation.

Perceived person-organization fit and in-role performance

P-O fit (e.g., Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Van Vianen & De Pater, 2012; Verquer et al., 2003) has been conceptualized as subjective P-O fit (the match between an individual’s own values and those of the organization as perceived by the individual) or objective P-O fit (the match between an individual’s own values and those of the organization as perceived by others). P-O fit has been measured in a direct way (individuals rate the extent to which they experience fit with organizational values) or an indirect way (individuals rate their own values and those of the organization separately). Although it should be acknowledged that P-O fit can also pertain to variables such as personality, skills, knowledge, or abilities, we conceptualize P-O fit as perceived P-O fit: a direct measure of subjective P-O fit reflecting the degree to which an individual perceives correspondence between his or her own values and those of the organization. We adopt this conceptualization of P-O fit because individuals particularly (affectively and behaviourally) respond to fit when they perceive its existence (Cable & Edwards, 2004; Chi & Pan, 2012).

Perceived P-O fit is positively related to beneficial outcomes such as job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviour, and negatively related to turnover intentions (Arthur et al., 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). There is, however, inconclusive evidence of a significant positive relationship between employee P-O fit and the in-role performance evaluation that an employee receives from his or her supervisor. In-role performance refers to fulfilling responsibilities laid out in one’s job description, adequately completing assigned duties, and generally meeting performance requirements central to one’s position (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Williams & Anderson, 1991). Employee in-role performance is typically considered to be validly measured through supervisor-ratings (e.g., Alessandri et al., 2017; see also Arthur et al., 2006; Janssen & Van Der Vegt, 2011), despite the fact that supervisor evaluations contain a subjective, perceptual element. Although the meta-analysis of Kristof-Brown and colleagues revealed an average correlation of .18 between perceived P-O fit and task performance, the meta-analysis of Arthur and colleagues showed a nonsignificant average correlation of .08. This inconclusive evidence suggests that the relationship between perceived P-O fit and in-role performance evaluations may depend on moderating variables.

In this study, we examine whether the relationship between employee perceived P-O fit and in-role performance evaluations may depend on a factor in the work context that is generally regarded as important for employee performance, namely employees’ supervisor. P-O fit has been argued to result in an increase in motivation, effort, energy, and persistence, as well as involvement with the organizational mission (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Wang, Zhan, McCune, & Truxillo, 2011). Additionally, alignment of employees’ and organizational values can provide a common frame of understanding and interpretation, which will ease exchange of information, reduce the prevalence of misunderstandings, and clarify expectations (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Edwards & Cable, 2009; see also Boon & Biron, 2016). Importantly, this common frame of understanding can also be essential for the performance of individual employees. That is, employees do not perform their work in a social vacuum but rather depend on others with whom they collaborate, especially their supervisor.

We suggest that employee P-O fit may relate positively to performance evaluations particularly when supervisor P-O fit is high. We argue that the combination of high employee and high supervisor P-O fit has the potential to enhance both actual performance and supervisor’s subjective evaluation of employee performance. First, supervisors explicate the goals and requirements of jobs, and assign and manage employees’ roles and tasks (Schein, 2004). Hence, a common frame of understanding between employees and supervisors regarding (for example) task instructions will impact employees’ in-role performance (Evans & Davis, 2005). Supervisors are expected to transmit the organization’s values and goals to employees and set matching performance standards. However, supervisors may particularly do so effectively if they themselves endorse the organization’s values (Posner, Kouzes, & Schmidt, 1985). These supervisors will provide task instructions and set requirements that fit organizational values, which in turn may benefit the actual in-role performance of employees who also endorse these values. In other words, high employee and supervisor perceived P-O fits should improve employee performance, because these shared high P-O fits facilitate processes that are important for employee actual performance. When both employee and supervisor experience fit with the organization’s values and goals, they will have similar perceptions about the types of activities that are necessary for attaining the organization’s goals and that are aligned with the organization’s values. Furthermore, they may develop similar perceptions about the requirements for job performance and the standards for evaluating employee performance, which yield clear expectations about the possible consequences of work behaviours.

In contrast, supervisors who do not support the organization’s values may show supervisory behaviours and provide messages and task instructions that are at odds with the values and goals of the organization. These low fitting supervisors may limit the functioning of employees with high P-O fit, such as decreasing their engagement in specific activities or behaviours that are aligned with the organization’s values (e.g., Preenen, Van Vianen, & De Pater, 2014). Moreover,
supervisors with low P-O fit may reduce clarity and predictability of managerial behaviours in relation to in-role tasks. Hence, low supervisor P-O fit may engender misunderstandings and uncertainty among employees and supervisors, which will impede employees’ in-role performance even when employees’ perceived P-O fit is high.

Second, supervisors with high P-O fit may subjectively evaluate the performance of employees with high P-O fit more positively. That is, employees with high P-O fit are more likely to spontaneously perform tasks that are aligned with the goals and values of the organization (Gregory, Albritton, & Osmonbekov, 2010). Supervisors with high P-O fit will appreciate these value-related task behaviours and may thus evaluate these employees’ performance more positively. In addition, employees with high P-O fit who are more autonomous in their job may initiate activities that align with the values of the organization (Arthur et al., 2006). Supervisors with high P-O fit will support these activities and judge them favorably. In contrast, supervisors with low P-O fit may not care about whether or not the work behaviours of their employees align with organizational values because they are indifferent to these values. Therefore, employees’ P-O fit may not play a role when a supervisor low in P-O fit assesses employees’ in-role performance. Altogether, employees with high P-O fit are more likely to do their work in a way that fits the values of the organization, which will in turn encourage supervisors with high P-O fit to evaluate the work of these employees more positively (see Gregory et al., 2010; Vilela, González, & Ferrín, 2008).

To sum up, the combination of employee and supervisor P-O fits both being high should result in a situation in which the supervisor facilitates the work activities of the employee and subjectively evaluates this employee’s activities more positively. The combination of a high P-O fit supervisor and a low P-O fit employee, in contrast, implies that the employee engages less in the type of work behaviours that are (subjectively) valued by the supervisor, resulting in lower performance evaluations. Finally, supervisors with low P-O fit do not have a common frame of understanding with employees with high P-O fit, preventing the possibility that employees’ high P-O fit will impact employees’ performance. Moreover, supervisors with low P-O fit do not care about employees’ behavioural alignment with organizational values and, thus, high employee P-O fit should not affect the performance assessments of supervisors with low P-O fit. The same applies to the combination of low P-O fit supervisors and low P-O fit employees: low P-O fit supervisors will neither facilitate these employees’ in-role activities, nor evaluate these employees’ behaviours subjectively more positive.

Hence, to summarize, we examine the interplay between employees’ and supervisors’ perceived P-O fits. We propose that employee perceived P-O fit will be positively related to employee in-role performance evaluations when the employee’s supervisor experiences a high P-O fit. In addition, we expect that the relationship between employee P-O fit and in-role performance evaluations will be absent when the supervisor experiences a low P-O fit. Altogether, we expect that the highest in-role performance evaluations will be observed when employee and supervisor perceived P-O fits are both high.

**Method**

Participants were 155 dyads, supervisors (43.9% female) and employees (54.8% female) from diverse Dutch organizations (Table 1 presents demographic information). The majority were organizations in the food industry (34.2%), retail or sales (29.0%), administrative services (9.7%), health care (7.1%), and education (4.5%). The remaining 15.5% of the sample were from diverse organizations such as marketing, (semi-)government, and transport. Thus, the sample consisted almost exclusively of employees working in service related industries and their direct supervisors. This convenience sample was collected as part of students’ data collection projects. Each of 41 students collected data from up to four supervisor employee dyads from the company at which they were employed or by approaching businesses through cold-call. Students were instructed to recruit individuals with whom they were not closely or not at all acquainted. Anonymity of the participants was safeguarded through a code system to match the members of each dyad. No individual identifying information of the participants was recorded or stored. Initially, (parts of) 163 dyads agreed to participate. We obtained complete data from 155 dyads. The employees’ questionnaire included perceived P-O fit, a control variable (person-supervisor fit) and demographics. The supervisors’ questionnaire included perceived P-O fit and the focal employee’s in-role performance. Items used response-scales from 1 (not at all true) to 7 (very true).  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations.</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
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<td>Tenure</td>
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<td>.41***</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.56</td>
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<td>2.98</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.44</td>
<td>.56</td>
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<tr>
<td>P-O fit supervisor</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>P-O fit employee</td>
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<td>1.37</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.25</td>
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<tr>
<td>In-role performance</td>
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<td>1.20</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.60***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In-role performance</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.21**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.
Perceived person-organization fit was assessed with three-items such as “The things that I value in life are very similar to the things my organization values”. These items were derived from Cable and DeRue (2002). Employees ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.37; \alpha = .94$) and supervisors ($M = 5.18, SD = 1.17; \alpha = .93$) completed the same P-O fit measure.

Employee in-role performance evaluation comprised six items ($M = 5.72, SD = 0.85; \alpha = .87$) completed by supervisors (e.g., “This employee completes assigned tasks in an adequate way”; Williams & Anderson, 1991).²

Control variables: Demographics. Several demographic control variables were included in the analyses that could potentially affect the outcome variable (Becker, 2005). Specifically, employees’ age, gender, organizational tenure, and dyadic tenure can affect performance outcomes and evaluations. Although the direction of some of these effects may vary based on sampling variation, meta-analyses suggest that older employees are evaluated less positively than younger ones (e.g., Duarte, Goodson, & Klich, 1994; Ng & Feldman, 2010; Sturman, 2003; Treadway et al., 2005). In addition, in the current research, it makes theoretical sense to control for dyadic tenure, as this is likely to affect the level and accuracy of performance ratings.

Control variable: Perceived person-supervisor (P-S) fit. It may be considered important to examine whether our prediction holds while controlling for perceived person-supervisor fit. First, research has shown that perceived P-S fit relates to performance (Kristof-Brown et al., 2010). Second, employees’ experienced P-S fit might relate to employees’ and supervisors’ similarity in P-O fit perception and may thus confound the interaction effect of employee and supervisor P-O fits. These considerations provide good grounds for including P-S fit as a control variable in the current study (Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016). Note, however, that prior research has shown that P-S fit and P-O fit are related yet distinct constructs (Van Vianen, Shen, & Chuang, 2011). Perceived P-S fit reflects employees’ perception that their own values match with those of their supervisor whereas perceived P-O fit reflects employees’ perception that their own values match with those of the organization. The set of values that employees use to establish their fit with the supervisor is not necessarily the same as the set of values they use to establish their fit with the organization. In a similar vein, the interaction of employee and supervisor P-O fits is conceptually and empirically distinct from employees’ perceived supervisor fit. The interaction of employee and supervisor P-O fits reflects the level of similarity in employees’ and supervisors’ P-O fit perceptions (these P-O fit perceptions can be both high, low, or opposed to each other). Although, for example, similarity in employee and supervisor P-O fit perceptions (as independently reported by employees and supervisors) might contribute to employees’ experienced fit with the supervisor (as reported by employees), they are not the same.

P-S fit was assessed with three-items such as “My supervisor’s values match the things I find important in life” ($M = 4.82, SD = 1.20; \alpha = .88$). These items were derived from Cable and DeRue (2002) P-O fit measure, whereby “organization” was replaced by “supervisor” as the referent (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2013).

We tested whether our measures of perceived P-O and P-S fit were indeed different constructs by conducting a set of two confirmatory factor analyses. We compared a model in which the items of employee P-O fit and P-S fit were loaded onto their respective factors with a model in which all items loaded on one factor representing overall fit. The results revealed that the first model ($\chi^2 = 6.97, df = 8, p = .54$, NFI = .99, IFI = 1.0, TLI = 1.0, CFI = 1.0, RMSEA = .000) fit the data significantly better than the second model ($\chi^2 = 169.38, df = 9, p < .001$, NFI = .78, IFI = .79, TLI = .65, CFI = .79, RMSEA = .34), indicating that employee P-O fit and P-S fit represent two distinct yet related constructs ($\Delta \chi^2 = 162.41, \Delta df = 1, p < .001$).

**Results**

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and correlations among the study variables. We tested our proposition that employee perceived P-O fit would be positively related to employee in-role performance evaluation when supervisor perceived P-O fit was high (but unrelated when it was low) with hierarchical regression analyses. As discussed above, we controlled for employee demographics, dyadic tenure, and employee P-S fit in all analyses. Table 2 shows the results of these analyses with the control variables entered in the first step, employee and supervisor perceived P-O fit entered in the second step, and the interaction of employee and supervisor perceived P-O fits entered in the third step. All independent variables and control variables were centered.

**Table 2. Results hierarchical regression analyses predicting employee in-role performance evaluation.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Step 1</th>
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<th>Step 2</th>
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<td></td>
<td>$B$ (95% CI)</td>
<td>SE $b$</td>
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<td>$\beta$</td>
<td>$B$ (95% CI)</td>
<td>SE $b$</td>
<td>$\beta$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee gender</td>
<td>.23 (.03; .49)</td>
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<td>Employee age</td>
<td>−.02 (−.04; .01)</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>−.29**</td>
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<td>Employee tenure</td>
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<td>Dyad tenure</td>
<td>.06 (.01; .11)</td>
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<td>Employee P-S Fit</td>
<td>.16 (.05; .27)</td>
<td>.06</td>
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<tr>
<td>Employee P-O fit</td>
<td>.10 (−.02; .22)</td>
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<td>Supervisor P-O fit</td>
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<td>Interaction of P-O fits</td>
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<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>5.70***</td>
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<td>4.70***</td>
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<td>4.73***</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
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<td>.18</td>
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***p < .001; **p < .01; *p < .05.
Results showed that, although employee age, employee tenure, and dyad tenure were highly correlated (see Table 1), employee in-role performance evaluation was only significantly related to employee perceived P-O fit and supervisor perceived P-O fit (see Table 2, Step 1). More importantly, results showed the anticipated interaction between employee perceived P-O fit and supervisor perceived P-O fit (see Table 2, Step 3). Further analyses of the simple slopes of this interaction (Figure 1) indicated that the relationship between employee perceived P-O fit and employee in-role performance evaluation was only positive and significant when supervisor perceived P-O fit was high (+1 SD), $B = 0.20$, $SE_b = 0.08$, $\beta = .32$, $t(146) = 2.63$, $p = .010$, but not when it was low (−1 SD), $B = −0.01$, $SE_b = 0.08$, $\beta = −.01$, $t(146) = −0.11$, $p = .912$, or when it was average, $B = −0.106$, $SE_b = 0.06$, $\beta = .15$, $t(146) = 1.63$, $p = .105$. In addition, employee in-role performance evaluation was significantly different for high and low supervisor perceived P-O fit when employee perceived P-O fit was high, $B = 0.19$, $SE_b = 0.09$, $\beta = .26$, $t(146) = 2.08$, $p = .039$, but not when employee perceived P-O fit was low, $B = −0.054$, $SE_b = 0.074$, $\beta = −.07$, $t(146) = −0.72$, $p = .472$, or when it was average, $B = 0.07$, $SE_b = 0.06$, $\beta = .10$, $t(146) = 1.17$, $p = .243$. Together, these results show that employee in-role performance evaluation is highest when both employee and supervisor experience high P-O fit.

In our analyses, we controlled for P-S fit. We repeated our analyses without controlling for P-S fit. While the interaction effect largely remained the same, $B = 0.09$, $SE_b = 0.04$, $\beta = .16$, $t(147) = 2.08$, $p = .039$, results revealed that the effect of employee perceived P-O fit on performance evaluations was additionally significant at an average level of supervisor perceived P-O fit, $B = 0.14$, $SE_b = 0.05$, $\beta = .22$, $t(147) = 2.81$, $p = .006$. This result parallels the correlation pattern in Table 1, which shows that employees’ perceived P-O fit and P-S fit were similarly correlated with employee in-role performance evaluation and were highly correlated with each other. The results furthermore showed that when both employees’ perceived P-O and P-S fits were included in the analyses simultaneously, they were no longer significantly related to employee in-role performance evaluation. This indicates that employees’ perceived P-O fit and P-S fit overlap in explaining variance in employee performance evaluations, which underscores the importance of controlling for P-S fit in the analysis. That is, controlling for employee perceived P-S fit provides a purer test of the unique effect of supervisor perceived P-O fit on the relationship between employee perceived P-O fit and employee in-role performance evaluation.

Additionally, we compared the effects sizes (i.e., the strength of the relationship between employee perceived P-O fit and performance evaluation) in this study to those from previous meta-analytic research. The correlation between P-O fit and performance evaluations (Table 1) in this research was .27 ($d = .56$). Meta-analyses (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005) showed an average correlation between P-O fit and in-role performance between perceived direct fit and task performance of .18 ($d = .37$) and a confidence interval ranging from .02 to .34. Arthur et al. (2006) meta-analysis showed an average correlation between direct perceived fit and performance of .08 ($d = .16$) and a confidence interval between .01 and .14. Thus, the correlation in this research was relatively high but within the confidence interval from Kristof-Brown et al. (2005).

Discussion

This study aimed to unpack whether and when perceived P-O fit is important for employee performance evaluations, and therewith sought to contribute to explaining the inconclusive findings regarding the relationship between employee P-O fit and in-role performance. We reasoned that when the values of employees and supervisors are aligned with those of the organization, employees and supervisors will agree on the goals and requirements of the job, the types of activities an employee should pursue, and the organization’s standards of performance. This may, in turn, promote actual employee in-role performance and supervisors’ subjective assessment of employee performance. As expected, we found that employee perceived P-O fit was positively related to employee in-role performance evaluation only when supervisor perceived P-O fit was high, but not when supervisor P-O fit was low. Furthermore, employee in-role performance evaluation was assessed as highest when both employee and supervisor perceived P-O fits were high. Accordingly, this study provides first support for the notion that employee perceived P-O fit may promote in-role performance only when the employee’s immediate supervisor’s perceived P-O fit is also high.

Theoretical implications

The role of P-O fit for employee in-role performance has remained elusive to date. To unpack this elusive relationship, we built our study on the notion that employee in-role performance pertains to tasks performed for the organization while being affected by the work context, especially the employee-supervisor working relationship. This notion led to considering supervisor perceived P-O fit as a moderator of the relationship between employees’ perceived P-O fit and in-role performance evaluations. Specifically, we reasoned that high P-O fit supervisors will particularly facilitate the in-role performance of high P-O fit employees due to the common
frame of understanding about organizational values that pertain to in-role tasks. Further, we reasoned that high P-O fit supervisors will evaluate high P-O fit employees’ performance more positively because these supervisors will attach more importance to the work behaviours (consistent with organizational values) that high P-O fit employees are likely to show.

Our finding that employee perceived P-O fit enhances performance evaluations only when supervisor P-O fit is high but not when supervisor P-O fit is low, not only shows that P-O fit is indeed important for in-role performance evaluations but also offers a potentially useful ground for explaining equivocal P-O fit-performance relationships. In fact, the results may even indicate that employees’ P-O fit on its own is not directly relevant for their performance. Rather, its relevance hinges on their supervisor’s P-O fit. Note that this does not imply that individual P-O fit is irrelevant; it does, however, call for a fuller assessment of the different factors that are jointly involved in shaping outcomes such as performance. As we argued, in-role performance (partly) results from the supervisor employee working relationship and, hence, in predicting variance in in-role performance, supervisor factors ought to be considered. Similar arguments may apply to other outcome variables: for example, the prediction of variance in organizational citizenship behaviour (such as helping out a colleague who has been sick) could take into account other factors in the broader social situation as well such as the P-O fit of the colleague in question.

In-role performance evaluations were relatively lower for low P-O fit employees, even when supervisor P-O fit was high. We argued that the combination of an employee with low P-O fit and a supervisor with high P-O fit implies that the employee engages less in the type of work behaviours and activities that the supervisor prefers, resulting in lower performance evaluation. In contrast, one might expect that high P-O fit supervisors try to influence the activities of low P-O fit employees to bring these activities more into alignment with organizational values. If so, the supervisors in our study were apparently unsuccessful in their attempts to do so. An explanation for this finding could be that low fitting employees may not put effort in adjusting their work behaviours, because they may wish to leave their job anyway. Future research could investigate what supervisors could do to influence the values and resulting work behaviours of low fitting employees as to bring these more in line with the values and goals of the organization.

Finally, this study responds to calls for more complex accounts and investigations, such as ‘multiple fits’ (Van Vianen et al., 2011). Individuals in organizations distinguish among multiple fit domains, such as their fit with the organization, the job, the supervisor, and the work group. To the best of our knowledge, there is only one study that examined the interaction of multiple fits and in-role performance (Vogel & Feldman, 2009). This work, however, studied multiple fits within employees rather than the interacting fits of multiple actors in work contexts. The findings of the present study suggest that more research is needed to confirm the findings of our study and to further explore interacting fits. Still, our findings point out that improving the prediction of important outcome variables in the fit literature can seriously benefit from the consideration of multiple fits and specifically the consideration of multiple actors’ fits.

**Practical implications**

Arthur et al. (2006) raised a cautionary note for recruiters who assume that applicants who fit will automatically yield performance benefits, as they found a non-significant meta-analytic correlation with job performance. The current study paints a different picture, or at least nuances this, by indicating that P-O fit relates to in-role performance evaluations under certain conditions. Our findings suggest that organizations could put particular effort in recruiting supervisors who fit the culture (see Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011), rather than cautioning against recruiting people based on P-O fit. This is particularly important because, while one non-fitting employee may thwart performance under a fitting supervisor, a non-fitting supervisor could, extrapolating from our results, undermine the performance of all his/her direct reports who have high P-O fit. Hence, in decisions on recruitment and perhaps promotion to supervisory positions, P-O fit might be given greater weight. Additionally, because our research indicates that supervisors are crucial for the functioning and assessment of employees, supervisors could devote specific attention to communicating the values of the organization and could be actively involved in socializing employees.

**Limitations**

It is possible that a supervisor with high P-O fit feels attracted to employees with high P-O fit and may assess these employees’ in-role performance more favorably. We believe that it is less likely that our results can be explained by such attraction alone. A review of performance appraisal research (Levy & Williams, 2004) concluded that supervisor affect (e.g., liking) seems more strongly related to trait-like ratings than to task-based ratings of employees and that high performance evaluations lead to liking rather than the reverse. At the same time, since – as we reasoned – employees with high P-O fit may be performing work that the organization values (Gregory et al., 2010), supervisors with high P-O fit may evaluate the performance of these employees more favorably. Additionally, the liking that could result from the two parties having high P-O fit might contribute to communication and trust (Vilela et al., 2008), suggesting that liking (due to a shared P-O fit) could influence performance evaluations. At the same time, both employee and supervisor P-O fits being low should then result in relatively higher liking, which is not supported by our findings. That is, the finding that the combination of both fits being low does not yield higher performance evaluations makes it less likely that similarity – and, by extension, liking – accounts for more favourable performance evaluations.

One may consider that, by controlling for employee P-S fit and dyadic tenure, we controlled to a certain extent for the quality and length of the dyadic relationship. We deliberately did not assess supervisors’ P-S fit as to preclude the possibility that supervisors’ P-S fit responses would bias their assessments of employee in-role performance. For a similar reason, we also did not assess supervisors’ perceptions of employee P-O fit as to preclude the possibility that supervisors’ report of these perceptions would inflate their performance evaluations. Note that there was no significant relationship between supervisors’ P-O fit and supervisors’ assessment of employee in-role
performance. One might observe such a correlation due to common source or social desirability bias; thus, its absence suggests that the findings are not due to common source bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

While objective performance outcomes would further enhance validity, the validity of supervisor ratings is supported by research showing that supervisor ratings of in-role performance can be compared against relatively objective standards (Janssen & Van Der Vegt, 2011), are not affected by employees’ impression management techniques (Bolino, Varela, Bande, & Turnley, 2006), and are highly correlated with external (e.g., customers) ratings (Netemeyer & Maxham, 2007). Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that supervisor performance evaluations are – at least partly – subjective and thus biased, which should be acknowledged as a limitation. In this study, we explicitly addressed the subjectivity of performance evaluations by reasoning that supervisors with high P-O fit will appreciate the activities of employees with high P-O fit and therefore evaluate their performance positively. If so, these positive performance evaluations of high P-O fit supervisors may at least reflect that the activities of their high P-O fit employees concur with the values and goals of the organization, which is indeed positive from the perspective of the organization. However, these performance evaluations may not necessarily mean that high P-O fit employees also show optimal (actual) performance on these valued activities. Future research could try to disentangle the types of (fitting or non-fitting) activities that employees pursue and their actual performance on these activities, and how these two elements of performance relate to employee perceived P-O fit.

Concluding remarks

P-O fit has become a central variable of interest in organizational practice and research. However, reliable relationships with in-role performance could not be established to date, raising questions about the importance of P-O fit for in-role performance altogether. The current study shows that perceived P-O fit can indeed enhance in-role performance evaluations but simultaneously suggests that reaping the benefits of P-O fit for in-role performance evaluations may depend, at least in part, on the P-O fit of employees’ immediate supervisor. Hence, this study highlights the importance of the combination of both high employee and high supervisor P-O fits and the relevance of attracting and recruiting supervisors, as well as employees whose values match those of the organization.

Notes

1. The questionnaire booklet included a number of other variables that are not pertinent to the current hypothesis and that are therefore not further discussed in this paper.

2. This measure consisted initially of seven items; however, one item (i.e., “This employee carries out activities that directly influence the evaluation of his/her performance”) was removed because it did not seem to capture the same concept as the other items. Importantly, only without this item did all other items load exclusively onto a single factor in a principle components analysis. Furthermore, one may also note that this is the worst-fitting item in Williams and Anderson (1991) original analysis. All in all, the excluded item did not capture employee in-role performance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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