Fit for functional differentiation: new directions for personnel management and organizational change bridging the fit theory and social systems theory

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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual paper seeks to bridge two existing theories in a bid to broaden our analytical scope when studying the process of onboarding, retention and exclusion of organizational members. The purpose of this paper is to address this issue.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors draw on the social systems theory to advance the fit theory demonstrating the pertinence of macro social factors for the determination of person–organization (P–O) fit.

Findings – The result of this conceptual groundwork is a framework for the creation of highly individual personal profiles that refrains from analyses of potentially discriminatory factors like age, race or gender.

Originality/value – The authors present an individualized, multidimensional and flexible framework for the analysis of dynamically changing constellations of P–O fit.

Keywords Social systems theory, Functional differentiation, Fit theory, Membership, Zone of indifference, Niklas Luhmann

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Having a job or living a career that fits your needs is said to matter. Despite being a recurrent cliché, individuals exert effort and time pursuing a job or occupation they believe will suit the needs they understand to demand, the goals they want to achieve and foremost, the values they hold. At the same time, organizations invest substantial effort in looking for and selecting candidates with the right credentials for their open positions, establishing behavioural expectations and on socializing newcomers so as to try creating adequate fit with the organizational background, its structural functioning and ultimately, its culture (Cable and Parsons, 2001; Van Vianen, 2018).

One of the ways to understand the fit between individuals and organizations is through the lens of fit theories. In general, fit theories assume that people continuously seek for environments that make them feel accepted and able to manifest their traits. In other words, fit can broadly be defined as the consonance between the person characteristics and environment characteristics.

The existing research on person–environment (P–E) fit addresses the extent to which traits, skills, values, needs, motivations or other individual characteristics are similar, or complementary to the characteristics of the work context, the group or the organization, such

as specific job requirements, goals, culture, leadership styles and organizational resources. The constant and dynamic changes in social and organizational settings have been challenging the individuals' ability to achieve fit with the environment. Although the P–E fit theory has been the focus of general interest, the greater diversity, increasingly transformation, shorter career and work–life cycles have demanded a better understanding of how individuals can find fit in their lives.

However, P–E fit is far from being easily understood, mainly because it involves subjective or objective evaluation of match – or mismatch – of individuals' values, preferences and personalities with their social and organizational multiple domains (person, job, group, organization and culture), either in complimentary or supplementary ways (Kristof, 1996). As such, evaluating fit may be challenged by its conceptual complexity and operationalization.

The social systems' theory, on the other hand, offers a radical innovative perspective for studying the issue of fit by detaching the discussion from mundane anthropocentric elements such as social knowledge, values, norms, and roles and refocussing it on a profound common language to society known as functions systems (e.g. economic, legal, political and religion) that undoubtfully directly impact both individuals and organizations.

In this article, we draw on the social systems theory to advance the fit theory demonstrating the pertinence of macro social factors for the determination of P–E fit. First, we present the theoretical backbone of the fit theory, its different layers and complexities. Secondly, we discuss key aspects of Niklas Luhmann's theory of social systems, particularly functional differentiation. Finally, we work across both disciplines exploring points of contact, departures and relationships articulating a broader social–theoretical context to the issue of P–E fit. Finally, we conclude with three main propositions.

Theoretical background

The existence of good "fit", which is generally referred to as P–E fit, may explain a variety of implications for individual attitudes and behaviours in organizations, as well as for group and organizational effectiveness. It is believed that having a good fit between the characteristics of people and those of the environment will result in better performance, higher job satisfaction, more positive attitudes and a lesser desire to leave the organization. Moreover, because achieving fit is a dynamic and developmental process, not having it – a lack of fit or misfit – could be a powerful trigger for a future change in one's career, job positioning or organizational bond, in the hope of achieving fit (Edwards and Billsberry, 2020).

Although the idea of having – or pursuing fit – may appear to be intuitive, understanding how P–E fit works might be somewhat complex mainly due to the notion of its multidimensionality (Edwards and Billsberry, 2020). That is, because having fit involves multiple domains; researchers have been facing difficulty to fully explain the idea of fit. Whereas it might be easier to understand the lack of fit or the experience of "misfit", e.g. not getting on with people, feeling inappropriate or detached from a group, having the intention or desire to leave the organization (Schneider, 1987; Van Vianen, 2018) it is more challenging to fully understand how "fit" might be achieved. Similarly, despite considerable efforts to define fit and how it manifests (Cable and Edwards, 2004; Kristof, 1996), there is no consensus in the literature about how to conceptualize fit, therefore being a complex and defying field of research (Edwards and Shipp, 2007; Jansen and Kristof-Brown, 2006).

Fit theory
The background of fit theory

The match between individuals and the environment, or P–E fit, has long been a research topic of interest to industrial and organizational psychologists as well as recruiters, job seekers and all other people in the business world (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Yet, the earliest

theorizing about P–E fit is often credited to Parsons (1909), who proposed a model on how to make vocational choices based on the match between personal attributes and environmental characteristics. Since then, thousands of P–E fit scholars have long debated whether one's attitudes and behaviours depend on personal attributes (e.g. personalities, knowledge and past experiences) or are a function of a specific situation (e.g. group norms and organizational structure). The interactional psychology paradigm suggests the interdependence between individuals and situations, such that individuals act in and react to situations, at the same time they create or enact.

Influential fit theories have been developed not only in the domains of individual matters, such as health and stress (Edwards and Cooper, 1990) and vocational choice (Holland, 1985), but also in the social realm, considering work adjustment (Dawis and Lofquist, 1984) and organizational culture (Schneider, 1987).

The notion that having a better fit between people and their environment results in more positive behaviours and responses has a long history and highlights the different types of fit that are studied today. For example, research in the field of vocational psychology had devoted to Holland's seminal theory of vocational choice (person–vocational (P–V) fit), indicating that greater career success and satisfaction with work results from a match between individuals' interests and the tasks and activities associated with classes of occupations (and not jobs or organizations). Several other studies on P–E fit had adopted such lenses (Hirschfeld and James Van Scotter, 2019; Mobley and Slaney, 1996; Nye et al., 2018).

In the organizational psychology domain, research had addressed the notion of fit to job characteristics (person–job (P–J) fit), emphasizing personnel selection and how to best hire individuals whose skills and abilities matched the skills and abilities required for the particular job (Barrick and Parks-Leduc, 2019; Judge and Cable, 1997; Van Vianen, 2018).

Later, theory and research on fit had shifted from a micro-individualized perspective to a more complex and integrative view of individuals in organizations, addressing fit between a wide range of individual attributes and a wide range of job, work groups and organizational characteristics across a wide range of organizational areas (Edwards and Billsberry, 2020).

To bridge the gap between these different lenses, Muchinsky and Monahan (1987) categorized P–E fit in two major types: supplementary fit (i.e. a person who supplements or possesses similar characteristics as to other individuals in the environment) and complementary fit (i.e. a need of the individual is offset by the environment and vice versa). Further, complementary fit is differentiated to specify the direction of the complementarity, such that there might be a needs–supplies fit (N–S fit, whether individuals' needs are fulfilled by the environment) or a demands–abilities fit (D–A fit, whether the demands of the environment are met by individuals' capabilities; Kristof, 1996).

Considering these possibilities, research on P–E fit has incorporated several levels of analysis. Apart of the P–V fit and the P–J fit, scholars have explored the person–group (P–G) fit, which addresses the extent to which an individual's characteristics (e.g. personality, skills, values and goals) are congruent or aligned with the characteristics of other members of his or her work group or work unit; person–organization (P–O) fit, which focusses on the extent to which an individual's personality, goals, values and attitudes fit in with the organization's context such as its climate, values, norms and processes; and the person–person (P–P) fit, focussing on the match between individuals or dyads (such as person–supervisor and P–G member) (e.g. Jansen and Kristof-Brown, 2006; Kristof, 1996).

Take the example of establishing fit with a supervisor. A positive and effective dyadic relation between a leader and a follower might be achieved when the two are alike, or when there is a supplementary fit on personality. On the other hand, to function effectively in performing one's task and achieving goals a follower might require more autonomy and

delegation that might require a more empowering leader. Thus, fit can exist when one entity provides what the other needs (i.e. complementary fit), regardless of their similarity, when they share similar characteristics (i.e. supplementary fit) or both.

However, even considering the several possibilities of interdependence between individual and context, little theoretical explanation or consensus had been achieved as to how person and environment variables, in its multiple dimensions, interact to affect behaviour. Whilst "matching" is one explanation that has gained considerable recognition, exploring these multiple dimensions of fit is somewhat a challenging and a complex task to achieve, as well as the far less unexplored state of incongruence or mismatch.

Nevertheless, as one might say is intuitive to think about aggregating across multiple types of fit (e.g. P–J and P–G together) and some research has begun to explore its possibilities, having a multidimensional fit could be related to more positive responses than when fit is assessed by only a single type of congruence. Moreover, having fit might not be related to being similar but being compatible (or complementary). In addition, certain types of fit (and misfit) may be more important than others or its relative importance might differently affect attitudes, behaviours and several other outcomes. These are the concerns we aim at addressing.

Since we live in a social world where people have some degree of freedom to pursue their goals, relationships and social memberships, they may regularly ask themselves whether their broader social environment offers what they believe they want for their lives. However, since people have bounded rationality, they are inclined to make suboptimal choices based on the ideal of a perfect fit. Additionally, both individuals and their environments change overtime and thus, the idea of fit might also change. As economy and management have been rapidly changing in organizations, individuals are confronted with situations that they may not have desired at first that may cause an increase in misfits at work (Vogel *et al.*, 2016). That is, the P–E fit theory is basically a theory of choice (Van Vianen, 2001) that affects individual identity, career decisions, well-being and social identification.

Fit theories are built on three basic principles. First, fit is a more powerful predictor of several and varied individual outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction) than either of its elements in isolation (the person and the environment). Second, outcomes from fit achieve their optimum level when personal attributes (e.g. needs, abilities and values) and environmental attributes (e.g. supplies, demands and values) are compatible. Moreover, having fit matters regardless of the level of the attributes. Third, discrepancies between personal and environmental attributes – or misfits – may reduce positive outcomes (Van Vianen, 2018).

In terms of the general P–E fit, the fit theory distinguishes *supplementary fit* from *complementary fit* (Kristof, 1996; Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987). Supplementary fit is characterized by P–E similarity (Cable and DeRue, 2002; Day and Bedeian, 1995; Kristof, 1996; Muchinsky and Monahan, 1987) while complementary fit is based on constructive or balanced dissimilarity, meaning that person and environment each provide what the other demands. On the other hand, *misfit*, destructive or unbalanced dissimilarity between person and environment, can occur in both directions: excess (one offers more than what the other demands) or deficiency (one offers less than what the other demands).

Experiencing misfit, however, means that the larger the discrepancies and the imbalance between individuals and their environment, in any direction (receiving less vs giving more and receiving more vs giving less), the worse are the expected outcomes. One of the explanations is that the fit theory assumes that people have an innate need to fit their environments and to seek out environments that match their own characteristics. Moreover, because individuals generally prefer consistency, wish to exert control over their life and to reduce uncertainty, they have a need to belong, and want happiness and life satisfaction (Yu, 2013).

P–E fit operationalization: assessing and measuring fit
Although there has been an ongoing debate with respect to which conceptualizations and procedures are superior to no operationalized P–E fit, there is a variety of different techniques have been adopted. Overall, P–E fit can be operationalized by direct or indirect measures (Kristof, 1996). While direct measures tap into individuals' overall perceptions of fit or misfit between P and E, indirect measures separately capture the perceived P and E using either self-report, other-rating methods or objective information. As such, fit scores have been calculated in diverse ways, such as means congruence, difference scores and also polynomial regression.

The direct measure of fit focusses on individuals' own perceptions of the degree to which they fit into the work environment. It is derived by asking individuals, for example, the extent to which they believe they fit into the work environment, either generally or for some dimension. Thus, it is related to how much individuals believe they have fit, regardless the content of the fit (for example, what were the values used to capture the similarity). In contrast, indirect fit considers separate measurements of the P and E factors, jointly comparing the two, for example, comparing individuals' reports of their own values with a separate evaluation of the organizational values. As such, perceived fit does not matter, but rather, the objective assessment.

Research is only beginning to address the relative importance of these different conceptualizations of fit. Nevertheless, in studying fit it is recommended that both dimensions of P and E are assessed in the same language and with the same classification scheme. How to do that considering the multidimensionality of fit?

Multidimensionality of fit
Apart of the large number of empirical studies researchers have been struggling to define the "elusive criterion of fit" (Jansen and Kristof-Brown, 2006), mainly because of its multidimensionality. These dimensions not only vary regarding its loci (internal or external) but all the multiple domains that may be captured to establish fit (P–J, P–P, P–G, P–O and others). Thus, mapping how they all fit together seems to pose an apparently impossible mission (Jansen and Kristof-Brown, 2006).

As an attempt to solve this problem, researchers have tried to unite the various forms of fit or suggested that the different dimensions of fit play different roles and have different emphases at different points of the employment relationship (Edwards and Billsberry, 2020). The most prominent contribution came from Jansen and Kristof-Brown (2006) who developed a model based on five different dimensions of fit (P–V, P–O, P–G, P–J and P–P) and five stages of employment (pre-recruitment, recruitment/job search, selection/job choice, socialization and long-term tenure) that comprised the multidimensional P–E fit. Their argument is that each dimension has salience depending on the time it is assessed, yet in the end of the cycle (tenure), all five forms are relevant and predict positive outcomes.

In addition to Jansen and Kristof-Brown's (2006) approach, Billsberry and colleagues (Billsberry *et al.*, 2005) used cognitive mapping techniques to explore how the classical dimensions of fit (e.g. P–J, P–V, P–G and P–P) relate to under-constructed perceived fit. By asking people to talk about the things that influence their sense of fit, Billsberry and colleagues found 16 different possibilities of fit (and misfit) dimensions, including work–life balance, extra-work factors and aspects of the physical environment.

Although these previous studies emphasized the importance of multidimensionality of fit, much more is needed to explore how the various dimensions of fit unite. Based on Jansen and Kristof-Brown's (2006) conclusion that "as the research on PE fit accumulates, it becomes apparent that increasing our understanding of single dimensions of fit, in isolation of time

and context, is no longer sufficient." (p.206), we aim at providing a greater insight into the nature of fit using the lens of Luhmann's systems theory.

Key aspects of the social systems theory
According to the theory of social systems (e.g. Luhmann, 2012, 2013, 2018), society is not composed of individuals, but of communications. Luhmann thus breaks with the anthropocentric, humanistic heritage of Western societies that cultivate the habit of taking humans as the measure of all things. By contrast, as if he too were a "Copernicus of sociology" (Homans and Curtis, 1970, 67), Luhmann builds his theory on the premise that communication is the constitutive element of social systems and that society is properly defined as the encompassing system of all communication.

Social differentiation
Against this backdrop of society as the encompassing nexus of all communication, the observation of social subsystems is a matter of social differentiation. As outlined by Roth *et al.* (2017), Luhmann identified initially three (1977) and later four different forms of social differentiation: segmentation, centralization, stratification and functional differentiation. Whereas segmentation refers to the distinction of segments such as families, settlements, tribes and nations, centralization refers to the observation that some segments may be more central than others. A city, for example, is typically a more central settlement than is a village. Stratification then refers to a situation when social systems are ranked into hierarchies. Last not least, functional differentiation refers to the distinction of probably ten function systems: politics, economy, science, art, religion, law, health, sport, education and the mass media system (Roth and Schutz, 2015).

Management and organization research has mainly focussed on the first three forms of social differentiation and therefore, largely neglected a critical set of key variables of modern organization (Roth *et al.*, 2017).

Function systems play a critical role in modern organizations. Each function system has its own social perspective and creates its own social reality. For instance, the economic system looks at all other systems from the economic lens and interprets the whole society likewise. The same events will have different meanings if observed from the perspective of the legal or religious systems. In other words, each system is functionally differentiated according to a respective symbolically generalized communication medium (Boldyrev, 2013). Thus, laws and political regulations may have an economic meaning within the economic system; however, only after being appropriately decoded and translated into the terms of the economic code, each one following its own logic is illustrated in Table 1.

Organizations are, in principle, multifunction and, therefore, can feature preference and/or biases to (sets of) function systems and can relate to a variety of function systems at distinct levels of intensity. A school can shape its multifunctionality preferences to respond to stimulus from its environment and embrace the function systems of economy, sports and religion – in addition to the education system (Roth *et al.*, 2017).

Organizations. Luhmann (2018) understands organizations as communicative systems in general and as systems of decisions able to carry an infinite chain of decisions from decisions, including who is in and who is out. Organizations create their own realities to guide their operations, and in this process chains of command and hierarchies and other structures are formed. In summary, organizations consist of decisions and nothing but decisions (Luhmann, 2018).

Interestingly, organizations are required to flag out their decision-making processes to instruct their members and observers. In making their decision-making processes visible,

Function system	Thematic orientation
Art	Creativity: production of innovative creations, which are experienced as aesthetic or as a novel way of observing and interpreting reality. Produces accounts of alternative realities
Economy	Money: revenues and expenses, profit and loss, and distribution of scarce resources. Price
Education	Impartation of knowledge, qualifications and skills, and norms and values. Decisions on educational contents. Premise for the placement of individuals to particular positions in society. Career
Legal	Laws and regulations: determines and decides what is right and wrong behaviour
Mass media	Informativity: determines what contents are relevant/informative for the "masses". Creates these contents through observation of the world and distributes these via media
Health	Health and illness: determines what is treated as healthy or ill and provides treatment. Diagnosis
Politics	Power: collectively binding decision-making. Ideology. Control
Religion	Faith: creates spirituality and constructions of transcendence, "proselytizes" people to believe in a higher purpose, goal or cause. Belief
Science	Truth: produces and makes use of theories and methods to create verified knowledge. Tests, verifies, questions and adapts hypothesis and theories based on evidence and plausibility
Sports	Competition: oriented to winning and losing and concerned with how to "beat" the other and win the "game". Gathering of achievements. Performance

Note(s): Updated from Sales *et al.,* 2021

Table 1.
Function systems with
thematic orientations

behavioural expectations required by the organization in relation to its members become apparent.

That does not mean that decisions are always transparent or necessarily observable (Nassehi, 2005), but that they must serve themselves with self-reference to proper function.

As systems of decision communications, organizations form segments of society that can also act as structural coupling between function systems. This is possible as organizational decision-making can use the codes of the function systems for definition of decision premises that help decide whether earlier decisions have been made properly or to guide adequate decision-making in the future.

Organizations are typically defined by their function systems' preferences. For example, decision-making processes of a bank are expected to place high value on economic issues, whereas those of a hospital are supposed to give precedence to health, and yet, it remains evident that there are economic decisions in hospitals as much as there are health-related decisions outside of them, or that there is bureaucracy and hence politics in institutions of higher education. In a functional differentiated society, organizations may, therefore, said to be multifunctional (Roth *et al.,* 2017, 2018; Will *et al.,* 2018) as they are obviously able to relate to a variety of function systems simultaneously and at different levels of intensity overtime. Thus, organizations may mirror or strategically challenge broader social macro trends in functional differentiation (Roth *et al.,* 2021).

Decision premises. Organizational multifunctionality may be best observed at the level of decision premises. As mentioned above, organizations consist of decisions, including decisions on what decisions are proper decisions in each organization. Luhmann (2018) distinguished four forms of such decision premises: personnel, communication channels, decision programmes and organizational culture. The term *personnel* refers to membership-related decisions such as the recruitment or placement of persons in positions (and hence the inclusion or exclusion of persons in organizations), whereas *communication channels* decide what positions are included in which flows communication. *Decision programmes* check whether decisions have been made properly regarding previous states or desired outcomes of

the decision-making processes. Last not least, *organizational culture* denotes the undecidable decision premises such as incontestable because foundational decisions or organizational decision-making routines.

In each of these dimensions, functional differentiation has a tremendous impact on organizational decision-making, e.g. in the case of an organization with a strategic focus on economic decisions, whereas at the level of organizational culture the same organization is defined by a prevalence of (micro-) political decision-making or in the case of staff members who experience strong tensions between financial targets or budget constraints and the original health mission of a hospital. One can imagine, for its members, this process of unlearning, and resignifying communication can be particularly costly and jeopardize membership.

Membership. Organizations are formed based on membership (e.g. Luhmann, 2018). Unlike in medieval times, the modern corporation membership is acquired and lost by decision and does not affect the whole person, but only parts of his/her behaviour. Membership is an important element to satisfy the condition of the modern organization as a system because it determines its closure, its membrane. Organizations exclude everyone except highly selectively chosen members. Upon entering an organization, via traditional recruiting processes or forced in by business combinations, one must conform with the requirements of that organization to avoid the risk of losing membership. As pointed out by Mingers (2003), individuals choose to join (to some degree) and sacrifice their individuality and autonomy to gain rewards. It is through membership that behavioural expectations are maintained and organizations in general are not concerned about the individual motives of their members because membership implies employees' consent to follow the rules of their organization. It is interesting to highlight that individuals are never members of organizations based on their individualities. They became members based on traits they have developed and that will be used to fulfil the functions of the organization. Founded on decisions, organizations agree on the start and termination of the membership and by making decisions they promote and transfer individuals within the organization.

Ahrne and Brunsson (2011) argue that 'membership brings a certain identity with it, an identity that differs from that of non-members.' Members are expected to fulfil a set of predetermined behavioural constraints, including the way they relate to other individuals, the way they dress, talk and take care of their appearance and physical and mental states. Consequently, members expect to behave (and be treated) differently than the non-members. Accordingly, exclusion is a consequence of repudiation of the social system in relation to the individual persons.

In this sense, the social system's concepts of organization, decision and functional differentiation offer an innovative, valid and challenging approach to the established research agendas on management and organization fields. In this article, we explore the potential application of functional differentiation in the fit theory.

Functional differentiation fit

As previously discussed, if functional differentiation is embedded in the daily affairs of modern society, then considering that organizations are exposed to society they are directly impacted by functional differentiation. In that sense, there are several potential applications of the social theory, particularly functional differentiation, in management practice.

Moreover, a functional diversity approach which accounts for the full scope of functional differentiation might be extremely valuable to explain and predict fit in organizations. To illustrate our line of though, we took particular interest in the P–O fit approach. First, P–O fit experiences are amongst the strongest predictors of people's emotional and affective reactions, such as their multiple organizational bonds and varied attitudes, as well as

career-related decisions, such as withdrawal cognition (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005; Van Vianen, 2000). Second, its components (the person and the organization) are the most difficult to materialize, since they are directly related to intangibles (i.e. beliefs, values and culture). In fact, despite previous research on P–O fit, very little is known about how an organization's culture is represented in the minds of individuals when they assess their perceptions of fit and the processes underlying the formation of these perceptions that are fundamental to their sense of belonging.

In this matter, there is a need to reflect this cognitive representation, the actual perception of fit and its relation to the inclusion and exclusion process. The attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) framework proposed by Schneider (1987) can be a good starting point for this reflection. The ASA framework central proposition is that the structures, processes and, importantly, the culture of an organization are defined by the homogeneity of its people. That is because individual employees were attracted to, selected by and have stayed with an organization that matches their own characteristics; they probably share the same needs, personalities and values. Thus, such homogeneity in membership defines the organization and, since organizations are social environments, ASA's dictum is that "people make the place". Then, when people seek fit with an organization; people are essentially seeking fit with their preferred function systems.

Considering the view of the organization as a general system, P–O fit is formed and modified through time and on the different ASA stages. That is, people's P–O fit perceptions exist and can change before, during and after being in the organization. Again, the social systems' theory assumes that multifunctional systems, such as organizations, change their systems' preferences overtime when confronted with the need to adapt to a change in context (Roth, 2021; Sales *et al.*, 2021).

Members of universities, for example, typically start their career due to a passion for either research or teaching or both. In the course of their career, however, this focus on science and education often shifts to a focus on economy (funding applications, budget management and financial reporting), (micro-) politics and probably also legal issues. This shift is often experienced as painful by the members concerned. In other contexts, the economic, political and further tasks are simply added to the core vocations of science and education up to a point where academics "find meeting the multiple personal and professional demands 'close to not-doable'" (Barcan, 2018, p. 113).

Yet beyond this view of the organization as a general system, P–O fit is formed and modified through time and on the different ASA stages. That is, P–O fit perceptions can change before, during and after being a member of an organization. Fit perception and actual objective fit are dynamic processes, defined in the course of membership and its maintenance through time.

Moreover, it is important to highlight that fit not only depends on the particular *content* of the person (P) or the organization (O) components – but are also affected by the *focal reference* for the comparison between the components and the *source* from which the O component is derived. That is, there is variance in the perception references for assessing fit. First, the *content* of fit assessments has been exclusively determined by researchers, aiming at capturing the values dimensions that are relevant for P and O and that vary between both. For example, it may derive from individual (P) instruments, such as Schwartz's (1994) values' model, and then be transposed to organizations (O); or it may derive from organizational (O) instruments, such as the organizational culture profile ((OCP); O'Reilly *et al.*, 1991) and then be transposed to individuals (P). However, the psychological meanings of such instruments might vary and, consequently, does not necessarily go together with equivalence. In that case, P and O cannot be compared and combined into a fit index.

Besides the content, the *sources* that individuals use for assessing organizational characteristics and PO fit may be blurred. Since organizational culture is a rather abstract

and complex phenomenon to grasp, individuals may focus on concrete persons, rather than abstract cultures. Yet, it is likely that the most successful members come to mind because they would best represent the organization's success.

Finally, there is the *focal reference*, or the perspective from which fit is assessed. People may focus on their own decision-making, or the salient attributes and values of the organization. That is, the importance can be on the person or the environment. In addition, both content and source of people's P–O fit assessments may differ depending on the *stage* of the P–O relationship in which they are assessed.

All of the above is mainly related to fit as a personal experience (Cable and DeRue, 2002). However, fit can be assessed and calculated, being a powerful management tool. Calculated fit measures aim to establish the discrepancy between personal and environmental attributes: the lower the discrepancy, the higher the fit. A fit index can be calculated by comparing individuals' personal attributes with a corresponding set of environmental attributes derived from individuals themselves (subjective fit) or from other sources (objective fit).

Radically singular, the systems theory creates a new avenue for understanding P–O fit just by avoiding making static ascriptions through traditional concepts like social knowledge, values, norms or roles. From this privileged theoretical point of view, organizations consist of decisions and nothing but decisions, comprising not of concrete persons with *body and soul* but of concrete actions (Luhmann, 2020).

Our proposed approach to *fit* draws on the social systems theory and Luhmann's (2012, 2018) concept of functional differentiation. From this perspective, we propose an innovative approach to fit theory based on the importance that different organizations (and its members) place on the key function systems of society (politics, economy, science, art, religion, etc.).

This approach allows for the analysis of a so-far underestimated, if not largely ignored, dimension of organizational culture, its impact on organizational decision-making in general and the issues that may arise if it is ignored by management.

Furthermore, from a social system's perspective, *functional differentiation fit* would be the willingness or capacity of the individual (member) to cope with (and accept) the formal expectations of the member role and membership requirements that are the result of decision premises and consequently, the functional systems' orientation of a particular organization.

Advancing the research agenda of the fit theory, going beyond the traditional determinants for fit, we believe these much more profound macro-societal forces (function systems) are at work influencing the membership bond and how individuals behave in their respective organization contexts, each one following a distinct logic.

If membership is activated by the fulfilment of certain behavioural expectations, keeping the membership status requires a certain degree of adaptability and fit. An interesting dynamic is established. Individuals are willing to take part in systems and organizations. On the other hand, organizations can only include a limited number of members – exclusion is therefore, again, the default position for individuals (Nassehi, 2005).

Inclusion and exclusion: turnover
According to Luhmann, inclusion and exclusion are determined based on whether or not individuals have a role in one of the subsystems (e.g. the organization). Consequently, in a functionally differentiated society there are many systems and subsystems that are not conceived around groups of people (like clans or classes in archaic and feudal societies), but around societal functions: inclusion means the individual is considered relevant for the system and bearers of social roles while exclusion means the individual is neglected or irrelevant (Schirmer and Michailakis, 2018). The individual therefore is definable by exclusion. His/her starting position in society is one of exclusion and in time (limitation of) inclusion becomes a perpetual challenge (Braeckman, 2006).

Linking the Luhmannian concepts of communication, membership and organization, in a functional differentiated society, individuals can only participate in social systems (including the organizations) when they are able to engage in their respective communication.

If, in functional differentiated societies, inclusion within one functional system does not determine or induce the inclusion in another, the opposite might occur with exclusion. In generic terms, the exclusion from one functional system, as illustrated by Braeckman (2006), often has a domino effect: someone who has not been educated will run the risk of unemployment, insufficient income, bad housing, unstable relationships, incomplete documentation and so on. It is interesting to note that organizations are instruments to execute the tasks of inclusion and exclusion of individuals from functional systems. As decision-making machines, they are the gatekeepers of functional systems, admitting individuals and determining their exclusion via membership. Organizations can communicate in their own name only because they recruit members by decision, and, if membership is accepted, they place these members under obligation to accept the decisions of the organization (Luhmann, 2018).

Finally, this process of inclusion and exclusion, known as *turnover* in human resources management fields, if badly managed, could be a source of value leakage (Gates and Very, 2003; Meyer, 2008) both by the waste of time and resources invested in attracting, training and retaining initiatives and negative impact on the group morale.

For illustrative purposes only, Figure 1 shows the functional differentiation fit assessment of a potential candidate (P) for a management position in a state-controlled listed extractivist conglomerate (O). In this case, the systems of preference of the individual and the organization are substantially dissonant. The organization is driven by the economic system (profit); it seems to be substantially legalistic and hierarchical, potentially demanding a great deal of time to be devoted in micro-politics and lacking transparency (low score on the mass media system). Because it operates in a commoditized market with considerable barriers for entry, the organization does not put noticeable emphasis on competition (low score on sports system). The individual, on the other hand, seems to be less concerned about the economics of the role and he/she may accept a lower salary if learning, training and development
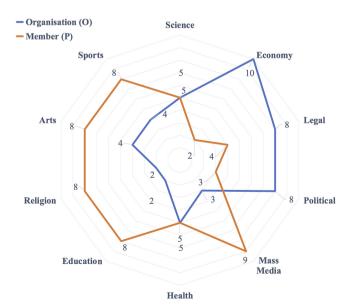

Figure 1.
Illustrative functional differentiation fit assessment

opportunities are offered (high score on education). This person is driven by competition (high score on the sports system) and is innovative (high score on the arts system) that may be an important feature for the organization (although this could also represent a potential misfit) and is guided by a higher sense of purpose, belief and cause that may be a start-up venture organization could better offer in terms of fit.

Concluding, as exposed in this paper, the fit theory has tried different directions regarding the number of fit dimensions and how to assess congruence between the person traits and the environment characteristics. From the person perspective, some traits may include abilities, goals, needs, personality, skills and values. From the organization perspective, the characteristics may include culture, demands, goals, supplies and values. With that in mind, we ask the following: Are not these attributes manifested in day-to-day communication and decision-making?

Concluding, we believe our proposed functional differentiation fit approach goes beyond a sound provocation and represents an overarching framework that incorporates a common communication language (functional systems) that may provide stronger predictions regarding the outcomes of fit, not only related to relatedness and social inclusion, but also related to performing the expected role behaviours in the membership.

Neither fit nor misfit

As previously discussed, the fit literature considers two types of fit: (1) supplementary fit, which arises when an employee possesses characteristics (e.g. values and goals) that are congruent with a particular environment, including the person's organization (P–O), his/her supervisor (P–S), and his/her work group (P–G) and (2) complementary fit being characterized when an individual (through the characteristics which he/she possesses) are dissimilar but can fill a gap experienced by the organization (P–O) or the job task (P–J), or when the organization or another environmental role player (through the characteristics it possesses) can fill a void experienced by the employee, or bot. Although dissimilar, the incongruency presents itself in a constructive manner. Misfit on the other hand, is characterized by a destructive or unbalanced dissimilarity between the person and environment, occurring in both directions: excess (one offers more than what the other demands) or deficiency (one offers less than what the other demands).

Again, the system's theory helps us to challenge and explore new possibilities beyond the known types of fit and misfit using its binary logic so presented in Luhmann's work, combined with notion distinctions. If true distinctions are both mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive, we believe fit and misfit may be a false one, opening the avenue to test whether the existing literature of fit have substantially covered all possibilities that a combination of fit and misfit could tell us.

For this exercise, we will use cross tables and the tetralemma, an ancient matrix structure used in traditional Indian logic (Roth *et al.*, 2017; 2019).

First, we start with the classic cross tabulation (Table 2) of this versus that and true (1) versus false (0):

In the next exercise, we introduce the tetralemma treating the above distinction false (that is, as either not mutually exclusive or not jointly exhaustive, or both) and translating this false distinction into two true ones (Table 3).

If we replace this and that by fit and misfit (Table 4), we end up with four combinations of fit: both fit and misfit, fit, misfit and neither fit nor misfit.

Intuitively interpreting the results in the light of the literature of fit (Table 5), we can clearly identify the classic fit (supplementary fit) and misfit, as well as the complimentary fit, where congruence and incongruence create a constructive environment by filling dissimilar gaps in the organization.

Applying the existing categories of fit we will end up identifying at least two general types of fit (supplementary and complementary) and misfit. Surprisingly, the exercise also uncovers a new area of neither fit nor misfit. Again, we enquire fit theory researchers: What is the materiality of the persons in organizations today that do not feel like fitting at the same that do not feel misfiting? We imagine this finding to be of extremely relevant for fit research. It is possible that most people employed today, particularly in the informal (or gig economy), are just neutral regarding the organizations they are parked in.

Outlook

Fit theories have so far neglected the fact that individuals are exposed to society and therefore subject to macro-level influence of social systems. Functional differentiation offers researchers and practitioners a new avenue to rethink the fit theory based on societal forces, guided by a systems' perspective. In that sense, the authors highlight three main propositions:

(1) People are often being hired for their competences in the fields other than politics, economy and legal. That is to say that, when you are young, you are typically hired as a researcher (science), teacher (education), designer (arts), etc. But if you want to have a career (or simply need the pay raise as your family grows bigger), you are often forced into job profiles/roles where your focus is on politics, economy and legal

	This	That
This	1	0
That	0	1

Source(s): Roth, 2019, p. 91

Table 2.
The trade-off matrix as the result of the re-entry of a false distinction

	This	Not this
That	1 1 (both this and that)	1 0 (or that)
Not that	0 1 (either this)	0 0 (neither this nor that)

Source(s): Roth, 2019, p. 91

Table 3.
The tetralemma resulting from coding two false distinctions as true distinctions

	Fit	Non-fit
Misfit	Both fit and misfit	Misfit
Non-misfit	Fit	Neither fit nor misfit

Source(s): Own table

Table 4.
The tetralemma of mis-/fit

	Fit	Non-fit
Misfit	Complementary fit	Misfit
Non-misfit	Supplementary fit	Zone of indifference (?)

Source(s): Own table

Table 5.
Mis-/fit and indifference

(office micro-politics, budget keeping and bureaucratic rule making) rather than your initial competences or passions. Persons thus forced into these fields might then engage in job crafting or pursue of strategies of responding to what they might, more or less consciously, experience as imposed work (see, e.g. Chen and Reay, 2021).

(2) Secondly, some issues with unsuccessful or unsatisfactory management careers have to do with the fact that standard incentive systems reward mainly politics, economy and legal job profiles and thus necessary pull people into these profiles even if they do not have the talent or motivation.

(3) Thirdly, there is room for challenging established "management" career paths and also think about dedicated "specialist careers" for talented experts in or amateurs of function systems other than politics, economy and legal.

(4) The fit theory has so far neglected or overlooked the persons that neither fit nor misfit the environment. These individuals are parked in a *zone of indifference* (Barnard, 1938; Grothe-Hammer, 2020; Kleve *et al.*, 2020) within organizations that tolerate their membership potentially because at the end of the day they are neither constructive nor destructive.

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