ASA Theory: An Empirical Study of the Attraction Proposition

Jon Billsberry, The Open University[1,2]

Abstract

This paper reports an empirical test of Schneider's (1987) attraction proposition that organizations attract people who share the organization's values. The values of 621 applicants to nine utility companies in the United Kingdom were compared to (1) the values of people contiguously seeking similar work, (2) the values of employees they might be working alongside, and (3) the values of the organizations' senior managers. The results show an effect for person–vocation fit, but once this is controlled for all significant effects disappear. These results suggest that applicants choose which organization to apply to based on their desire for a particular type of work rather than their attraction for particular companies, which is contrary to Schneider's attraction proposition. In a conclusion at the end of the paper, possible reasons for the rejection of Schneider's attraction proposition are discussed. It is argued that the factors of familiarity, proximity and exposure are critical to applicants' behavior and should be incorporated into ASA theory.

ASA theory was developed by Schneider (1983a, 1983b, 1985, 1987; Schneider, Goldstein & Smith, 1995; Schneider, Smith & Goldstein, 2000; Schneider, Smith, Taylor & Fleenor, 1998) as an explanation of why organizations look, feel and behave as they do. The main idea in this framework is that organizations attract, select, and retain those people who share their values. Schneider (1987) argues that this cycle creates similarity in the type of people employed by the organization and that this similarity limits the actions of the organization owing to the fact that it occupies a constrained niche of like-minded employees sharing similar values, personalities and attitudes. Schneider et al (1995) call this effect the 'homogeneity hypothesis' and they predict that it will be dysfunctional for organizations, as they become increasingly ingrown and resistant to change.

Schneider's framework is based on an intuitive cause and effect relationship that has been well-tested in the psychological literature over the past fifty years. Namely, the observation that similarity between people leads to attraction. For example, Hatfield, Traupmann and Walster (1978) reviewed the literature and showed that couples tend to be similar in terms of IQ, education and other characteristics. Newcomb (1961) gathered data from a women's university college in the USA that had a strong tradition of liberal values.

1 All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jon Billsberry, Centre for Human Resource and Change Management, Open University Business School, The Open University, Milton Keynes MK8 0DA, United Kingdom; +44 (0) 1908 655888; Fax +44 (0) 1908 655898; electronic mail may be sent to j.billsberry@open.ac.uk.

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The researcher found that in order to gain the liking and acceptance of classmates, many students coming from conservative backgrounds adopted liberal attitudes. In reviewing the many 'bogus stranger' studies of attraction, Byrne and Nelson (1965) conclude that as the proportion of similar attitudes increases, attraction towards the stranger increases in a linear fashion. From the vocational psychology and job choice literatures, Schneider cites the work of Holland (1976), who showed that people choose to join career environments that they are similar to, and Tom (1971), who contributed to this literature by demonstrating that people's most preferred work environment has the same 'personality' as they do.

Hence, Schneider was able to extrapolate from these studies using the idea that similarity leads to attraction. He argues that people want to work with people whom they are similar to and that this effect can be found when people look for jobs (attraction), are selected for jobs (selection), and during employment (attrition). The overall effect of this cycle is that the people within the organization increasingly become more like one another and that this leads to homogeneity in the workforce.

Homogeneity hypothesis

Schneider's Attraction–Selection–Attrition cycle (ASA; Schneider, 1987) is one of the most influential models in the person–organization (P–O) fit literature. Yet, despite the centrality of the cycle in the P–O fit literature, and its proposed dire consequences for organizations, there have been relatively few studies of it or its separate propositions (Schneider et al, 1998). Those studies that have investigated whether the homogeneity hypothesis are reviewed below.

Jackson, Brett, Sessa, Cooper, Julin and Peyronnin (1991) studied 939 executives in 93 top management teams in large, established American banks and financial holding companies. They found some evidence to suggest that the executives in these top management teams were clustered together into teams that were relatively homogeneous in their demographic composition (i.e. in relation to their age, tenure, level of education, college curriculum, experience outside the industry, and military experience). The researchers also found (1) that top team turnover is greater with greater levels of heterogeneity in the top team, (2) that new recruits to the top team from inside the organization are more homogeneous with existing top team members than recruits from outside the organization, and (3) the more a member of the top team differs to other members, the greater the likelihood that they will leave the top team. This study provides some support for Schneider's homogeneity hypothesis. This support is weak, however, because the researchers examined homogeneity via demographic variables (age, educational background, military experience etc.), rather than by investigating psychological variables such as values, attitudes, or personality as advocated by Schneider (1987; Schneider et al, 1995, 1998).

Jordan, Herriot and Chalmers (1991) investigated three different hypotheses derived from Schneider's theory: (1) that members of different organizations differ in personality; (2) members of different occupations within organizations differ in aptitude but not personality; and, (3) that there is an interaction between seniority and organization such that the more senior managers are closer to the organizational personality profile than less senior people. Their sample was 344 managers in four British organizations. The researchers found support for the attraction and selection elements of the ASA theory, but not for the attrition stage as senior managers appeared no different to others within each of the organizations. Interestingly, Jordan et al. (1991) found evidence for differences between functions within organizations suggesting that subcultures within organizations reproduce themselves in their own image.

Schneider, Smith, Taylor and Fleenor (1998) investigated the homogeneity hypothesis using data from the archives of the Center for Creative Leadership. Their sample consisted of 12,739 predominantly middle-aged, white, male managers from 142 organizations who had completed the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI; Myers & McCaulley, 1985) whilst on a leadership development course at the Center. This sample spanned a broad spectrum of US businesses. The researchers were able to support the hypothesis that organizations are relatively homogeneous with respect to the personality attributes of their managers by demonstrating that the personality profiles are distinctly different to each other. They also found that both industry and organization had a significant effect on the personality characteristics of managers.

Finally, Denton (1999) examined the hypothesis that there would be a significant relationship between the homogeneity of personality and organizational tenure. He examined the personality types of 87 female store managers working for the same book retailer, but in different outlets. The participants completed the MBTI personality indicator whilst attending a training course. At the individual level, the researcher was unable to find any statistically significant relationships between the two sets of data. One explanation of this finding could be that the managers of the retail outlets are rarely in contact and operate independently of each other, co-ordinated by the remote head office. As such, there would not appear to be any major factors coalescing the personalities of the 87 dislocated managers. There are many other reasons why no significant findings were found, including, of course, the falsehood of the original premise, but the data seems to suggest that some form of actual personal interaction is a prerequisite for the homogeneity hypothesis.

In summary, these studies provide mixed results regarding the homogeneity hypothesis. The studies that have looked at organizational environments in which the respondents have geographical proximity have found the effect, whereas the one study in which the organizational members were geographically dispersed did not. The finding that geographic remoteness of organizational members is relevant to the homogeneity hypothesis (albeit a very weak finding) does suggest that the attraction phase of the ASA cycle might be less influential than hypothesized in the cycle than the selection and attrition phases of the cycle. This might be the case because much selection (acknowledging the caveat of the remote screening of application blanks and CVs) is conducted face-to-face and during employment most employees interact with other members of staff. Applicants, on the other hand, divide into two distinct camps; internal and external applicants that are defined by whether or not they interact with existing members of staff. The external applicants are particularly interesting to consider because they are the people who might disrupt the homogeneity by bringing in new and different values to the organization.

Attraction

A group of studies have explored the consequences of similarity between applicants and organizations during the recruitment phase of the ASA cycle. Bretz, Ash and Dreher (1989) showed that people are attracted to environments that would allow them to address their need to achieve, but not for their need to affiliate. These researchers conducted a laboratory experiment that measured personality and then presented the participants with descriptions of organizations with reward systems that had been manipulated. They found that people with a high need for achievement disproportionally chose organizations with individually-focused reward systems.

Judge and Bretz (1992) surveyed students in two American universities. The students were asked for their values and then presented with a number of work scenarios in which eleven organizational and value variables were manipulated. They were asked the probability of whether or not they would accept a job offer from the organization in each scenario. As predicted by the researchers, value alignment between students and the manipulated scenarios was positively related to the students' job choice decisions.

Turban and Keon (1993) asked management students to indicate their attraction to paper descriptions of organizations in which various characteristics were manipulated. They found that people with a high need to achieve were more attracted to organizations that offered a merit-based reward structure (i.e. those that rewarded performance over seniority) than people with a low need to achieve. They also showed that people with low self-esteem were more attracted to decentralized organizational structures (and larger firms) than people with high self-esteem. These results suggest that people are attracted to organizations that mirror their personality.

Cable and Judge (1994) examined whether congruence of one aspect of the organizational environment, the pay and compensation system, with individual personality traits influenced the job search decisions of engineering and hotel administration students approaching graduation. The researchers asked engineering and hotel administration students to evaluate thirty-two different pay and compensation scenarios. They found that the attractiveness of the pay policies of organizations was heightened by greater levels of 'fit' between individual personality traits and the characteristics of the compensation system. If pay and compensation systems are structured according to the values, goals and culture of the organization, then the fit of individuals to the pay systems is an indication of their fit to the organization as a whole.

These studies provide interesting glimpses of the consequences of applicant's similarity to various organizational constructs on their attractiveness of organizations. However, they all have a laboratory form in which non-applicants rate the attractiveness of hypothetical organizations. Such laboratory experiments are likely to over-emphasize situational variables and mask individual differences (Schneider, 1987). Moreover, whilst these studies provide support for the hypothesis that similarity leads to attraction, the decisions of people in artificial situations does not necessarily accord with actual behavior. Subsequent research, therefore, explored the behavior and perceptions of 'real' applicants.

Cable and Judge (1996) investigated the P–O fit perceptions of job seekers. The job seekers were undergraduate applicants to 35 organizations who were recruiting through the 'milk round' of a large university in the north east of the USA. The job seekers were asked to report their perceptions of the attractiveness of the job attributes for a job for which they had just been interviewed, their perceived fit with the company and the job, and they completed a modified version of the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991) to report their perceptions of the company's values. Later, the job seekers completed a second battery of assessments including demographics, values, academic record, and their final job choice. In addition, the researchers collected the values of employees against whom the values of applicants were compared so that measure of each applicant's fit could be ascertained. The researchers found that applicants' perceived value congruence was predictive of their perceptions of their own fit. The researchers also found that job seekers' perceived value congruence (OCP derived) was associated with their job choice intentions ($r = .24$, $p < .05$, $n = 273$), albeit weakly.

There are a number of reasons why this study cannot be considered a direct test of Schneider's attraction proposition that organizations attract people who share their values. First, there is no comparison group against which the fit of applicants can be judged against. It might be that the job seekers in this study were no better 'fitted' than other people in the same applicant pool (Boudreau & Rynes, 1985) who did not choose to apply. A relevant control group would have allowed a direct test of Schneider's attraction proposition. Second, the job seekers were confined to one discipline, industrial relations, which might be subject to a particular set of vocational values that might distort the findings. Third, more than half of the sample was looking for internship placements rather than full-time work. Hence, there is a leap of faith as to whether the sample can be considered 'real' job applicants. Fourth, Barber and Wesson (1998) have raised doubts concerning the revised version of the OCP that was developed and used by Cable and Judge (1996). By using concurrent protocol analysis, these researchers discovered that a paper and pencil card sort did not replicate the card sort of the OCP items. Hence, there are methodological issues with the study. That said, this study provides a lot of related evidence to support Schneider's attraction proposition; if applicants choose to join organizations that they believe they fit, it is only a short inferential leap to propose that they join organizations that they do indeed fit.

A year later, the same authors published a follow-up study that employed a similar design (Judge and Cable, 1997). In addition, they also captured students' Big Five personality traits. The authors found similar findings with both subjective (direct questions) and objective (OCP derived) fit being associated with organizational attractiveness. Although this study providing many interesting insights, such as the observation that neither subjective nor objective fit were associated with offer acceptance, but cannot be considered a direct test of Schneider's attraction hypothesis as there was no measure of the organization's actual values.

This review of the literature demonstrates that have been no direct tests of Schneider's attraction proposition that organizations attract people who share its values. However, there are several related tests that generally support the tenor of the hypothesis. These include a study by Cable and Judge (1996) that demonstrates that applicants choose to join organizations that they believe they will fit, which is just a short step away from demonstrating that applicants choose to join organizations that they 'actually' fit. This is the gap that the current study addresses. Specifically, this study examines whether or not people apply to organizations whose values they share.

Measurement of values

The most natural tool to use to assess Schneider's attraction proposition would be the OCP, as previous researchers have done. However, the original card sort is impractical when there are a large number of remote and geographically dispersed respondents (Block, 1978; Kerlinger, 1986; Nunnally, 1978). To combat the impracticalities of card sorts in such circumstances, Cable and Judge (1996) transformed the OCP into a reduced paper and pencil sort that they argue replicates the ranking process of the Q-sort without the need to use cards. Unfortunately for the present study, their revised version of the OCP has been criticized by Barber and Wesson (1998) who examined the way people completed the instrument using concurrent verbal protocol analysis. They built and compared two questionnaires based on the items on the OCP. The first of these replicated Cable and Judge's (1996) tool in which respondents are asked to place the items in order of their desirability. The second of these questionnaires employed a Likert-scale and each respondent was asked to indicate the desirability of each of the items. The researchers found that the paper and pencil version of the OCP card sort (1) failed to replicate the cognitive processes of the original card sort, (2) contained items the respondents did not understand, (3) forced respondents to guess, and (4) caused respondents to ask for clarification about the instructions. The Likert-scaled version, on the other hand, presented none of these problems.

Barber and Wesson's (1998) conclusion contained some strong views on the appropriateness of the paper and pencil sort as a substitute to the card sort. 'These results lead us to conclude that the construct validity of the component parts of the OCP may be compromised by use of a paper and pencil Q-sort, and that the rating version presents far fewer concerns' (Barber & Wesson, 1998, p. 98). '[W]e believe that the behavioral consequences of the frustration experienced by the Q-sort participants are probably understated. Furthermore, it did appear that the more demanding Q-sort task generated substantially different thought processes than did the rating task. [… A] pencil and paper sorting approach has significant drawbacks and no significant advantages relative to a rating approach. We strongly encourage adoption of a rating format of the OCP when actual card sorts cannot be used’ (Barber & Wesson, 1998, p. 99).

When the OCP was being developed in the late-1980s, it was generally agreed that a person’s values were hierarchically organized according to their salience to the individual. Since this time, the values literature has moved on significantly and there is now much less unanimity about whether values are hierarchically organized or independently held (Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Indeed, a main thrust of this literature is now suggesting that values are held independently of each other (Stackman, Pinder & Connor, 2000). Although the values literature is now divided between the two schools of thought, the general thrust of recent research points towards a view that values are held independently of each other. Accordingly, there is theoretical support to justify Barber and Wesson’s (1998) suggestion of a paper and pencil rating version of the OCP (i.e. a version that asks respondents to rate each value independently of others). This is the approach taken in the present study. However, it must be noted that the accepted view of values within the P–O fit literature strongly holds that values are hierarchically structured.

In their study of the OCP, Barber and Wesson (1998) noted the difficulty that respondents had understanding the items in the set. Whilst most items were understood by respondents, several items stood out. Initial trials of the OCP items at the sites chosen for the present study supported this view with many people having considerable trouble with their abstract nature. The OCP authors assert that the 54 items are “a comprehensive set of values that could be used to characterize both individuals and organizations” (O’Reilly et al., 1991, p. 495). The items that emerged are short value statements, mostly two or three word statements. Predominantly they are phrased as instrumental values, although some terminal values appear (Stackman et al., 2000). By phrasing the items in a conceptual way, the authors allowed respondents to interpret each value in ways specific to themselves. This idiographic interpretation creates concerns both about the commensurability of individuals’ responses to other respondents and creates potential difficulties for respondents’ understanding each of the values, as highlighted by Barber and Wesson’s (1998) findings. For example, take the OCP value “flexibility”. Does it mean that (1) individuals are flexible? (2) cultures are flexible? (3) managers are flexible? (4) staff are flexible? (5) values are flexible? or something else such as managerial rhetoric for “exploitation”? (Sisson, 1994).

Resolving the issue of the appropriate phrasing of values is not isolated to the OCP. Schwartz (1992), for example, has categorized values at a conceptual or universal level extending the work of Rokeach (1973). Although his focus is on universal values, he acknowledges that these are too abstract to be used at the operational level (i.e. in questionnaires, card sorts etc.). In a later paper (Schwartz, 1994) he recommends that values be expressed in terms relating to behaviors suited to the specific environment in which the research instrument is being used. This is important, he argues, because not all universal values are suited to every situation and phrasing them in context-specific terms improves construct validity. Schwab (1980), who also conceptualized values at the conceptual and operational levels, supports this view.

Method

Measure development

For the reasons outlined above, it was decided to rephrase the OCP items in terms describing the value as it might be observed in an organizational setting. For example, "flexibility" was changed to "people are flexible in their approach to work" and "tolerance" was changed to "people tolerate the mistakes of others". The values underpinning each of the reworked items are still transparent, but by expressing them in terms of the behavior of individuals in organizations (or modes of conduct), the concerns of Schwab (1980), Schwartz (1992, 1994) and Stackman et al (2000) were addressed. In reworking the items, it was possible to produce many different items relating to each original item in the OCP; the number of reworked items was limited only by the researcher's imagination. In choosing a selection to be tested in subsequent studies, those items that seemed the most direct operationalization of the original OCP item were chosen. An additional factor that influenced the selection was the desire to produce a varied set of items to make completion of the measure less repetitive.

Following trials of different scales and anchors, a seven-point Likert-scale was adopted with an off-centre neutral point. In response to the prompt, *"How characteristic of your organization's culture are the following items?"*, the following anchored scale was adopted: (1) 'very uncharacteristic', (2) 'uncharacteristic', (3) 'neutral', (4) 'sometimes found', (5) 'characteristic', (6) 'very characteristic', and (7) 'a defining characteristic'. In response to the prompt, *"How desirable is it for each of the following items to be a part of the organization you work for?"*, the following anchored scale was adopted: (1) 'very undesirable', (2) 'undesirable', (3) 'neutral', (4) 'desirable', (5) 'very desirable', (6) 'important', and (7) 'essential'.

A sample of 1,004 managers from a broad cross-section of British companies completed the questionnaire so that some of its psychometric properties could be explored. These respondents completed the questionnaire to report both their own values and the values of their employer. Analysis of the results yielded 23 items that were common to both individual and organizational values. (Full details of this development work are available from the author and are the subject of a separate paper, which is currently under review elsewhere.) The 23 values used in this questionnaire appear in the Appendix.

Sample

Site. The graduate entry to managerial posts in nine utility companies in the United Kingdom was chosen as the site of the present study. Utility companies do not have the strong associations with particular professions or vocations that accountancy firms, banks, hospitals and other such organizations do, which is a problem associated with previous studies such as Chatman (1991) and Sheridan (1992). Instead, they employ a wide cross-section of people in a wide variety of jobs. For example, they employ clerical and administrative staff, shop assistants, sales and marketing people, engineers, human resources staff, cleaners, customer care staff, and even some professional staff such as accountants and lawyers. Each of these companies was functionally structured. Only a small number of departments in each company sought graduate entrants. These functional departments included finance, marketing and sales, engineering, information technology, and human resources. In total, 19 different departments spread across the nine utility companies sought graduates.

Applicants. Research questionnaires were sent to applicants by staff in the Human Resources department. The procedure was as follows. If someone was interested in applying to the organization they would get a brochure containing an application form from their university's careers centre, at a corporate presentation during the milk round, or by phoning the organization to request one. Every application was acknowledged with a letter. It was with these acknowledgement letters that the research questionnaire was sent to applicants. To reinforce the point that the questionnaire was only being used for academic purposes, applicants were asked to send their completed questionnaires to the researcher at a university address in a pre-paid, pre-addressed envelope.

In total, the companies received applications from 825 different people. Of these, 621 applicants returned completed questionnaires, which is a response rate of 72.3%. 54% were male and 46% female. Some 68% of applicants had had full-time work and 76% had had part-work. The mean length of time that applicants report they had been in full-time work was 21 months. The mean length of time that applicants report they had been in part-time work was 23 months. The average age of applicants was 23 years and 6 months with a standard deviation of 4 years and 5 months. The youngest applicant was 19 years and the oldest was 49 years and six months.

Control group. It was necessary to capture the values of the general population that applications might come from so that it would be possible to investigate whether people self-select from this pool based on their fit to the values of the organization (and the people in it). In discussion with members of the Human Resources departments of the companies, it was discovered that historically eleven UK universities supplied a disproportionately large percentage of applicants. It is to these eleven universities that the companies make their milk round presentations. As a result, these eleven universities were selected to provide a sample of the values of the applicant population.

To gain these values, the heads of the careers service at each of these eleven universities was approached for help with the distribution of the questionnaires. All kindly accepted. The process for distributing the questionnaires was as follows. To each university careers centre, 50 copies of the questionnaire were sent. Accompanying every questionnaire was a letter explaining the purpose of the questionnaire and giving instructions and a prepaid addressed envelope for the questionnaires to be returned. The questionnaires were placed on the counter of the careers service. Careers service staff asked users of the service, i.e. people looking for work as graduate entrants, to complete a questionnaire. These questionnaires were distributed at the same time that people were applying to the organization.

The questionnaires asked job seekers for their values in the same manner as applicants to the corporation. In addition, they were asked to report their degree course, the type of work they were looking for, their gender, date of birth, whether they have had full-time or part-time work and, if so, for how long.

In total, 550 questionnaires were distributed and 171 (31.1%) were returned completed (2 were not completed properly). There was a mixed response rate from the eleven universities. Only 4 questionnaires (8%) were returned from one university, whereas the most responsive returned 28 (56%). Amongst these questionnaires, there were 136 responses that could be categorized as looking for work in a similar type of department to those being offered by the companies (38% male, 62% female). Some 8 people did not respond to this part of the questionnaire and 27 expressed a desire for a different type of work.

Corporate values. Three sets of values were gathered from organizational members. The first and second set of values came from employees in recruiting departments who were asked to report their own values and the values of their department. The third set of values came from the members of the top team of each utility. These people were asked to report the values of their organization. They were not asked to report their own values as the people granting access were uncomfortable asking for information from senior managers. In all circumstances, where there was evidence that the department members or senior managers did not agree on the nature of values of their department or organization, i.e. when reliability coefficients fell below 0.7 (George & Mallery, 1995), the department or organization was removed from all subsequent analysis.

Types of fit

The design of the study means that three types of fit can be calculated for every applicant and member of the control group. First, their fit to top team members' assessments of the corporate values can be assessed. This form of fit is termed person–organization values fit from hereon (P–OV fit). The second type of fit is to departmental members' assessments of their departments' values. This form of fit is termed person–department values from hereon (P–DV fit). The third type of fit that can be calculated is to department members' own values. From hereon, this form of fit is termed person–people fit (P–P fit).

Fit was calculated using the sum of absolute differences method. Difference scores have their critics (e.g. Edwards, 1993; Nunnally, 1978). Edwards (1993, 1994) argues that there is conceptual ambiguity inherent to difference scores because they hide the relative contributions of the person and the organization to the overall score, although they do produce information on the size of the congruence. Edwards is also concerned that many forms of difference scores ignore the direction of difference. However, whilst these are important concerns, they are largely irrelevant when the researcher's interest is in the degree of fit. In such situations, the researcher wants to measure the congruence of people and organizations. The comparative importance of the strength of the person and organization variables are of secondary interest to the measure of fit, and the direction of fit is irrelevant because it is the degree of fit, rather than particular types of fit, that is of theoretical interest (Tisak & Smith, 1994a, 1994b).

Results

Three hypotheses were tested:

1. *The value congruence between applicants and the recruiting organization will be greater than the value congruence between people in the control group and the recruiting organization (i.e. P–OV fit).*

2. *The value congruence between applicants and the recruiting department will be greater than the value congruence between people in the control group and the recruiting department (i.e. P–DV fit).*

3. *The value congruence between applicants and the employees of the recruiting department will be greater than the value congruence between people in the control group and the employees of the recruiting department (i.e. P–P fit).*

To test the first hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted to compare the P–OV fit of applicants and members of the control group who were seeking work in commercial organizations. In one of the organizations, there was a statistically significant difference in the proposed direction (applicants $n = 12$, $\bar{x} = -31.24$, sd = 5.22; control group $n = 135$, $\bar{x} = -34.87$, sd = 6.14; $t = -1.982$, sig. = .025), but in the other six there were no significant differences. It is possible that this way of conceptualizing the control group contains an element of person–vocation fit (P–V fit), which might inflate the differences between the two constituencies. This is possible because there is an imbalance in the type of work (i.e.

vocation) sought by the people in the two constituencies. To eliminate potential contamination by P–V fit, the same analysis was run again, but this time it was conducted department by department and only those people in the control group wanting the type of work of the department were included. This leaves firm-specific P–OV fit. The reworked numbers are contained in Table 1 below. A one-tailed significance test was employed because the differences in mean fit scores were hypothesized as being in one direction.

Company	Department	Status	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (1-tailed)
Water	Finance	Control group	18	-30.57	6.45	-1.008	.162
		Applicants	9	-28.11	4.83		
Water	Mgt & Cust Servs	Control group	38	-31.22	7.17	.463	.323
		Applicants	36	-31.93	5.99		
Water	Engineering	Control group	18	-28.96	5.18	.870	.195
		Applicants	21	-30.64	6.64		
Electric 1	IT	Control group	22	-32.89	5.50	-1.423	.080
		Applicants	47	-30.75	5.95		
Electric 2	Finance	Control group	18	-34.85	5.85	-.378	.355
		Applicants	6	-33.85	4.73		
Electric 3	Sales & Marketing	Control group	14	-31.68	3.98	-.244	.410
		Applicants	12	-31.24	5.22		
Electric 4	Finance	Control group	18	-34.94	6.90	-.431	.334
		Applicants	25	-34.10	5.93		
Telecoms	Finance	Control group	18	-38.44	6.20	-.906	.186
		Applicants	14	-36.29	7.28		
Telecoms	Mgt & Cust Servs	Control group	38	-37.38	6.67	-.629	.266
		Applicants	13	-36.04	6.57		
Telecoms	Engineering	Control group	18	-36.72	5.61	1.228	.115
		Applicants	11	-39.00	3.15		
Telecoms	IT	Control group	22	-38.70	6.30	-.174	.432
		Applicants	41	-38.39	7.10		
Telecoms	Sales & Marketing	Control group	14	-33.21	5.78	.947	.175
		Applicants	23	-35.43	7.51		
Electric 6	Engineering	Control group	18	-29.40	4.99	1.279	.110
		Applicants	22	-31.58	5.64		
Electric 6	Strategy & Dev.	Control group	12	-32.96	7.90	-1.250	.110
		Applicants	26	-30.20	5.47		

Table 1 *Comparison of P–OV fit for applicants to each department against people in the control group who want similar work*

The results displayed in Table 1 control for applicants' choice of work: for example, it compares the P–OV fit of applicants wanting work as accountants, say, to the same fit of people in the control group wanting to work in finance and related fields. In nine of the fourteen cases, applicants' fit is greater than non-applicants' fit, although none of these differences are statistically significant. In the remaining five cases, the control groups' fit are greater than applicants' fit, although, yet again, none of these differences are statistically significant. Overall, the results broadly balance out and the first hypothesis is rejected. In short, these results do not support the idea that applicants have a better P–OV fit than the control group once P–V fit is controlled for.

The second hypothesis was tested in a similar fashion to the first. Again, the initial conceptualizing of the control group as a whole, rather than by splitting it by vocation, created effects with the two recruiting sales and marketing departments exhibiting statistically significant differences in the predicted direction. As a result, the control group was split with just those people wanting the same type of work as the applicants being included thereby controlling for P–V fit. The results are displayed in Table 2 below.

Company	Department	Status	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (1-tailed)
Water	Finance	Control group	18	-37.92	5.33	-1.340	.096
		Applicants	9	-35.02	5.23		
Water	Engineering	Control group	18	-34.45	4.99	1.803	.040
		Applicants	21	-37.71	6.13		
Electric 1	IT	Control group	22	-33.98	4.86	-.628	.262
		Applicants	47	-33.06	6.04		
Electric 3	Sales & Marketing	Control group	14	-29.96	4.74	-.899	.189
		Applicants	12	-28.29	4.72		
Electric 4	Finance	Control group	18	-35.13	5.66	-.902	.181
		Applicants	25	-33.85	3.66		
Electric 5	Human Resources	Control group	13	-24.80	5.86	1.180	.122
		Applicants	39	-26.84	5.23		
Telecoms	Finance	Control group	18	-36.99	5.84	-.486	.316
		Applicants	14	-36.01	5.34		
Telecoms	Engineering	Control group	18	-40.83	4.89	1.034	.155
		Applicants	11	-42.51	2.79		
Telecoms	IT	Control group	22	-34.10	4.83	-.864	.196
		Applicants	41	-32.83	5.92		
Telecoms	Sales & Marketing	Control group	14	-29.46	4.11	.511	.307
		Applicants	23	-30.35	5.61		
Electric 6	Engineering	Control group	18	-31.88	3.92	.975	.168
		Applicants	22	-33.51	6.12		

Table 2 *Comparison of department P–O fit for applicants to the department against people in the control group who want a similar type of work*

Table 2 shows that just one of the eleven t-tests has a result at the $p<.05$ level and that is not in the hypothesized direction. This analysis is particularly interesting because it shows that when P–V fit is controlled for, no attraction effect for P–DV fit can be found with this data set.

Similar results are exhibited when the type of fit is P–P fit with significant effects found for the sales and marketing and finance departments when the control group is not separated by vocation. Once P–V fit is controlled for, all significant differences disappear causing the third hypothesis to be rejected. These results are displayed in Table 3 below.

Company	Department	Status	N	Mean	SD	t	Sig. (1-tailed)
Water	Engineering	Control group	18	-23.66	3.62	-.074	.471
		Applicants	21	-23.54	6.31		
Electric 1	IT	Control group	22	-24.28	4.23	-1.234	.111
		Applicants	47	-22.79	4.89		
Electric 2	Finance	Control group	18	-23.77	6.18	-.082	.468
		Applicants	6	-23.53	5.56		
Electric 3	Sales & Marketing	Control group	14	-22.68	5.81	-.467	.323
		Applicants	12	-21.75	3.98		
Electric 4	Finance	Control group	18	-24.71	5.94	-1.388	.087
		Applicants	25	-22.67	3.67		
Electric 5	Human Resources	Control group	13	-21.17	3.04	.539	.298
		Applicants	39	-21.94	4.85		
Telecoms	Finance	Control group	18	-23.48	5.41	.047	.481
		Applicants	14	-23.59	7.46		
Telecoms	Mgt & Cust Servs	Control group	38	-27.26	7.37	-1.497	.071
		Applicants	13	-23.97	4.84		
Telecoms	Engineering	Control group	18	-22.18	4.10	.382	.353
		Applicants	11	-22.85	5.41		
Telecoms	Sales & Marketing	Control group	14	-21.71	5.89	.922	.182
		Applicants	23	-23.25	4.23		
Electric 6	Engineering	Control group	18	-23.92	3.84	1.019	.157
		Applicants	22	-25.47	5.40		

Table 3 *Comparison of department P–P fit for applicants to the department against people in the control group who want a similar type of work*

Discussion

This study looked at whether the people who apply to an organization are a better fit than a sample of people who were looking for similar types of work at the same time through the same process. This analysis was conducted by comparing the fit of applicants to the fit of (1) people in the control group contemporaneously seeking commercial work through university careers services and (2) people in the control group contemporaneously seeking a similar type of work through university careers services. The results of these tests are clear: once P–V fit is controlled for, applicants do not have a better fit than the people in the control group. Hence, it seems that the people in the control group who want work in commercial organizations make decisions on what type of work they want to do, rather than on which organizations they want to work in. In short, graduates make vocational rather than organizational choices. As a result, the data in this study reject Schneider's proposition that organizations attract people who share their values.

The researcher was able to talk to the heads of four of the university careers centers during the data-gathering period to discuss graduates' approach to application. Generally speaking, graduates decide which types of jobs they want to do and then apply for all relevant openings that seem attractive (usually judged on starting salary and location), especially when application is allowed by standard application form. For example, someone decides that he or she wishes to train as an accountant within industry and then applies to all those organizations offering such training. He or she might exclude all those companies offering less than £20,000 starting salary that are not located in the south east of England. The heads of the university career centers quoted examples from all manner of professions and jobs to support this approach. Such an approach to job search has been widely reported in the literature (e.g. Herriot, 1984; Keenan, 1997; Rynes, Orlitzky & Bretz, 1997). As one careers centre head put it, "we're called careers centers or services, not companies centers". Not surprisingly, therefore, the data accords with applicants' behavior and reveals the vocational effect, but no organization-specific effect.

Returning to Schneider's original paper, it is interesting to note that he offers very little to support the notion of a firm-specific attraction effect. As mentioned earlier, his main justification for advocating a firm-specific attraction effect is the vocational choice literature. He quotes Holland (1976, p. 533) thus, "Vocational choice is assumed to be the result of a person's type, or patterning of types *and* the environment" (Schneider, 1987, p. 441). Schneider concludes by suggesting that "the career environments people join are similar to the people who join them" (p. 441). Schneider extrapolates from the findings of Holland (1976, 1985), Tom (1971) and Owens (Neiner & Owens, 1985; Owens & Schoenfeldt, 1979) to posit that people will be attracted to "organizations of a particular sort" (p. 442) in the same way that they are attracted to vocations and jobs. By conducting the present study in utility companies with functional departments, it was possible both to observe this vocational choice effect and to control for it. Once controlled for, there was no firm-specific effect: people are attracted to work in a sales and marketing department because it is a sales and marketing department, not because the company is particularly attractive to them. The findings of the present study show that Schneider's extrapolation from the vocational choice literature is inappropriate for the respondents in the present study.

Schneider's attraction hypothesis is so intuitive and compelling that it is interesting to discuss whether or not there are reasons why the present study might not have found the effect, when, in many other cases, it might be present (a form of Type II error). Perhaps the most obvious study-specific constraint is the choice to study graduates entering work. Such an environment is compelling to the recruitment and selection researcher as it is one of the few planned opportunities to study organizational entry with the volumes required to produce statistical significance (Rynes et al, 1997). In addition, procedures for graduate entry tend to adhere to the principles of rigorous personnel selection, which informs the dominant selection paradigm (Schmitt & Chan, 1998). The allure of graduate entry is so powerful that it dominates the P–O fit literature (Rynes et al, 1997). The influential studies of Rynes and Gerhart (1990), Chatman (1991), Cable and Judge (1996, 1997), and Kristof-Brown (2000) all considered graduates or 'milk round' recruiters. Given the findings of the present study (i.e. that attraction is to the vocation not the organization), the focus on graduates seems inappropriate when the study seeks to discover P–O fit influences. In the present study most of the graduates were seeking their first 'real' job. There are implications of this, which are well recorded in the literature that considers the transition of graduates into the world of work. Nicholson and Arnold (1991), for example, demonstrated that graduates entered work with unrealistic expectations. Keenan and Newton (1984, 1986) found that engineering graduates quickly became frustrated because their aspirations were not met, which was also a finding of Mabey (1986), suggesting unrealistic expectations. Arnold (1985) reports that graduates found 'the general atmosphere at work' (p. 308) the most commonly reported source of surprise. In addition, half of his graduate respondents said that 'What the people are like with whom you work' (p. 313) was a surprise to them. The overall sense of this literature is that graduates enter organizations as 'innocents abroad'. They know little of the world of work, working environments, or the employing organizations. Given the consistent finding that graduates hold unrealistic expectations, one has to wonder whether graduates are able to make objective assessments about the nature of the organizations to which they might apply.

The second study-specific factor that might account for the absence of an attraction effect is the choice of utility companies as the location of the study. Among the reasons why this was chosen was that they exemplify the 'typical' large organizations that recruit on the milk round. Graduates would almost certainly have heard of the names of these companies, and graduates may have been more aware of them than usual due to the news flow surrounding the privatization of the utilities in the preceding decade. But whilst the names will have been recognizable to graduates, these companies are largely indistinguishable from other large corporations. If Schneider was right, this would not matter; his framework, after all, does not contain any provisos or clauses limiting it to a particular type of organization or industry (except for the enigmatic phrase 'organizations of a particular sort', (Schneider, 1987, p.442)). As a representative of the 'grey corporations' of the UK, the organizations providing the location for the present study provide a neutral reference to explore for a general attraction effect. That such an effect was not found with this corporation makes extrapolation to other 'grey corporations' reasonably straightforward. However, it does beg the question of what sort of organization might exhibit an attraction effect. Presumably one with strong values that are visible to the applicant population.

The last point raises a third study-specific issue. This study used an instrument that captured 23 work values. Generally speaking, these values were operationalized as items depicting the behavior of employees following the guidance of Stackman et al (2000); i.e. as instrumental values. Such values may not, of course, correspond with the values that applicants use to make judgments about the attraction of organizations. Schneider (1987) cites the example of the YMCA as an organization that might exhibit an attraction effect. The YMCA has a strong and visible set of values connected to religion, social welfare and support, which are linked to the particular organization. This produces several avenues for researchers wishing to find the attraction effect. The first of these might be to take a more conceptual approach to values. By focusing on the behaviors of employees, applicants need an understanding of work within organizations, which previous studies have shown that graduates have unrealistic expectations of. Perhaps looking at the behavior of organizations and conceptualizing values at this level, although it risks the anthropomorphism trap, might be a fruitful way forward. A second avenue might be to adopt an individual approach with the researcher studying the particular values of an organization and then measuring these values in employees, applicants, and relevant non-applicants. Such an approach has been suggested by Kristof-Brown (1997) for the capture of organizations' values. The third avenue might be to look for an alternative currency altogether. Values were used in this study as they represented a logical extension of previous work (e.g. Cable & Judge, 1996, 1997; Chatman, 1991; O'Reilly et al, 1991) and because Schneider's own clarifications suggested that values were paramount. Perhaps, goals, personality, climate, vision or some other dimension might show up an attraction effect.

Finally, it is interesting to return to the attraction literature for an explanation of why the attraction effect might not have been found. Other than referencing the vocational choice literature, Schneider's other justification for the attraction effect is the well-demonstrated 'similarity leads to attraction' phenomenon. However, similarity does not stand in isolation as the reason for attraction. Other factors, such as proximity, exposure, and familiarity, all influence the ability of similarity to influence attraction (e.g. Festinger, Schachter & Back, 1950; Gross, 1992; Saegert, Swap & Zajonc, 1973; Turban, 2001). In the case of the behavior of graduate applicants during the milk round, their exposure to recruiting organizations, other than their general life experience, is the brochure and a short presentation. The brochure for the utility in the present study was very brief with just a few sides of marketing material and a page on each business unit and the opportunities each one offered. The presentations were 'manicured' to project the organizations in the most favorable light, as was the case for most organizations' presentations on the milk round. These presentations occurred midway through the application process and so might have only had a marginal effect on enticing more applications. Hence, most applicants' exposure to the recruiting companies is likely to have been very slight. The earlier discussion on graduates' entry into work demonstrated that they have little familiarity with organizational life. And proximity is not relevant given the clustering of applicants in locations remote to the recruiting organization. As a result, it seems unlikely that these remote applicants can gain sufficient understanding of the recruiting organizations' values for the congruence of values to have any significant effect on their application behavior. Not surprisingly, therefore, no attraction effect based on value congruence could be found.

This discussion prompts the question of what circumstances it might be possible to find the attraction effect. From the above, several conditions can be advanced:

1. Potential applicants must understand the nature of work and organizational behavior.
2. The values of recruiting organizations must be visible.
3. Potential applicants must be able to assess recruiting organizations' values, which highlights, proximity, exposure and familiarity.

Two environments suggest themselves. The first is the largely unresearched world of internal recruitment (Harris, 2000). In this environment, potential applicants are already employed by the recruiting organization and therefore are likely to be fully aware of the environment to which they would like to move. They are likely to understand exactly how the environment differs to their current environment and are able to find out more about the environment by talking to colleagues to fill any holes in their knowledge. The second environment is those industries or professions where there is (1) considerable movement between a relatively small number of organizations and (2) opportunities for potential applicants to discover what work in other organizations will be like. An example of such a profession would be academics in higher education (HE). In this profession there are structural mechanisms, e.g. conferences, external examining, visiting lectureships, that give potential applicants opportunities to find out more about places that they might apply to. Moreover, such is the circulation of academic staff that potential applicants often know people who have intimate knowledge of the recruiting establishment whom they can contact to find out more. Moreover, in the HE environment, the type of work is likely to be broadly similar in most institutions. As a result, the decision to apply elsewhere is likely to be influenced to a greater extent by person–organization fit and person–people fit than job moves where jobs might be expected to be very different.

These observations suggest that it is possible to refine ASA theory in the following ways. The present study demonstrated that it was not enough to say that "similarity leads to attraction" as it was demonstrated that similarity did not lead to attraction. The discussion highlighted two reasons for this phenomenon. First, these applicants were concerned with vocational choice, not organizational choice. People chose to apply to this organization because the employer had vacancies in particular types of work; i.e. there was no firm-specific element to applicants' choosing. Second, the applicants in this study were remote with little opportunity to assess the values of the recruiting organization. Drawing from the interpersonal attraction literature, these people did not have proximity, exposure and familiarity to the recruiting organization, which are viewed as necessary precursors for the similarity leads to attraction effect. From these two issues, two attraction propositions can be advanced:

1. *Applicants must have made, have embarked on, and be settled upon their choice of vocation before an organization-specific attraction effect can appear.*
2. *Applicants must have proximity, exposure, and familiarity with the recruiting organization's values for value congruence to influence attraction.*

Managerial implications

The present study has remained neutral on Schneider's fears (Schneider, 1987, Schneider et al, 1995, 1998, 2000) that greater homogeneity of workforces leads to organizational dysfunction. It has simply explored whether or not the attraction phase of the proposed ASA cycle contributes towards organizational homogeneity. Consequently, no views can be offered on whether or not it is right for organizations to recruit and select for fit. However, some ideas can be offered to those organizations that have decided that they do, or do not, wish to do so.

One managerial implication that emerges from this study is the ineffectiveness of recruitment interventions to alter the value profile of applicants. The recruiting companies had expressed a desire to communicate their corporate values during the attraction phase. Accordingly, they designed their brochure to feature the values they wished to promote – achievement, excellence, growth, employee-friendly personnel policies, community involvement – and reiterated these values in milk round presentations at the universities that they expected to attract most people from. Despite these efforts, the profile of applicants was unaltered and did not differ from the general population from which applicants came. There are many ways to interpret this finding (perhaps the companies were ineffective in their efforts, perhaps applicants can see through the 'hype' of brochures and presentations, or perhaps applicants are 'blind' to the messages), but the most likely explanation seems to be that potential applicants knew little of the recruiting organization and applied to it because it offered the type of work they desired. If so, the natural managerial implication is that efforts by organizations to attract applicants with particular values are likely to be fruitless unless considerable effort – i.e. much more than demonstrated by the companies in the present study – is put into the exercise.

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Appendix

Conversion of OCP items

Original OCP Item	Reworked Item
Being innovative	Staff are continually being innovative
Being quick to take advantage of opportunities	People are quick to take advantage of opportunities
A willingness to experiment	Staff experiment with new ways of doing things
Respect for the individual's rights	People have respect for the rights of others
Action oriented	Employees are very busy at work
Developing friends at work	People develop friendships at work
Working in collaboration with others	People work in collaboration with others
Working long hours	People work long hours
Risk taking	Employees take risks
Autonomy	Staff have a lot of autonomy
Paying attention to detail	Staff pay attention to detail
Taking initiative	People act on their own initiative
Being demanding	Staff have considerable demands made of them
Offers praise for good performance	Employees are given praise for good performance
Fitting in	People try to fit in
An emphasis on quality	People make quality a priority
Being results oriented	People focus on profits
Being precise	Staff are precise
Fairness	Being fair is a priority for people in the organisation
Being people oriented	Managers are concerned that people are treated well
Opportunities for professional growth	There are opportunities for growth and development
Being highly organised	Staff approach their work in a very organised manner
Being competitive	People are competitive