



## Person–organization fit: Testing socialization and attraction–selection–attrition hypotheses

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### ABSTRACT

Using the socialization and attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) frameworks, this study examined the relation between employees' work values and their organization's values (person–organization fit). With a two year time interval, 140 respondents participated in a longitudinal study. After entry, socialization served to enhance homogeneity. The work values underwent small changes and the perception of fit with the organization grew. Despite high retention rates results confirmed the attrition effect. Results indicated that the lower the perceived match between own and organizational values at entry, the more likely it was that someone left the organization over time. We concluded that socialization as well as attrition mechanisms were present at the same time.

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### 1. Introduction

Researchers often mentioned person–organization fit (P–O fit) when writing about the homogeneity hypothesis, stating that as organizations mature, they become increasingly occupied by similar people. Over time, an organization's members tend to become similar in terms of personality, values, and interests. For instance, Hansen, Huggins, and Ban (2003) reported that the values of people who changed economic sectors corresponded closely to the values of their new sector. Unfortunately, their study design did not allow for cause-and-effect statements. The work values may have helped persuade people to change, or employees of a particular sector may have adopted the prevailing norms of that setting. The attraction part of the attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) literature addresses the first mechanism, whereas the socialization literature addresses the second process. The present study sought to examine how both socialization and attrition operate. We concentrated on the causal relation between an employee's work values and the organizational environment, a largely unanalyzed topic due mostly to methodological difficulties (Chatman, Wong, & Joyce, 2008).

Although many aspects of organizations and people are important, one fundamental and enduring characteristic, is values. Because both employees and organizations have values, they can be directly compared in terms of value congruence, as the defining operationalization of P–O fit (Finegan, 2000; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). Past research indicated that when employees' values and priorities match those of their organization, they are happier and more likely to stay (Ostroff, Shin, & Kinicki, 2005). Various studies examined the consequences of value congruence and its effect on employee attitudes and behavior. For example, Whitely, Dougherty, and Dreher (1991) and Bretz and Judge (1994) assumed work motivation to be maximized when individual characteristics fit the organizational environment. Meta-analyses of P–O fit and outcomes revealed a significant relationship with work attitudes such as intention to quit, job satisfaction and

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organizational commitment and with behaviors such as organizational citizenship, turnover, and performance (e.g. Hoffman & Woehr, 2006; Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Verquer, Beehr, & Wagner, 2003). Information on repeated measurement of values may provide a more complete description of the attrition–socialization processes. Furthermore Dickson, Resick, and Goldstein (2008) as well as Kristof-Brown et al. (2005) considered the impact of newcomers' initial values and fit and how these may change during tenure, as relatively neglected topics within this literature; making them promising directions for additional research.

According to Cooper-Thomas, van Vianen, and Anderson (2004) three mechanisms can cause changes in fit perceptions during the crucial initial period after organizational entry: (1) employee values may change as a result of socialization, (2) organizational values or the perception of it may change, and (3) individuals may change organizations. Each reaction leads to increasing within-organization homogeneity of values. The attraction–selection–attrition (ASA) literature describes the first reaction, whereas the socialization literature describes the second reaction. During socialization, employees acquire the attitudes, behavior, and knowledge needed to participate as an organizational member (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). Over time individuals may change their values and personalities in the direction of organization values (Cable & Parsons, 2001). Due to socialization newcomers establish an organizational identity and display attitudes, values, and behaviors that coincide with the organization's culture (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998). A few empirical studies demonstrated that socialization helps establish fit between newcomers and organizations (e.g. Cable & Parsons, 2001; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005). The ASA framework proposed by Schneider (1987) offers an alternative model to explain how organizations evolve toward psychological homogeneity. He stated that “the people make the place” and posited that over time forces within an organization operate to attract, select and retain an increasingly homogeneous group of employees. The ASA model assumes an influence of P–O fit on the applicant's job choice behavior (self-selection) as well as on the organization's hiring decision (employer selection). People are attracted to organizations, that have values similar to their own (attraction), and organizations select people who share their values (selection). Finally, individuals who do not fit the organization will leave voluntarily or be asked to leave (attrition). The outcome of these three processes determines the types of employees in an organization. Over time, organizations do tend toward homogeneity with regard to the type of employees (Dickson et al., 2008). As Judge and Cable (1997) reported, organizations attracted people who perceived a fit between their traits and preferences and the organization's culture. Furthermore, newcomers more often left when their values did not match those of the organization. According to Ostroff and Rothausen (1997) this impact of misfit is most prominent early in an individual's career within an organization. Additional empirical evidence supported this framework (e.g. Adkins, Russell, & Werbel, 1994; Cable & Judge, 1996; Van Vianen, 2000).

Socialization and attrition operate jointly to shape a firm's work force (Chatman et al., 2008). Socialization describes a force leading to a sense of fit, whereas attrition represents a force leading to misfit and exit. In the long run, at an organizational level both processes will lead to a homogeneous workforce. Notwithstanding, at the individual level both processes indicate something different (Chatman et al., 2008). Following the socialization theory, the individual adapts his or her values depending on the organizational environment, whereas in the attrition model the individual stays or leaves the organization depending on his or her original values. If he or she has a poor fit, the ASA model implies that he or she will eventually leave the company. To contrast the two theoretical perspectives, we studied individual work values and the perception of P–O fit using a longitudinal approach, as suggested by Kristof-Brown et al. in 2005. We opted for work values, as a specific type of values, defined as “general and relatively stable goals people desire and feel they ought to realize through working” (De Cooman et al., 2007, p. 125).

### 1.1. Hypotheses

Socialization occurs whenever employees change roles or cross boundaries within the organization, it is most intense when one first joins an organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). As a result, most interesting studies were longitudinal with data collection beginning either before graduation or shortly after organizational entry and continuing with one or more follow-up surveys 6 months to 2 years after entry (Bauer et al., 1998). Assuming that socialization plays the dominant role as Becker and Connor (2005) concluded from their research on private and public sector managers, we expected changes in work values over time. Following Cable and Parsons (2001), the socialization of employees is assumed to affect their individual values. Thus, comparing employees' values across different points in time can indicate their degree of socialization. Moreover, from a socialization perspective, we presumed the individual P–O fit to increase with tenure (Kim et al., 2005; Morrison, 1993). We formulated the following hypotheses:

**Hypothesis 1.** Work values at entry differ from work values after staying with an organization for two years.

**Hypothesis 2.** Compared to entry, the P–O fit is higher after staying with an organization for two years.

Alternatively, when assuming that ASA plays the dominant role, we expected that individuals who fit the environment when entering the organization would tend to remain, while those who felt they did not fit the organization would tend to resign or be dismissed (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Consequently, we formulated the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3.** The likelihood that an individual leaves an organization relates inversely to the perceived P–O fit when entering.

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