

Fitting Person-Environment Fit Theories into the Cultural Contexts: Stimulating Field Expansion by Looking at the ASA Process through a Cultural Lens¹

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Overview and Objectives

Practitioners and researchers have long recognised that an individual's fit with a job, group, organization, and individual work supervisor and colleagues is crucial to the success of individuals and organizations (Arthur, Bell, Villado, & Doverspike, 2006; Billsberry, Ambrosini, Moss-Jones, & Marsh, 2005; Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof, 1996; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; Ostroff & Judge, 2007; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). While numerous reviews and meta-analyses have helped us make sense of the person-environment fit (PEF) phenomenon, many unresearched areas fortunately still remain. We say "fortunately" because unanswered questions and unexplored topics help invigorate the field, rejuvenate fit researchers and ultimately energize their efforts.

One such unexplored area, with potential for expanding and taking the PEF literature forward, is the role of culture in PEF. We find this research area not only timely but also of great practical value. With the increase in organizational diversity and international collaborations, it has become rather a cliché to state that a cultural understanding of OBHR topics is imperative. Recent research (Lee, 2006; Ramaswami & Dreher, 2009; Van Vianen, De Pater, Kristof-Brown & Johnson, 2004) highlights the importance of cultural values in understanding fit dynamics, which may have implications for attracting, selecting, and retaining talented individuals in organizations. Yet, efforts to provide a cultural perspective on fit have been rather scant or invisible. To provide more visibility into this important and unexamined area, we put on our cultural glasses and look at PEF through the lens of cultural values and norms, to better understand the cultural boundary conditions that influence PEF processes and outcomes. This chapter will be a step in the direction of more indigenous PEF research. By delineating cultural influences in the Attraction, Selection and Attrition (Schneider, 1987a, 1987b) stages of the fit process, we hope to challenge existing assumptions underlying PEF theories and stimulate a more holistic and contextually grounded understanding of fit phenomena. In essence, our cultural understanding of PEF needs to go deeper, and this chapter explores how culture influences fit processes.

Chapter Outline

We propose to organize our chapter as follows –

Section 1. Introduction and Objectives

Here we will provide an overview of the chapter, and discuss the lack of cross cultural research in PEF or the paucity of indigenous understanding of PEF in non-Western/U.S. cultures. To provide a framework of cultural influence on fit, we also undertake the following conceptual tasks described in the following paragraphs.

¹ *Note: Both authors have contributed equally.*

Section 2. PEF in the ASA Framework

We will draw on Schneider's (1987) well acclaimed ASA framework as the backdrop against which we examine cultural factors in PEF. While PEF itself is the main focus, we choose the ASA framework since a cultural understanding of PEF has implications for recruitment, selection, and retention of employees which are processes inherent in the parsimonious ASA model.

Section 3. Cultural Context

Here we provide a brief overview of the key cultural models and dimensions available in the literature (GLOBE, Hofstede, Schwartz, etc.), and choose those that seem most theoretically relevant to the PEF phenomenon, with accompanying explanations. Here we elaborate on how culture shapes the way we make sense of the world, as a kind of mental programming or frame of reference. For example, the cultural value of collectivism may influence the selection processes in organizations through the importance placed on in-group norms and affiliations. Thus the process of applicant or employee selection may be infused with normative influences that may be uncommon in individualistic cultures or for individualistic individuals. Therefore, what it means to fit for a job in one culture may draw on qualities of the individual beyond the general KSAs (e.g., in-group ties).

Section 4. Looking at ASA through a Cultural Lens

In this next section, we provide a discussion of each ASA process and its influence by cultural values/norm, with relevant examples. Some are noted below.

Section 4a. Role of culture in attraction processes

- *Jan-pehchan, sambandh, guanxi* (e.g., Farh, Tsui, Xin, & Chen, 1998; Zhu, Bhat, Nel, 2005)
 - *Jan-pehchan* and *sambandh* are Indian equivalents/approximations of the Chinese socio-cultural concept of *guanxi*, meaning particularistic ties with implied reciprocal social exchanges
 - These relationship aspects seem to play a role in business connections, interpersonal attraction, as well as selection processes (Chen & Francesco, 2000; Zhu, et al., 2005)
 - Perhaps we can state that in some cultures, it is the quality of the exchange between P and E that influences "fit" rather than the actual matching of P and E characteristics
- Individualism vs. collectivism
 - individualists will be attracted if there is fit (mainly PJ and PO, which means that the job content, compensation, and values suit them)
 - collectivists will be attracted to individuals and groups (PS, PG) if there is a personal relationship or obligation, explained by literature on instrumental and expressive motives of individualists and collectivists (Triandis, 1995)
 - PS or PG fit (resulting from *guanxi*) may have a more important role in attraction process in collectivist cultures due to the effects of demographic similarity and social identity between candidates and recruiters (Goldberg, 2003).
- Parents/familial influence

- fit consideration is no longer individual-centred (i.e., not whether this job fits *me*, but whether this job fits *my relevant others*).
 - E.g., the socio-cultural context influences career and organizational choices (Fouad & Byars-Winston, 2005)
 - One's job or career decision is likely to be influenced by significant others (Phillips, Christopher-Sisk, & Gravino, 2001). Such influence may be more pronounced in collectivist cultures.
 - Further explanation using the example of mate selection (Zhang & Kline, 2009)
 - Time orientation (Long-term vs. short-term)
 - the weight people may put in current or immediate fit vs. long-term future fit may influence whether or not one is attracted to, or will stay with a current job or organization.

Section 4b. Role of culture in selection processes

- Research suggests that selection practices differ by cultural values held in a society/by an individual (e.g., Huo, Huang, Napier, 2002; Phillips & Gully, 2002; Ramamoorthy & Carroll, 1998; Ryan, Boyce, Ghumman, Jundt, Schmidt, & Gibby, 2009).
- Guanxi, Collectivism/Ingroupism
 - Same arguments above may be used in selection, but from recruiters/employers' point of view (e.g., Sue-Chan & Dasborough, 2006)
 - E.g., Xin and Pearce (1996) suggest that *guanxi* helps reduce "transaction costs"...applied to the selection scenario, this would imply that organizations in Eastern cultures where particularistic ties exert normative influence on behaviour, *guanxi* is a convenient cultural heuristic that influences selection processes/outcomes
 - Different weights in PJ, PO, PS, and PG fit.
 - Different interpretation of PS and PG fit: instead of personality similarity or value congruence, PS/PG fit may be interpreted as *guanxi* and reference from relevant others.
- Universalism vs. particularism
 - Whether fit is looked at globally or in a piecemeal fashion
 - Aycan (2005) suggests that recruitment and selection in cultures high on performance orientation or universalism are based on hard criteria such as job-related knowledge and technical skills (i.e., PJ fit) whereas cultures that are low on performance orientation, oriented towards ascribed status or particularistic ties tend to favour soft criteria such as relational skills or social class affiliation (i.e., PS/PG fit).
- Uncertainty avoidance: to what extent one is willing to accept ambiguity in fit in the selection process.
 - In cultures of high uncertainty avoidance, employers will make larger efforts to ensure the fit in the selection process. For example, Ryan et al. (1999) found that a greater variety of tests were used more extensively in countries high on uncertainty avoidance.

Section 4c. Role of culture in attrition processes

- Cultural values influence commitment (e.g., Parkes, Bochner, & Schneider, 2001) and consequently attrition
- Tolerance of misfit
 - Collectivism: Collectivists are more loyal than individualists and will not leave if there is misfit...they will sacrifice fit if their company needs them or if they feel attached to their colleagues...alternatively, collectivist institutions may accommodate misfitting individuals and not fire them.
 - e.g., collectivists may adjust their behavior to fit better with the organization, where as individualists may not be able or willing to be so malleable (Chatman & Barsade, 1995)
 - e.g., collectivists' commitment and attachment to organizations may be influenced by satisfaction with supervisors and colleagues (relationship orientation) rather than with work or promotion (task orientation) (Boyacigiller & Adler 1991; Pelled & Xin, 1997; Wasti, 2003)
 - Maximizer vs. satisficer: "Maximizers are defined as persons who are always looking for the best, whereas satisficers are satisfied once the threshold of acceptability, based on their intrinsic values, is crossed."
 - Under the influence of Buddhism, Asian people are more likely to embrace the attitude of satisficer which help them to be more tolerant to misfit (Hwang & Chang, 2009)
 - European or American people are more likely to be maximizer, thus emphasizing more on exact fit.
- Cross-cultural studies on fairness, justice, and psychological contract
 - This line of research can be used to understand how culture influences needs-supplies fit
 - What is considered as unfair, injustice, and breach of psychological contract may differ across cultures
 - The reaction to perceived injustice and breach of psychological contract may also differ.
 - Thomas, Au, & Ravlin (2003) argue that collectivists will have a higher overall threshold for the perception of a psychological contract violation than will individualists.
- Uncertainty avoidance: to what extent one is willing to accept ambiguity in fit to stay.
 - Similar argument as previous section.

Section 5. Contributions and Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice.

A cultural understanding of PEF can help theoretical and empirical advances in this important research area. Based on the literature on the ASA framework and cultural values, we will provide recommendations for future research on areas that have received minimal research attention. A cultural understanding of PEF would likely do the following –

Section 5a. Theory

- Encourage re-conceptualization and definition of PEF from a cultural perspective
- Revisit the Western assumptions that underlie PEF phenomenon
- Highlight contextual and cultural boundary conditions that influence PEF and outcomes, including but not limited to cultural values and norms
- Provide insights into how cultural values interact to influence PEF processes and outcomes

Section 5b. Research

- Encourage consideration of qualitative research to uncover more indigenous understanding of PEF
- Encourage examination of more non-Western/ non-U.S. populations with a clear cultural frame in mind
- Critically evaluate all relationships from a cultural contextual perspective, regardless of origin of sample

Section 5c. Practice

- Benefit multinational companies looking to expand their operations in other cultures, by increasing their cultural sensitivity and understanding of cross-cultural interfaces
- Help managers and practitioners understand the cultural influences on the ASA process and help them be more tolerant and appreciative of the diversity of sometimes invisible influences on standard HR practices
- Provide material for expatriate-training on international HR practices, interpersonal relationships, role expectations, etc.

Section 6. Conclusion

Fit will be a more useful construct for OBHR and cross cultural management in general if one takes a contextual approach to understanding it. While we will also note the limitations of this chapter, it is hoped that the ideas we present here will stimulate future research on neglected research questions in the area of fit.

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