

The ASA Framework as Rhetoric

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Abstract

Ben Schneider's ASA framework and the associated idea of homogeneity is a theoretical cornerstone on which most organisational person-environment (PE) fit studies are built. However, whilst it is commonly used to justify studies and to explain empirical findings, very few PE fit studies have moved the underlying ASA framework forward. More than 20 years on, the theory remains intact and has barely evolved. This paper begins with a short citation review that illustrates how the ASA framework is used in empirical studies. Following this, the body of the paper explores the reasons why the empirical studies that use the ASA framework as their theoretical underpinning are ineffective in revising Schneider's ideas. The paper concludes with a discussion of the ASA framework's rhetorical role and its inappropriateness as a theoretical justification of empirical PE fit studies.

Introduction

Kristof-Brown and Jansen (2007, p. 123) describe Ben Schneider's ASA framework as the "theoretical cornerstone in PO fit research". More than this, DeRue and Morgeson (2007, p. 1242) say that "most research on person-environment fit relies on Schneider's (1987) attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model to explain how high levels of fit are generated". In short, almost every PE fit study refers to the ASA framework in some way and it is used to justify and explain results. Unusually, after 20 years of continual reference, the ASA framework is largely unchanged and there have been very few studies directly testing its propositions.

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the way that the ASA framework is used in papers and to explore the reasons why so few empirical studies help to develop and refine its underlying principles. The paper ends with reflections on the circumstances in which it might be appropriate to use the ASA framework to justify and explain empirical findings.

The ASA framework

In his seminal article of 1987, Ben Schneider introduced the ASA framework which suggested that an organisation attracts and selects people with attributes, defined as values, personality and attitudes (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995), similar to those within the organisation. People who do not fit will eventually leave the organisation (attrition). Through the cycle of attraction, selection and attrition, the process then yields a restricted and thus more homogeneous range of people sharing similar attributes that produce similar kinds of behaviour. The increase of homogeneity in attributes and behaviour within an organisation is referred to as the homogeneity hypothesis. Schneider (1987, Schneider et al., 1995) then argues that the homogeneity tendency in organisations yields a restricted range of people and behaviours, which then leads to a positioning of the organisation in an increasingly

constricted niche and a greater difficulty to adapt to environmental changes. He suggests that, although a high homogeneity among the individuals in an organisation may initially be beneficial, the greater difficulty to adapt to environmental changes may threaten the organisation's survival.

ASA framework citation review

Anyone who is interested in PE fit research knows the ubiquitous nature of the ASA framework. Given how stable the theory has been, we were interested in exploring how researchers use it in their work. For speed and convenience, we conducted a citation review looking for papers that included the terms 'ASA framework', 'person-environment fit', and 'person-organization fit' using Google Scholar¹. This approach yielded 26 articles of which we included 23 once we removed book chapters and a review article.

All but three of the papers mentioned the framework in the introduction or literature review as a way of justifying the study. A typical inclusion can be found in the second paragraph of Lievens, Decaestecker, Coetsier and Geirnaert (2001), 'Schneider's (1987) attraction-selection-attrition (ASA) model conceptually grounds this research stream.' (p. 31). This is broad-brush justification; but it is typical.

Fewer, but still most, authors (i.e. 17) cited Schneider's ASA framework in the conclusion or discussion sections of their papers. Here, most usage noted that the findings were 'consistent with the theoretical framework' (Cable and Judge, 1996, p. 304) or explanatory; e.g. 'Another possible explanation (based on Schneider's ASA model) is that people might self-select into organizations' (Parkes, Bochner and Schneider, 2001). It was relatively rare for authors to critique, develop or extend Schneider's framework

After reviewing these citations, we came to the conclusion that the most common usage of Schneider's ASA framework in PE and PO fit studies was as rhetoric. Its main role was to offer broad justification of studies and to win acceptance of findings. Schneider's ASA framework is sufficiently authoritative to convey these qualities. Indeed, it seems to be held in such awe that to criticise or contradict it is to lead to citation wilderness (e.g. Billsberry, 2007; Mumford, Zaccaro, Johnson, Diana, Gilbert and Threlfall, 2000).

Given the prime position of the ASA framework in the literature, it is interesting that it has evolved so little over the past twenty years. This might be because it posits some universal truths that have been robustly defended, but it might also be because many PE and PO fit studies that claim to be based on the ASA framework are actually poorly aligned to it. In the rest of this paper, we outline the characteristics of the ASA framework that make testing it so difficult.

Outcome-related predictions

It is important to note in what ways Schneider (1987) has applied the theoretical lens to the person-situation debate in the ASA framework. He argued that "situations are defined in terms of the attributes of the persons there" (Schneider, 1987, p.355). It is thus the people who create the place. This way of conceptualising the environment has implications for the means to assess a match between the person and the

¹ We fully appreciate the 'rough and ready' nature of this citation review and we intend to conduct a full and proper review using more acceptable databases in the future.

organisation. Schneider (1987) posits that fit occurs if the attributes of a person are similar to the attributes of the other organisational members. Thus, a match exists if there is homogeneity and this defines fit as the supplementary fit of attributes. It is then suggested that the homogeneity of the individuals has organisational outcomes. Indeed, Schneider regularly asserts that his framework is about predicting the behaviour of organisations, not organisational members.

This view contrasts with the way PE fit is often researched, where it is the behaviour of individuals that are the usual dependent variables. Harrison's (2007) critique of the fit literature illustrates this well. He argues that current fit research is predominantly defined by the underlying assumption that PE fit needs to lead to a positive individual outcome; he called this underlying assumption, the "warm glow of fit" (p. 397). In addition to this focus on positive individual outcomes as an inherent assumption of the definition, PE fit research has mainly been interpreted to have a micro-focus on the individual. This however is not the case with the ASA framework that focuses on organisational level outcomes as mentioned above. That said, Schneider's homogeneity outcome, although set at an organisational level, is underpinned by an individual level cycle, namely, attraction, selection and attrition. So whilst this difference in the outcome level of analysis is recognised by many scholars (e.g. Edwards, 2008; Ostroff and Schulte, 2007), it is perhaps understandable that it does not prevent scholars using the ASA framework to justify studies where PE fit predicts individual level outcomes.

Types of fit

Although Schneider's ASA framework is used to justify and explain all manner of PO and PE fit studies, Schneider conceptualises PE fit very specifically. For him, the people make the place and his interaction of variables is between people. In short, the type of fit that Schneider refers to is person-person fit (when a dyadic relationship is considered; this is probably best termed person-individual fit) or person-people fit (when the individual is being to a group of people). He may also consider person-team, person-group, person-supervisor and even person-organisation types of fit, but only when the 'E' variable is defined in a currency that relates to the qualities of humans. Not only does he avoid the anthropomorphism trap that infests PE fit research, but he also carefully aligns his measurement with his conceptual frame. In short, Schneider's ASA framework is only relevant to PE fit studies where the 'E' is defined in human terms. This is illustrated in the following analysis value congruence studies.

Value congruence and value homogeneity

Research on PO fit has been strongly influenced by the definitional work of Chatman (1989) and the subsequent development of the Organization Culture Profile (OCP) (O'Reilly, Chatman and Caldwell, 1991). This work strongly emphasised value congruence. Although the definition of PO fit has since been adjusted by Kristof (1996), value congruence and the conceptualisation of the environment as organisational culture is still one of the main research avenues. In OCP-derived value congruence studies, the values of the organisation come from individual organisational members' perceptions. They are asked to assess how typical of the organisation a number of values are. These are then aggregated to produce a series of 'E' variables against which the individuals' values can be measured (e.g. Billsberry,

2007; Cable and Judge, 1996, 1997; Chatman, 1991; O'Reilly et al, 1991). This approach is invalid as a test of Schneider's ASA framework. Schneider argues that the values of the organisation are the values of its individual members. This distinction in conceptualisation has an influence on how these values are operationalised. Instead of comparing individuals' values to some assessment of the organisation's value, individuals' values should be compared to other individuals' values. In this way, the homogeneity of values in organisation can be properly assessed as can an individual's relationship to these values. There may be compositional issues (Ostroff & Schulte, 2007), but it is an approach properly justified by Schneider's conceptual work.

Fit and misfit

One commonality in almost all PE fit studies is the conceptualisation and measurement of fit and misfit (or 'no fit', or 'poor fit', or 'weak fit') as a continuous variable. However, one way of reading Schneider's ASA framework is to conceptualise fit and misfit as separate categories. When describing the attrition phase of the framework, Schneider (1987, p. 442, *emphasis added*) uses the following language, 'the important finding from turnover studies is that people who do not fit an environment well will tend to leave it. So, while people may be attracted to a place, they may make errors, *and finding they do not fit*, they will leave.' One interpretation is that Schneider sees 'do not fit' as a separate category akin to misfit. If correct, and his later 1998 study (Schneider, Smith, Taylor and Fleenor, 1998) does take a different stance, the ASA framework would only be suitable as a justification of studies employing a categorical stance to fit and misfit. However, at present we know very little about the emergence of misfit (Talbot and Billsberry, 2007), but Schneider's work would appear to encourage more empirical work in this area.

Temporal multidimensionality of ASA and fit

A review on the work being done on the ASA framework indicates that different attributes influence attraction, selection and attrition. While personality seems to be linked to the way people feel attracted to an organisation (e.g. Turban and Keon, 1993; Cable and Judge, 1997; Billsberry, 2007), values may influence the phases of selection (e.g. Cable and Judge, 1997; Johnson, 1990) and attrition (Agius, Arfken, Dickson, Mitchelson and Anderson, 2005) more strongly. Therefore, attributes which contribute to one aspect of the ASA theory may only be important at a specific moment. This notion introduces the concept of a shifting or wandering type of homogeneity, which emphasises a time dimension when investigating the ASA framework. In addition, the inference that homogeneity attributes are salient at different points in time also offers the idea that a variety of attributes pushes towards homogeneity in organisations. A careful reading of Schneider's original paper demonstrates that a temporal element and multidimensionality are crucial components of his approach. This suggests that longitudinal studies or those with a temporal element are required to test Schneider's theory. However, cross-sectional studies may still have a role to play when the researcher clearly identifies the precise moment in the ASA framework that their study is testing.

Conclusion

This paper began life as frustration. Everywhere we looked, we saw the ASA framework used to justify all manner of theoretical and empirical results. And yet these results were not developing the supporting theory. It seemed to us that the ASA framework had become rhetoric. On deeper analysis, we noticed that it was being used to support studies to which it was only barely relevant. We now believe that Schneider's ASA framework should only be applied to PE fit studies that exhibit the following characteristics:

- Either they have organisational dependent variables or attraction, selection or attritional individual dependent variables
- Have a supplementary design
- Conceive the 'E' element in human terms
- Measure fit and misfit in a categorical fashion
- Are clearly aware of their temporal position
- Are multidimensional in design

This is a demanding set of criteria, and we readily admit that we might have over-egged it in the case of categorical measurement, but these seem to be some of the necessary characteristics of PE fit studies wishing to use the ASA framework and the homogeneity hypothesis to justify their existence.

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