

Evolution and Current Status of the ASA Model

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Abstract

A brief introduction to how the ASA model evolved is followed by a similarly brief review of the current status of research on the propositions of the model. Finally, some thoughts about future research needs are presented.

Paper

Evolution of the ASA Model

While seemingly straightforward, the conceptual and empirical issues surrounding the simultaneous study of personal and situational attributes are varied and daunting (cf. Walsh, Craik, & Price, 2000). In my earliest research (Schneider & Bartlett, 1968; 1970) I first proposed that fit would moderate ability-performance relationships for life insurance agents; the data failed to support the hypothesis (Schneider, 1972; 1975). But I decided to continue, this time looking at direct moderators in the ability X reward system (motivation) paradigm. Here the environment (reward system) was seen as a direct effect and fit was not an issue but again the data failed to substantiate the hypothesis (Schneider, 1978a).

A review of the literature after the failure (Schneider, 1978b) suggested that only in laboratory studies were significant interaction effects revealed. I reasoned that the explanation for this was that only when there are extremes on at least one of the variables of interest can one find significant algebraic interactions and that these were unlikely in field studies (Schneider, 1978b).

I then discovered the then-burgeoning literature in personality on person-situation interaction (e.g., Pervin & Lewis, 1978a). A major impetus for this interactionist vantage point was Mischel's (1968) attack on personality theory. This attack argued that situations, not persons, caused behavior. The interactionists argued that a simultaneous consideration of both person and environment characteristics would more adequately explain behavior. But how would this work?

I began to wonder about how the person and the situation actually interacted in the everyday world and discovered in my readings that Pervin and Lewis (1978b) called this everyday phenomenon by the name "natural interaction". By natural interaction, Pervin and Lewis meant the natural byplay of persons with each other and other facets of the social and structural environment that produced the observed behavior. I then happened

on a wonderful paper by Bowers (1973) that demolished the extreme vantage taken by Mischel (1968) and fit well with what Pervin and Lewis had described as natural interaction. Two points Bowers made in this paper constitute the conceptual bases for the ASA model:

1. Research in laboratories showing the dominance of situations over traits does not reflect the real world because it fails to provide for the natural interaction of persons in situations.
2. A fundamental attribute of a true experiment, random assignment of participants to treatments, denies the fact that people are *not* randomly assigned to settings, but they choose themselves in and out of them, then behave in them, and thus perhaps determine them.

I elaborated this idea about environments being a function of people behaving in them in a series of papers in the 1980s (Schneider, 1983a; 1983b), culminating in my Presidential address to SIOP in 1985 (see Schneider, 1987). There I outlined in a talk called “The People Make the Place” what has come to be called the ASA—attraction-selection-attrition—model of organizational functioning.

The ASA Model and its Current Status

The model provides a person-based conceptualization of why organizational environments look and feel the way they do. The model is based on Bowers’ (1973) insight about non-random assignment of people to settings. The model leads to some straightforward and testable propositions:

1. People are differentially attracted to organizations such that they are attracted to organizations they believe they fit.
2. Through formal and informal selection practices the people in settings also make choices; they choose to allow in (select) persons who they feel fit.
3. People leave settings, voluntarily or involuntarily, if they do not fit it well.

While these issues had been independently identified previously, a consequence of them all occurring had not been identified: homogeneity. It logically follows that if people are differentially attracted to settings, differentially selected by settings, and differentially leave settings, then those who remain in a setting will become increasingly similar to each other; not the same, but more similar to each other than they are similar to people in other settings. They will have relatively similar personalities, interests, and values and this hypothesis has come to be called the homogeneity hypothesis. Dickson, Resick and Goldstein (In Press) present a nicely detailed review of the research literature on these propositions, including the homogeneity hypothesis, reporting quite substantial support for the elements of the ASA cycle as well as support for the homogeneity hypothesis.

I also proposed an antecedent to the ASA cycle in organizations and a consequence of the hypothesized homogeneity that the ASA cycle yields. The antecedent concerned the role of the founder in largely determining the strategy, structure, and culture of the organization. Founders do this by operationalizing their personalities in the decisions they must make early on as the organization begins life. Schein (1992, pp. 211-212) put this idea this way:

Founders not only choose the basic mission and environmental context in which the new group [organization] members will operate, but they choose the group members and bias the original responses that the group makes in its effort to succeed in its environment and integrate itself. Organizations do not form accidentally or informally.

In short, by their actions, actions that emerge as ways of them implementing their personalities, founders have long term consequences for the strategy, structure and culture of the organizations they enact (see Schneider & Smith, 2004, for a review of this research).

Another predicted consequence of the ASA cycle in organizations that I made in 1987 was that organizational change would be very difficult unless the people themselves in organizations were different people. That is, I claimed that OD and similar efforts were likely to be fruitless because they worked with existing people and those people would (a) be similar and (b) be comfortable and of a certain “sort” and be very difficult if not impossible to change. The homogeneity of the personality of those in an organization undergoing change is still not mentioned as a cause of “resistance” in that literature (e.g., Burke, 2002) but that literature literally screams for such consideration.

One final hypothesis I explicitly proposed (1983b, 1987) was that, due to the homogeneity that is an outcome of the ASA cycle, organizations would tend to fail in times of turbulence. That is, the proposal is that homogeneity yields narrowness of vision so people do not initiate the organizational changes necessary to adapt to larger environmental changes. There is less research on this idea but a paper by Boone, Olffen, Witteloostuijn, and Brabander (2004) does an excellent job of explicating the issues. They did an archival study of 25 years of evidence from Dutch newspapers concerning “homosocial reproduction” in top management teams. Their hypothesis was that in times of crisis and environmental turmoil, such teams would diversify their membership as a coping strategy. They found however that top management teams close ranks rather than open themselves up to new input and insights. In a similar vein, Beckman, Burton, and O’Reilly (2007) found that diversity of experience in the TMTs of start-ups in Silicon Valley were correlated with success of the firms in obtaining venture capital and eventually issuing an IPO.

In summary, there is good evidence for the basics of ASA theory—people are attracted to, selected by, and stay with companies they fit. In addition, there is good conceptual and some empirical evidence for founder effects on organizations and, over the long term, evidence indicates that organizations come to take on the personality of their founders (Schneider & Smith, 2004). Finally, there are a few studies now of homogeneity

in organizations with one set of studies revealing that over time there comes to be homogeneity of personality in organizations (Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 2003) and the other set of studies indicating that homogeneity may not be useful for long-term organizational health (Boone et al., 2004).

Future Research Needs

When main effects have been established, it is time to seek boundary conditions and it is that time for the ASA model. While there exist a plethora of possible issues to study, I have chosen to focus on five here.

1. *Perceptions of choice*—the ASA model presupposes people have choices about where they work and that at root it is this fundamental perception that precedes the issue of perceived fit for people. To my knowledge there is no research on this issue but it would prove very interesting to say the least.
2. *The organizational life cycle*—it would seem that early on in the life of an organization that heterogeneity would be relatively high because the impact of the ASA cycle is in an early stage. My hypothesis is that organizational success is easier in a start-up precisely for this reason and, as the ASA cycle promotes homogeneity, the likelihood of failure increases. More successful organizations will identify the need for continuing heterogeneity and resist the natural inclination to homogeneity.
3. *The culture-personality link*—ASA proposes a link between founder personality and strategy, structure and culture but there is not much research on this. Thinking of the FFM (Big 5) for a moment, do founders who are more “open” create more innovative organizations? Do founders who are more “conscientious” create more obsessive organizations? Research of this sort would be very useful; tests of Holland’s (1997) career environment theory might serve as a model.
4. *The issue of misfits*—Chatman, Wong, and Joyce (In Press) raise the very interesting question about the fate of misfits who do not leave the organization. Job embeddedness theory (Lee, Mitchell, Sablinski, Burton, & Holtom, 2004) predicts that some misfits stay because they cannot leave due to other strong pressures in their lives. Research on this issue could prove quite salutary as would work on the issue of people choosing to join organizations they do not believe they fit due to similar external pressures.
5. *Cross-levels issues in ASA research*—ASA has as its level of analysis the Organization; so research is needed on the degree to which ASA also functions at the job, and team level. One might hypothesize that ASA logic would prove more valid at the job level due to inherently more homogeneity, then the team, and then the organizational level of analysis; i.e., as the potential for heterogeneity increases (due to multiple functions in

organizations, for example) ASA would be less predictive of homogeneity. There is not much research on the question but one study would support this hypothesis (Ployhart, Weekley, and Baughman (2006).

Conclusions

The ASA framework provides an alternative, person-based, conceptualization of organizational functioning with P-E fit as a central organizing construct. The framework proposes that what we experience as strategy, structure, and culture in organizations are outcomes of people interacting with each other and not due to some mystical “well there it is” consequence. In other words, what organizations are is a direct function of the people they contain; the people still make the place.

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