

Homogeneity of Personalities Generating Organizational Culture: Bottom-up Rather Than Top-down Fit

Annelies E. M. Van Vianen and J. W. Stoelhorst
University of Amsterdam

ABSTRACT

Person-environment fit theory has been applied in organizational psychology to explain the development of organizational culture. This paper re-examines its tenets from an evolutionary perspective and suggest a modified explanation of homogeneity of personalities and its effect on organizational cultures.

PAPER

PE fit theories argue that people have a fundamental need to fit their environments and that the degree of fit between people and their work environment is positively related to important individual outcomes. Schneider's seminal Attraction Selection Attrition (ASA) model goes a step further by proposing that personalities of people in an organizational setting are the defining characteristic of that setting. The ASA model holds that the mechanism of attraction-selection-attrition (i.e., people with specific characteristics are attracted to, selected by, and stay in an organization) creates homogeneity of personalities in organizations, which in turn generates specific organizational cultures (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

The purpose of this paper is to reconsider ASA as the fundamental mechanism that constitutes organizational culture. We argue that organizational culture is most likely indirectly caused by homogeneity of personalities through its supportive role for generating homogeneity in *behaviors*. In developing our arguments we will partly rely on evolutionary theories. PE fit theory presents itself as a natural candidate for such an exploration because it shares its basic tenet with evolutionary theory. For, the central premise of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection is that individuals in a population whose anatomical, physiological and behavioral characteristics *best fit* the environment will have the greatest chances of surviving and reproducing.

Evolutionary Theories and PE fit

Evolutionary psychologists typically examine *why* humans behave as they do and what the ultimate *function* (i.e., outcomes) of their behaviors is. For example, from an evolutionary perspective one could argue that people's need to assess their similarity (fit) with others may stem from a past adaptation to assess genetic relatedness (Tooby & Cosmides, 1989). In case of non-genetic relationships people have a need to fit others in order to guarantee a balance in resources. Indeed, symmetry-based reciprocity (i.e., directing favors to kin or to others with similar features) has been extensively documented in primates, the species that are our closest genetic relatives (Brosnan & De Waal, 2002), as well as in humans (Knudsen, 2003). Studies with primates, for instance, showed that similarity enhances expectation of reward division

(e.g., De Waal & Davis, 2003). Thus, as opposed to cognitive approaches to PE fit, evolutionary theories describe people's behaviors as being automatic and often unconscious, and as being driven by the principles of kin selection and reciprocity.

Two theories in the realm of evolutionary psychology seem particularly relevant for explaining mechanisms of fit and the development and change of organizational culture. *Gene-culture coevolution theory* stresses the role of socially transmitted cultural information and the interactions between genetic dispositions and cultural phenomena that affect human behavior. It holds that human pre-dispositions shape cultural processes, which in turn modify selection pressures on human genes (Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Another evolutionary theory, *niche-construction theory*, rejects the view that organisms are merely passive victims of selection pressures from the environment. It argues that organisms are able to construct their own niche through modifying important components of their real environment (Laland, Odling-Smee, & Feldman, 2001). Humans, among other species, are especially good at surviving in a broad range of settings because of their capability to construct environments that fit their needs.

Gene-culture coevolution and niche construction theory both go at the heart of Schneider's proposition that the personalities of the people in an organization are the defining characteristic of that organization. Gene-culture coevolution opens up the possibility that organizational cultures and practices are the result of homogeneity of *behaviors* and homogeneity of *personalities*. From niche construction theory it could be argued that modern organizations are fashioned by humans to suit their evolved psychological mechanisms. This would mean that if individuals perceive a misfit, they would try to modify their environment rather than leave the organization.

The Emergence of Organizational Cultures

The central proposition of the ASA framework is that homogeneity of people within an organization defines the structures, processes, and culture of that organization. Because individual employees were attracted to, selected by, and have stayed with an organization that suits their personal characteristics, people within a specific organization share their needs, values and personalities. This homogeneity in personalities in turn defines the organization. Several studies have evidenced some homogeneity of personalities in organizations (Giberson, Resick, & Dickson, 2005; Jordan, Herriot, & Chalmers, 1991; Schaubroeck, Ganster, & Jones, 1998; Schneider, Smith, Taylor, and Fleenor, 1998). The occurrence of homogeneity was mainly ascribed to mechanisms of attraction and selection of organizational leaders who attract and select people who have similar personal characteristics (Giberson et al., 2005). We believe that attrition rather than attraction and selection may have led to homogeneity in personalities.

People seem to primarily choose a *job* that fits them and the choice for a specific organization, that is often based on universally shared preferences (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004; Turban & Cable, 2003), is of secondary concern (Saks & Ashforth, 2002). Also, because people seem to use diverse and idiosyncratic cues to assess their prospective fit, the mere fact that applicants perceive fit with the organization does not preclude that they differ in terms of their personalities. If idiosyncratic preferences play a role, this is most likely related to vocational choice and/or personal attraction toward people already working

in the organization. Homogeneity in personalities as the result of the attraction phase is therefore most likely in organizations that mainly employ people from specific vocational groups and/or use informal recruitment and selection procedures.

The next step in the ASA cycle concerns the *selection* of applicants by organizations. Selection research suggests that recruiters are not very well equipped to assess applicant-organization fit (Cable & Judge, 1997). They mainly select applicants on the basis of capacities and personality, and use universal standards of ideal employees' personality profiles (Anderson & Shackleton, 1990). Selection research has demonstrated (indirect) effects of similarity *perceptions* rather than actual similarity between recruiters and selected applicants (Howard & Ferris, 1996). Homogeneity effects in organizations as a result of personnel selection have not yet been substantiated by research and in fact seem unlikely, except that some organizations might be better able than others to attract and select 'ideal' employees.

The *attrition* stage of the ASA model rather than the attraction and selection stages will contribute to homogeneity of personalities. Fit can be best established when people have information about their environment and the individuals in them. They may leave an organization if they do not fit. Indeed, PE fit studies have shown that misfit (perceptions) cause people to leave an organization (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001; Riordan, Weatherly, Vandenberg, & Self, 2001; Saks & Ashforth, 1997).

Although there is some evidence for homogeneity of personalities in organizations, further investigation is needed to examine its underlying processes. Moreover, the precise role that homogeneity of personalities may have in the development of organizational cultures is yet unclear. In the following we reflect on what evolutionary theories have to say about possible tendencies toward organizational homogeneity and the development of cultures.

An Evolutionary Perspective on Homogeneity of Personalities in Organizations

Recent evolutionary theories suggest that cultural homogeneity is better understood in terms of similarity in behavior than in terms of similarity in stable traits (Richerson & Boyd, 2005): "Homogeneity is achieved, not by assortative¹ interactions of individuals with fixed phenotypes², but by social norms that cause phenotypically plastic individuals to converge on a single behavior" (Wilson, 1997, p.352).

It is widely accepted that individuals from genetically distinct populations can adopt each other's cultural behaviors without difficulty, and that cultural change can occur without accompanying genetic change (Laland & Brown, 2002, p.310). Moreover, genetically similar individuals behave differently in different environments (Henrich & Boyd, 1998). Human behavioral ecologists have argued that differences in behavior between human groups are responsive to particular environments, and that these different patterns of behavior are exhibited by human beings with basically similar genetic compositions (Laland & Brown, 2002, p.110). Thus, cultural variations in behavior do not stem from underlying genetic variations.

¹ in human genetics, a statement of the frequency at which individuals mate with persons of similar phenotype

² the outward, physical manifestation of the organism as opposed to the internally coded, inheritable information carried by the organism

Gene-culture coevolution theory

It may be clear that evolutionary theories generally stress variety of individual traits in cultural groups. However, this does not preclude that there are other mechanisms that may result in homogeneity of people within cultures. Gene-culture coevolution theory supports the view that organizational cultures may bias the types of employees they select or retain. However, as opposed to the idea that groups of individuals are intentionally selected on the basis of their specific traits, gene-culture coevolution theory postulates that cultural group selection works through conformity of individuals to the behavior of the majority (Boyd & Richerson, 1985). Conformism is an important component of human social learning (Henrich & Boyd, 1998), and stable group differences in behaviors exist because of people's tendency to imitate others (see McElreath, Boyd, & Richerson, 2003). Phenotypic differences between human groups persist because human phenotypic plasticity allows individuals that move from one group to another to adopt the behavioral norms of the new group (Richerson & Boyd, 2005). Thus, the human proclivity to conformity (Henrich & Boyd, 1998), docility (Simon, 1990), and imitation creates *behavioral* homogeneity within groups. An evolutionary perspective suggests that organizational cultures are endorsed by homogeneity in *behaviors*, a notion that finds support in other work on culture in organizational psychology (Schein, 1992). Thus, homogeneity in behaviors rather than personalities is the primary mechanism that sustains organizational cultures.

Learning by imitation is the cornerstone of cultural transmission. Specific behaviors particularly those with a high pay-off, spread within groups through imitation (Boyd, Gintis, Bowles, & Richerson, 2003). Human cognitive abilities to acquire information via imitation far exceed those of any other species (Tomasello, 2000). Yet, although behavioral ecologists view copying behaviors as inherently adaptive, others have shown that indiscriminate imitation is not (Laland, 2004). Conformism and imitation are adaptive and will increase the mean fitness of individuals if, among others, the model from which the behavior is copied produces reliable information.

The chance that individuals adopt local beliefs and behaviors depends on specific characteristics of the model whose behavior is imitated. Research in biology has shown that imitating the successful (i.e., those with the highest pay-off) seems like a good survival strategy (Laland, 2004). Natural selection has also favored cognitive abilities to rank potential models according to their payoffs in humans (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Experimental economic research that used multi-round market and investment games has shown that individuals tend to mimic the beliefs and decisions of successful players, even if all individuals had similar information necessary for making a decision (Henrich, 2004; Offerman & Sonnemans, 1998). However, when the successful model is very different from the imitator, the model's success may not translate into success in the imitator's own circumstances (Boyd & Richerson, 1987). Indeed, research in biology has shown that individuals preferentially copy kin, and similar or familiar others (Laland, 2004; Swaney, Kendal, Capon, Brown, & Laland, 2001).

These literatures from economics and biology suggest that the way in which organizational cultures develop and evolve largely depends on which indicators of success employees will use, and whether or not they perceive similarity with successful others. Among the cues individuals use to rank potential models is the amount of prestige-deference an individual receives from other people (Henrich,

2004). In organizations, prestige will often be linked to hierarchical position, although not necessarily so. Employees preferentially imitate the behavior of prestigious models, particularly if they perceive these models as similar to themselves. Thus, employees may particularly use prestigious models as a benchmark for assessing their fit.

Bottom up fit

Homogeneity mechanisms in organizations may not take the form of leaders selecting subordinates with similar personalities, but rather stem from the retention of employees who perceive similarities between themselves and prestigious models. People find similarity important for any relationship, whether the other person is a (hypothetical) friend or leader (see Lusk, MacDonald, & Newman, 1998). Together, this would mean that homogeneity in personalities mainly results from the attrition stage of Schneider's ASA framework. If employees have difficulties to conform to the behaviors of prestigious models due to their perceptions of misfit with these models, they will likely leave the organization. Thus, although organizational cultures are mainly characterized by homogeneity of behaviors, the processes that support conformity to these behaviors may also cause a certain degree of homogeneity in personalities. This is in line with evolutionary proponents like Wilson and Dugatkin (1997) who argue that although optimal similarity (i.e., no phenotypic variation) within groups will never be achieved, assortative interactions could still contribute to nonrandom groupings (i.e., lower within group variances as compared to between group variances). Gene-culture coevolution theory emphasizes that humans behave in an adaptive manner in all kinds of environments to the extent that: "Past history of selection will have favored the ability to adopt the particular strategy that maximizes the difference between the benefits and costs in that particular environment" (Laland & Brown, 2002, p. 114). Hence, people will stay in the organization as long as the benefits of staying outweigh the costs of adaptation to the organizational culture. If individuals fit their environment and conformation is relatively easy, costs will be low.

Our reasoning as presented above is in line with Schneider's (1987) proposition that due to attrition organizations will have a restricted range of types of people in them. In addition, our reasoning leads to a suggestion about the specific processes through which attrition may contribute to homogeneity of personalities: Employees who experience sufficient similarities with prestigious models will stay because conformation to the dominant behaviors is relatively easy for them as opposed to those who do not experience similarities with prestigious models and, therefore, will leave.

Niche construction theory

The balance between benefits and costs, and whether individuals will stay in the organization, will also depend on other factors than individuals' perceived fit with prestigious models. Niche-construction theory argues that organisms are able to modify important components of their selective environments (Laland et al., 2000). Individuals that initially do not fit may first try to create a more fitting niche in order to reduce conformation pressure from the organizational environment, and only if restricted in doing so, leave the organization. Research has shown that autonomy and high decision latitude in jobs are positively related to job satisfaction (Edwards &

Rothbard, 1999; Roberts & Foti, 1998). This is consistent with the notion of niche construction because it is these types of jobs that allow people to create their own niche. Niche construction theory, with its emphasis on the human capacity to modify environments, leaves open the possibility that people will leave environments they are not able to change when they experience misfit. This suggests that homogeneity of personalities is more likely to develop in organizations that allow little room for niche construction.

Agenda for Research

Schneider et al. (1995) took an important step in the application of PE fit to organizational psychology by extending the analysis of the consequences of PE fit from individual to organizational processes. Extant studies have evidenced some homogeneity of personalities in organizations but did not study its direct causes and consequences nor did they study the processes through which homogeneity may lead to specific organizational cultures. We see several options for future research that may fill this void.

First, research should scrutinize the formation of homogeneity of personalities in organizations in a *direct* rather than *indirect* way. This can be done, for example, by comparing companies applicant pools, examining further restriction of range after selection, and establishing final restriction (attrition) regarding personality attributes of people.

Future research should further examine the conceptual meaning of person-organization fit in people's perceptions. Our line of thinking implies that people assess their fit with the organization mainly through their fit with prestigious others. Note that prestigious persons are not necessarily individuals' supervisor. People may take their perceptions of similarity with successful others as a cue for their person-organization fit. Interestingly, this corroborates studies that showed that people tend to organize their organizational experiences in human terms and attribute personality traits to organizations (e.g., Slaughter et al., 2004).

Additionally, research is needed that examines whether personalities of people make the place. Do specific personality compositions directly cause specific cultures? Alternatively, do people's personalities indirectly affect organizational culture through mechanisms that sustain homogeneity in behaviors? A model should be tested in which individuals' actual similarity with prestigious others cause similarity and (PO) fit *perceptions*, which facilitates imitation of *behaviors* that in turn creates organizational cultures.

Finally, the two basic human mechanisms that came forward from evolutionary theories, people's fit need and their plasticity, seem to compete with each other when making decisions in daily life. People's fit need might take the lead in that it directs decision to leave or stay most obviously in situations where they experience high pressure to conform. Strong cultures do not allow individuals to reconcile their work environments with their idiosyncratic needs and values (i.e. allow *individual* niche construction). These cultures, as opposed to weak cultures, endorse homogeneity in behaviors and, therefore (see the proposed mechanisms as described above), homogeneity in personalities. The possible relationship between cultural strength and homogeneity of personalities could be tested in future research.

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