

Experimenting with Homogeneity and Creativity

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Introduction

I have just registered on the PhD programme at Coventry University and I still have that naïve excitement of someone setting out on an adventure. I have had an interest in organisational behaviour for many years, but organisational fit is fairly new to me. I am particularly interested in looking at the influence of organisational fit on creativity. My reading of the subject so far suggests to me that this is a burning question and I am intrigued by how far apart the various positions are.

My intention is that my study will empirically investigate the relationship between people's fit and their creativity. In particular, I plan to study how the fit of team members influences the creativity of the team. This question seems to have received very little empirical attention despite being at the heart of conceptual and theoretical discussions. In this paper, I set out some of the background and I conclude with a particular question that I'm hoping conference goers can help me with: Is it legitimate to conduct experiments in the field of organisational fit?

Background

Organisational fit is the manifestation of interactional psychology in the business environment. This form of psychology is an explanation of people's behaviour. It says that people's behaviour is caused by an interaction of people and situations. This approach is grounded on a significant amount of conceptual research that has examined the determinants of people behaviour (e.g. Bowers, 1973; Chatman, 1989, 1991; Mischel 1968; Pervin, 1978).

Psychology looks at how people interact and is best described as person-environment (PE) fit and in organisational settings it is referred to as person-organisation (PO) fit. This has now been broken down further by researchers into Person-Job (PJ), Person-Vocation (PV), Person-Group (PG) and Person-Person/People (PP) forms of fit. It is now well-established that PO fit is positively associated with levels of job satisfaction, organisational commitment, organisational citizenship and tenure. The flip side of this theory looks at the limitations it presents and they are associated with the intent to leave and actual staff turnover.

ASA theory (Schneider, 1987) outlines a framework for understanding organisational behaviour that integrates both individual and organisational theories. The theory explores the outcome of three unified self-motivated processes, attraction-selection-attrition, which determines the kinds of people in an organisation, and which subsequently defines the nature of the organisation, its structures, process and culture (Schneider 1987). Schneider's work on the ASA model of organisational behaviour has become one of the most important models in the history of personnel psychology having the central theme that people matter. Schneider has highlighted the importance of organisational structure processes, organisational climate and culture. Schneider early work recognised propositions regarding the role of people in creating the situation. Schneider's attraction process concerns the fact that people's

preferences for particular organisations are based on implicit efforts of their own personal characteristics and the attributes of potential work organisations.

Schneider (1987) recognised the organisational implications of lots of individuals all seeking organisations where they fit, and of people who deciding they do not fit, leaving in order to find better fit elsewhere. Over time, organisations would come to be filled with increasingly similar employees to produce a homogeneous workforce. Crucially, Schneider (1987) raised the issue of whether greater homogeneity in the workforce is positive or negative for the organisation's survival. Many researchers have followed this line of argument and suggested that higher levels of homogeneity are negative, arguing that greater homogeneity restricts the types of people employed by the organisation meaning that it occupies a narrower ecological niche than it should do. Their intuitive argument says that the more similar people are, the more likely they are to hold similar views and be less likely to generate diverse solutions to problems. In effect, they equate greater homogeneity with 'cloning'.

On the other side of the argument are researchers who suggest that greater homogeneity creates conditions in which creativity can flourish (e.g. West and Farr, 1996). They argue that with homogeneity comes, an alignment of values, greater satisfaction and commitment, and an understanding of the organisational environment. In such conditions, people know the boundaries and feel 'safe' leading to a relaxed environment in which employees are able to express themselves and contribute. Hence, the discussion on whether increased workforce homogeneity leads to more or less creativity has become polarised into extreme positions without an agenda to explore the various issues.

My research question will empirically explore whether homogeneity is good or bad for creativity in organisations. My thesis will look at the relationship between two variables: organisational fit (the independent variable) and creativity (the dependent variable). No one seems to have explored this relationship, despite it being central to this literature.

Methodology

One of the reasons no one has looked at this question is that examining the impact of a psychological construct such as fit on the behaviour of an organisation is virtually impossible given the vast number of influences on organisational behaviour. As a result, I plan to test my research empirically with an experiment. This will allow me to isolate the variables of fit and creativity and explore how they relate to each other.

I plan to use extant methods for measuring fit and creativity thereby reducing the risks associated with the study. The process will use groups of students (or managers) who engage in creative task. This will allow me to flex the nature of the fit in the group to explore the nature of the fit and their creativity.

I would really appreciate if anyone can point me in the right direction on this methodology. Papers by Bowers (1973) and Schneider (1987) worry me because they state that experiments are not an appropriate method of explaining people's behaviour and therefore for measuring their fit. Is it invalid to use experiments in organisational fit research? I would really appreciate your thoughts. Another issue that I would be really grateful on would be any pointers on papers that you think are pertinent to my research. Many thanks for taking the time and trouble to read this short paper and for any advice you can offer.