

Ideal and actual culture: How different is too different?

**Cheryl A. Boglarsky, Human Synergistics International
Catherine T. Kwantes, University of Windsor**

Presented at the 65th Annual Conference of the Canadian Psychological Association

The interest in person-organization (P-O) fit research and thinking has gained momentum in the last few years, due in part to organizations increasingly employing teams whose members rotate from activity to activity rather than staying in one job, globalization and downsizing. As a result they are compelled to require more of employees, including retraining and the acquisition of new skills and flexibility. If the reliance on selecting individuals based on general organizational compatibility is increasing, and organizational changes will inevitably occur, it appears that the focus of compatibility/congruence is misplaced. Because of the fluid nature of the organization, and the need for the individual to constantly adapt, compatibility should be further conceptualized to include the "what is expected" of members of an organization – or the organizational culture. The Organizational Culture Inventory® (OCI) was used to assess employees' perceptions of their current work culture and also of the organizational culture they believed would be the ideal organizational culture in which to work.

Difference scores were analyzed to explore the impact of exceeding or failing to meet the ideal cultural norms using data from 697 employees in 10 organizations. Organizational commitment was the main outcome variable. Initial results provide only partial support for the notion that actual-ideal culture incongruence leads to negative outcomes, and suggest that the direction of incongruence and the cultural style play a large role in the determination of P-O fit.

The interest in person-organization (P-O) fit research and thinking has gained momentum in the last few years. The basic notion is that a fit between personal attributes and characteristics of the target organization contributes to important individual and organizational outcomes.

This interest is due in part to the rise in organizations increasingly employing teams whose members rotate from activity to activity rather than staying in one job; globalization and downsizing of many organizations continue, and as a result they are compelled to require more of employees, including retraining and the acquisition of new skills and flexibility. Thus there is greater reliance on selecting people according to their general fit to the organization rather than for a particular job (see Borman, Hanson & Hedge, 1997 for a review).

Generally, P-O fit has been described as the compatibility between individual attributes and characteristics of the organization, which contributes to important individual and organizational outcomes, especially organizational commitment. However Kristof (1996) points out there have been several

ways in which P-O "compatibility" has been conceptualized:

- supplementary fit – where the individual possesses characteristics that are similar to other organizational members;
- complementary fit – where the individual adds something unique to the organization and "makes it whole;"
- needs-supplies – where the organization satisfies an individuals' needs, wants and desires;
- demands-abilities – where the individual satisfies an organizations' needs, wants and demands.

These conceptualizations treat organizations as static entities and do not take into account the dynamic, organic nature of organizations. Because an organization must be responsive to its environment, it must be flexible and open to a continuous cycle of input, internal transformation, output, and feedback (Morgan, 1996). Therefore, organizational needs and demands are constantly changing in response to environmental conditions and changes. As a result, organizational strategy and structures may change

and cause changes in member characteristics and organizational needs, all of which affect the P-O fit.

If the reliance on selecting individuals based on general organizational compatibility is increasing, and organizational changes will inevitably occur, it appears that the focus of compatibility is misplaced. Because of the fluid nature of the organization, and the need for the individual to constantly adapt, compatibility should be further conceptualized to include the "what is expected" of members of an organization - or, more technically, the behavioral norms and expectations associated with the more abstract aspects of culture such as shared values and beliefs. These behavioral norms, or organizational culture, are relatively unchanging in the face of environmental demands (Cooke & Szumal, 2000).

The present study

The present study examines the contention that that P-O fit, and its resulting effect on organizational commitment, should include the fit between expected and preferred behavioral norms.

Presently, ideal organizational culture (as defined by the behaviors, if reinforced, would increase individual effectiveness) was paired with the actual organizational culture (as defined by the behaviors that are currently reinforced). The gap or *incongruence* between the extent to which a specific behavioral norm was desired (i.e., ideal culture) and the extent to which the specific behavioral norm was experienced (i.e., actual culture) served as the independent variable.

Chan (1996) suggested that, "Over time, individuals in cognitive misfit are likely to be less motivated, less committed, and experience more work-related stress and job dissatisfaction than those in *fit*" (p. 199). These negative attitudinal states can lead directly to low satisfaction and intentions to leave – in other words, low organizational commitment.

Therefore two organizational outcomes, the extent to which respondents indicated high levels of job satisfaction and intention to stay, served as the dependent variable in the present study.

Research questions

The study included three research questions:

1. Is there a relationship between a person-organizational culture misfit (i.e., incongruence) and negative outcomes?
2. Is there a difference in the relationship (person-organizational culture misfit and outcomes) regarding the direction of incongruence? That is, is there a differential effect of exceeding or failing to meet the ideal cultural norms?
3. What role does cultural style play in this relationship?

Method

Participants

An archival database was accessed for this study. Data from employees at ten organizations (N=697) in the United States were used to examine the hypotheses.

Instrument

Both the actual culture and the ideal culture were measured using the *Organizational Culture Inventory*® (OCI; Cooke & Lafferty, 1987; Cooke & Szumal, 2000). The OCI is a survey that assesses normative beliefs and shared behavioral expectations, which may reflect the more abstract aspects of culture such as shared assumptions and values. The OCI contains 96 items designed to produce 12 scales of 8 items each. Each item describes a behavior or personal style that is currently expected and/or encouraged in their organization. On a scale of 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*To a very great extent*), respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each behavior is expected in their organization. The 12 scales and the culture patterns they reflect are classified into three major clusters, Constructive, Passive/Defensive and Aggressive/Defensive, with four styles each (Table 1). Illustrative items from the scales, along with the item stem and response options are presented in Table 2. The style scores are derived by summing the raw scores for each style and the cluster scores are the mean of the four styles.

Two outcome measures (Kwantes, 2000; O'Connor-Cahill, 2002) were used:

- Job satisfaction (i.e., the extent to which members feel positively about their work situation), and
- Intention to stay (i.e., the extent to which members plan to remain with their current organization).

Both outcomes were measured on 5-point scales that range from 1 (*disagree or not at all*) to 5 (*agree or to a very great extent*).

Results and Discussion

Actual-ideal culture incongruence was determined by subtracting the ideal culture score from the actual culture score (as measured by the OCI). This produced a difference score (*d*) and the result was used to indicate the amount of congruence (or fit) between the actual and ideal cultures. That is, scores near zero ($d=0$), indicate that the actual and ideal cultures are similar. Negative *d* scores indicate preference for a greater extent of a particular cultural style; and positive *d* scores indicate a preference for a lesser extent of that cultural style.

Research question 1: To determine if actual-ideal culture incongruence leads to negative outcomes, a correlational analysis was run between an overall *d* (mean of all 12 gap scores) and the organizational outcomes.

The Pearson's *r* correlation coefficients of -.22, and -.15 (both significant at $p<.000$) indicate that as actual-ideal culture incongruence increased, outcomes became more negative (table 3 and 4).

Research question 2: To determine if the direction of incongruence affects outcomes, a t-test was performed between respondents who had overall *d* scores that were positive (indicating that respondents wish to have a lesser extent of the cultural style) and negative (indicating that the respondents wish to have a greater extent of the cultural style).

As Table 5 shows, the respondents with negative overall *d* scores indicated significantly higher outcome scores than those who had positive overall *d*

scores. This indicates that incongruence due to experiencing *more cultural style* than preferred leads to more positive outcome scores than incongruence due to experiencing *less cultural style* than preferred.

Research question 3: To determine the role of individual cultural style, the direction and strength of the incongruence was determined for each cultural cluster (Constructive, Passive/Defensive, and Aggressive/Defensive) and for each associated style (table 1).

The direction was determined as in Research question 2. That is, overall *d* scores that are positive (indicating that respondents wish to have a lesser extent of the cultural style) and negative (indicating that the respondents wish to have a greater extent of the cultural style).

Incongruence strength was determined by the standard deviation (SD) of the overall *d* scores. The overall *d* scores' SDs were divided into quarters – where the lowest and highest quarters constituted higher dispersions, indicating *higher incongruence, or strength*; and the second and third quarters had smaller dispersions, thus *indicating lower incongruence, or strength*. Table 6 presents the organizational outcome means and SDs by cultural strength and cultural style.

Oneway ANOVAs were run to determine if positive and negative outcome levels varied depending on direction and strength of the incongruity.

Contrary to expectations, outcomes do not always become more negative as incongruity increases. Figures 1 through 6 show the patterns between the cultural clusters and incongruence. For the Constructive cultural cluster, the positive outcomes increased as the incongruity became positive (actual exceeded ideal) and decreased as incongruity became negative (ideal exceeded actual). Conversely, for the Defensive clusters (Passive and Aggressive) the relationship was opposite – the organizational outcomes decreased as incongruity became positive (actual exceeded ideal) and increased as incongruity became negative (ideal exceeded actual). Similar results were found for the individual cultural styles.

These results provide only partial support for the notion that actual-ideal culture incongruence leads to

negative outcomes such as low worker satisfaction and intention to leave, and suggests that the direction of incongruence and the cultural style play a large role in the determination of P-O fit.

References

- Borman, W. C., Hanson M. A. & Hedge, J. W. (1997). Personnel Selection. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48, 299-337.
- Chan, D. (1996). Cognitive misfit of problem-solving style at work: A facet of person-organization fit. *Organizational and Human Decision Processes*, 68, 194-207.
- Cooke, R. A., & Lafferty, J.C. (1987). *The Organizational Culture Inventory*. Plymouth, MI, US: Human Synergistics International.
- Cooke, R. A. & Szumal, J. L. (2000). Using the Organizational Culture Inventory to Understand the Operating Cultures of Organizations. In N. M. Ashkanasy, C. Wilderom, M. Peterson, & B. Schneider (Eds.), *The Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate* (pp. 147-162). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications.
- Kristof, A. L. (1996). Person-organization fit: An integrative review of its conceptualizations, measurement and implications. *Personnel Psychology*, 49, 1-49.
- Kwantes, C. T. (2000). Individualism and collectivism as antecedents of organizational commitment: A comparative study of the United States and India. (Doctoral Dissertation, Wayne State University, 2000). *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences & Engineering*. 61(1-B), Jul 2000, 571.
- Morgan, G. *Images of Organizations*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- O'Connor-Cahill, M. E. (2002). A study of how the congruence between person and culture relates to employee perceptions of organizational fit, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to leave. (Doctoral Dissertation, Alliant International University, 2002). *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B: The Sciences & Engineering*, 62(10-B) 4769.

For further information please contact the authors:

Cheryl A. Boglarsky, Human Synergistics International, cab@humansynergistics.com

Catherine T. Kwantes, University of Windsor, ckwantes@uwindsor.ca

Table 1.

*Descriptions of the 12 Styles measured by the Organizational Culture Inventory. **

Cluster and Style	Description
Constructive Norms – Styles promoting satisfaction behaviors	
Achievement	Characterizes organizations that do things well and values members who set and accomplish their own goals
Self-Actualizing	Characterizes organizations that value creativity, quality over quantity, and both task accomplishment and individual growth.
Humanistic Encouraging	Characterizes organizations that are managed in a participative and people-centered way.
Affiliative	Characterizes organizations that place high priority on constructive interpersonal relationships.
Passive/Defensive Norms – Styles promoting people-security behaviors	
Approval	Characterizes organizations in which conflicts are avoided and interpersonal relationships are pleasant – at least superficially.
Conventional	Characterizes organizations that are conservative, traditional, and bureaucratically controlled.
Dependent	Characterizes organizations that are hierarchically controlled and non-participative.
Avoidance	Characterizes organizations that fail to reward success but nevertheless punish mistakes.
Aggressive/Defensive Norms – Styles promoting task-security behaviors	
Oppositional	Characterizes organizations in which confrontation prevails and negativity is rewarded.
Power	Characterizes non-participative organizations structured on the basis of the authority inherent in members' positions.
Competitive	Characterizes organizations in which winning is valued and members are rewarded for “out-performing” one another.
Perfectionistic	Characterizes organizations in which perfection, persistence, and intolerance for mistakes are valued.

*From *Organizational Culture Inventory* by R.A. Cooke and J.C. Lafferty, 1983, 1986, 1987, 1989, Plymouth, MI: Human Synergistics. Copyright 1989 by Human Synergistics, Int. Adapted by permission.

Table 2.
*Illustrative OCI Items. **

<i>For Actual Culture:</i> Please think about what it takes for you and people like yourself (e.g., your co-workers, people in similar positions) to “fit in” and meet expectations in your organization. Using the response option to the right, indicate <i>the extent to which people are expected to:</i>	RESPONSE OPTIONS: 1. Not at all 2. To a slight extent 3. To a moderate extent 4. To a great extent 5. To a very great extent		
<i>For Ideal Culture:</i> Please think about the behaviors that <i>ideally</i> should be expected and encouraged in your organization to maximize its effectiveness. Using the response option to the right, indicate the <i>extent to which members should be expected to:</i>			
<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> _____ help others grow and develop <i>(1) Humanistic-Encouraging</i> _____ deal with others in a friendly way <i>(2) Affiliative</i> _____ “go along” with others <i>(3) Approval</i> _____ always follow policies and practices <i>(4) Conventional</i> _____ please those in positions of authority <i>(5) Dependent</i> _____ wait for others to act first <i>(6) Avoidance</i> </td> <td style="width: 50%; vertical-align: top;"> _____ point out flaws <i>(7) Oppositional</i> _____ build up one’s power base <i>(8) Power</i> _____ turn the job into a contest <i>(9) Competitive</i> _____ do things perfectly <i>(10) Perfectionistic</i> _____ pursue a standard of excellence <i>(11) Achievement</i> _____ Think in unique and independent ways <i>(12) Self-Actualization</i> </td> </tr> </table>		_____ help others grow and develop <i>(1) Humanistic-Encouraging</i> _____ deal with others in a friendly way <i>(2) Affiliative</i> _____ “go along” with others <i>(3) Approval</i> _____ always follow policies and practices <i>(4) Conventional</i> _____ please those in positions of authority <i>(5) Dependent</i> _____ wait for others to act first <i>(6) Avoidance</i>	_____ point out flaws <i>(7) Oppositional</i> _____ build up one’s power base <i>(8) Power</i> _____ turn the job into a contest <i>(9) Competitive</i> _____ do things perfectly <i>(10) Perfectionistic</i> _____ pursue a standard of excellence <i>(11) Achievement</i> _____ Think in unique and independent ways <i>(12) Self-Actualization</i>
_____ help others grow and develop <i>(1) Humanistic-Encouraging</i> _____ deal with others in a friendly way <i>(2) Affiliative</i> _____ “go along” with others <i>(3) Approval</i> _____ always follow policies and practices <i>(4) Conventional</i> _____ please those in positions of authority <i>(5) Dependent</i> _____ wait for others to act first <i>(6) Avoidance</i>	_____ point out flaws <i>(7) Oppositional</i> _____ build up one’s power base <i>(8) Power</i> _____ turn the job into a contest <i>(9) Competitive</i> _____ do things perfectly <i>(10) Perfectionistic</i> _____ pursue a standard of excellence <i>(11) Achievement</i> _____ Think in unique and independent ways <i>(12) Self-Actualization</i>		

*The illustrative items are presented in an order that is different from the order in which they are presented in the OCI. Scale names and numbers are indicated in italics.

From R.A. Cooke and J.L. Szumal, "Using the *Organizational Culture Inventory* to Understand the Operating Cultures of Organizations" *Handbook of Organizational Culture and Climate*. In N. M. Ashkanasy, C. Wilderom, M. Peterson, & B. Schneider (Eds.), (2002). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. Copyright © 1987, 1987 Human Synergistics, Inc.

Table 3.

Correlational analysis between mean d and satisfaction.

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	(<i>sd</i>)	Pearson's <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
d	697	-0.11	(2.92)	-.22	.000
Satisfaction	695	3.48	(1.16)		

Table 4.

Correlational analysis between mean d and intention to stay

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	(<i>sd</i>)	Pearson's <i>r</i>	<i>p</i>
d	697	-0.11	(2.92)	-.15	.000
Intention to stay	697	3.37	(1.37)		

Table 5.

Student's t-test between positive overall d scores and negative overall d scores for satisfaction and intention to stay.

Variable	<i>n</i>	Mean	(<i>sd</i>)	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Satisfaction						
Positive overall d	315	3.24	(1.06)	5.173	630.7	.000
Negative overall d	370	3.69	(1.21)			
Intention to stay						
Positive overall d	315	3.20	(1.43)	3.099	634.2	.002
Negative overall d	368	3.53	(1.27)			

Note: For the satisfaction measure, Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ($F=8.317$, $p<.01$), therefore the scores were adjusted from $t=5.227$, $df=683$ ($p<.001$) to the values presented in the table. Likewise, for the intention to stay measure, Levene's test for equality of variances was significant ($F=9.173$, $p=.003$), therefore the scores were adjusted from $t=3.127$, $df=681$ ($p<.01$) to the values presented in the table

Table 6.

Organizational Outcome Scores (SD) by Cultural Style Cluster and Gap distance from the Mean.

Cultural Style	Gap Distance from the Mean (Incongruence).			
	2 SD Below	1 SD Below	1 SD Above	2 SD Above
Satisfaction (n=696)				
Constructive	2.38 (1.40)	3.29 (1.28)a	3.73 (1.25)b	3.63 (1.22)ab
Passive/Defensive	3.95a (1.14)	3.60a (1.27)	3.26 (1.34)	2.45 (1.41)
Aggressive/Defensive	3.64 (1.37)	3.64 (1.22)	3.28 (1.33)	2.50 (1.49)
Intention to stay (n=694)				
Constructive	2.20 (1.10)	3.44 (.95)	3.88 (.96)a	3.85 (1.01)a
Passive/Defensive	3.96a (1.02)	3.88a (.97)	3.23 (1.01)	2.35 (1.17)
Aggressive/Defensive	3.76a (1.10)	3.83a (.99)	3.58 (1.07)	2.41 (1.19)

Note: Means in the same row that **do not share** subscripts differ at .05 in the Scheffe comparison. Organizational Commitment was assessed on 5-point Likert scales (1=*not at all*, 5=*to a very great extent*). The *gap distance from the mean (incongruence)* was derived by subtracting the Ideal cultural style score from the Actual cultural style score (i.e., Actual-Ideal). Negative gap scores indicate the respondents' preference for a greater extent of the cultural style; and positive gap scores indicate a preference for a lesser extent of the cultural style.

Figure 1. *Constructive Cultural Style Gap and Satisfaction.*

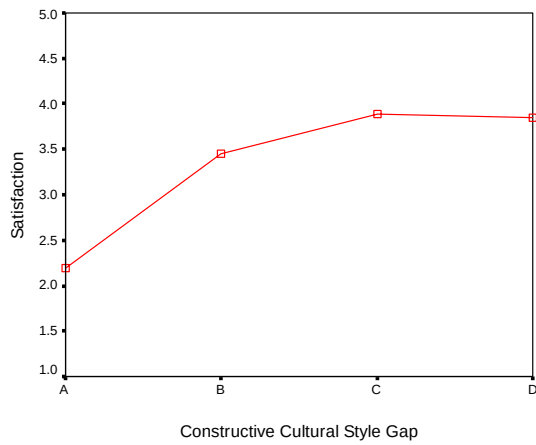


Figure 2. *Aggressive/Defensive Cultural Style Gap and Satisfaction.*

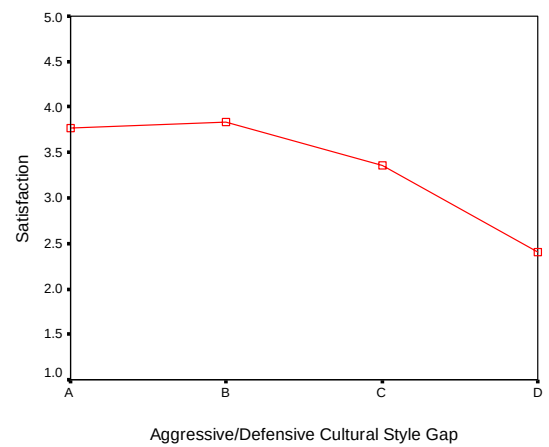
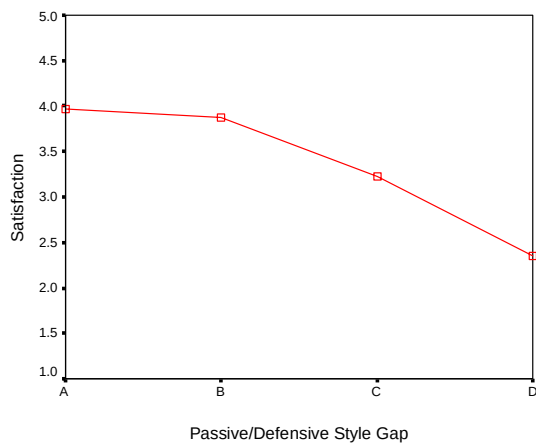


Figure 3. *Passive/Defensive Cultural Style Gap and Satisfaction.*



Legend

- A = Cultural gap score is two (-2) standard deviations below the gap mean.
- B = Cultural gap score is one (-1) standard deviations below the gap mean.
- C = Cultural gap score is one (+1) standard deviations above the gap mean.
- D = Cultural gap score is two (+2) standard deviations above the gap mean.

Figure 4. *Constructive Cultural Style Gap and Intention to Stay.*

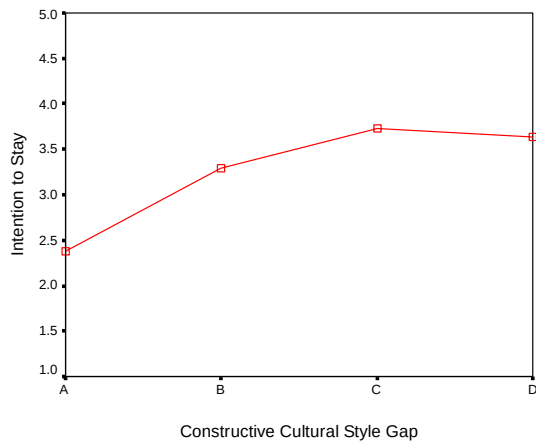


Figure 6. *Aggressive/Defensive Cultural Style Gap and Intention to Stay.*

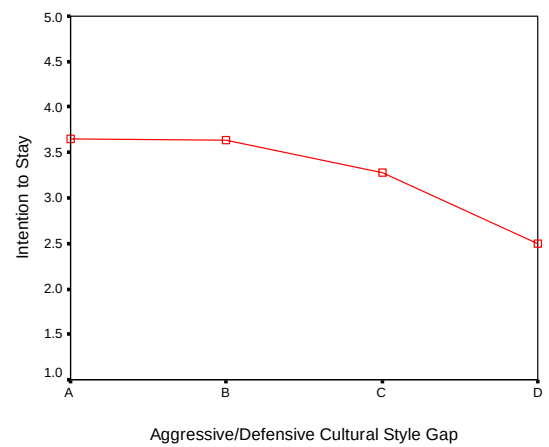
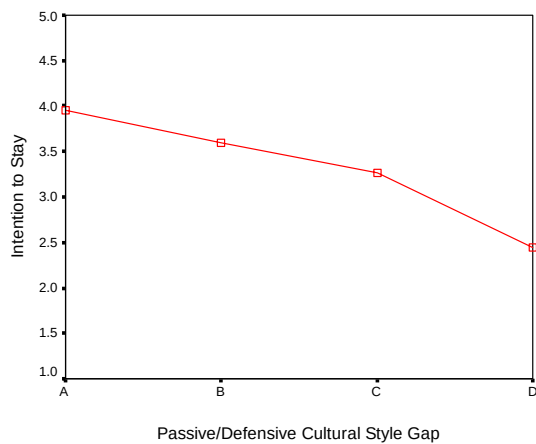


Figure 5. *Passive/Defensive Cultural Style Gap and Intention to Stay.*



Legend

- A = Cultural gap score is two (-2) standard deviations below the gap mean.
- B = Cultural gap score is one (-1) standard deviations below the gap mean.
- C = Cultural gap score is one (+1) standard deviations above the gap mean.
- D = Cultural gap score is two (+2) standard deviations above the gap mean.