



# Perceived similarity, proactive adjustment, and organizational socialization

John D. Kammeyer-Mueller<sup>a,\*</sup>, Beth A. Livingston<sup>b</sup>, Hui Liao<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Florida; Department of Management, Warrington College of Business Administration, 2111 Stuzin Hall, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

<sup>b</sup> Cornell University, Human Resource Studies Department, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, 166 Ives Faculty Building, Ithaca, NY 14853, USA

<sup>c</sup> University of Maryland, Department of Management and Organization, Robert H. Smith School of Business, 4506 Van Munching Hall, College Park, MD 20742, USA

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## ABSTRACT

The present study explores how perceived demographic and attitudinal similarity can influence proactive behavior among organizational newcomers. We propose that newcomers who perceive themselves as similar to their co-workers will be more willing to seek new information or build relationships, which in turn will lead to better long-term adjustment. Results from a three-wave field investigation of newcomer proactive behavior show that newcomer perceptions of surface-level similarity to the rest of the work group in education and gender increased proactive adjustment behavior. Contrary to our expectations, perceived similarity in terms of age decreased proactive adjustment behavior—in other words, newcomers who were significantly different from their co-workers in age engaged in more proactive adjustment behaviors. Deep-level similarity in terms of work style was associated with higher levels of role clarity, but this relationship was not mediated by proactive adjustment behavior.

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## 1. Introduction

Adjusting to a new job can be a daunting proposition. Newcomers have to learn how to do their core job tasks, and they also need to find out what their co-workers consider normal and acceptable behavior. A great deal of research has shown that organizational socialization practices and the newcomer's proactive behavior improve the speed of the adjustment process (e.g., Ashford, Blatt, & VandeWalle, 2003; Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Miller & Jablin, 1991). However, socialization research has not paid much attention to the social context in which proactive behavior occurs (Johns, 2006). Although research suggests that organizational efforts to improve socialization are associated with greater proactive behavior from newcomers (Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006), little research has examined how the characteristics of the work group might influence newcomers' proactive adjustment. Additionally, Ashford and Black (1996) advised researchers to consider the organization's culture as an antecedent of newcomer proactive behavior.

We intend to demonstrate that certain types of perceived similarity affect proactive adjustment, and also that proactive behavior explains the effects of perceived similarity on important work outcomes among organizational newcomers. Fig. 1 provides an overview of our model.

Our three-wave longitudinal investigation makes a number of contributions to our understanding of perceived similarity and organizational socialization. First, we provide a preliminary integration of the currently separated literatures on relational demography and organizational socialization. Socialization research cannot yet answer questions about how diversity shapes the process of newcomer adjustment. Second, investigating newcomer adjustment also provides an opportunity for demography researchers to understand how differences amongst workers contribute to the *formation* of relationships. Proactive behavior may explain the effect of perceived work group similarity on individual newcomer adjustment, just as

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [kammeyjd@ufl.edu](mailto:kammeyjd@ufl.edu) (J.D. Kammeyer-Mueller), [ba193@cornell.edu](mailto:ba193@cornell.edu) (B.A. Livingston), [hliao@rhsmith.umd.edu](mailto:hliao@rhsmith.umd.edu) (H. Liao).

conflict or cooperation links diversity to performance at the group level. Third, unlike most previous research on socialization that has concentrated on newcomers proactively taking steps to fit in to the established norms of the workplace, we examine how newcomers' proactive behaviors can set the stage for them to engage in more self-starting and initiative-related behavior like citizenship and creativity.

### 1.1. Proactive adjustment behaviors

Based on previous research on proactive newcomer adjustment (e.g., Ashford & Black, 1996; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), we considered three proactive adjustment behaviors: feedback seeking, general socializing, and building a relationship with one's supervisor. These behaviors are related to higher levels of role clarity, organizational commitment, and social acceptance from co-workers (e.g., Gruman, Saks & Zweig, 2006; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). This focus on these social, interactive behaviors also fits the social nature of our theoretical framework.

### 1.2. Conceptualizations of perceived similarity

The organizational demography and diversity literatures often differentiate between deep- and surface-level characteristics (e.g., Harrison, Price & Bell, 1998; Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002). Surface-level characteristics are those that are almost immediately observable and measurable in simple and valid ways. Deep-level characteristics, on the other hand, refer to members' attitudes, beliefs, skills and values which are communicated through behavior and verbal cues. Learning about deep-level characteristics occurs over time, after interaction. In the current paper, we consider similarity in both surface- and deep-level characteristics, expecting the same patterns of results to emerge.

Surface-level (e.g., demographic) characteristics are often used as self-relevant categories in the context of a work group (Tsui et al., 1992). Newcomers introduced to groups in which they are visibly dissimilar from their coworkers may be less likely to proactively seek out information and feedback or to clarify tasks because they feel less comfortable with people who are different from themselves and perceive less support from their coworkers (Liao, Joshi, & Chuang, 2004). Surface level characteristics like age, education, gender, and race are easily observable, and influence individuals' self-categorizations (Harrison et al., 1998; Turner, 1987). Harrison et al. (1998, 2002) demonstrate that age, sex and race are important surface characteristics in making judgments of others. Education has been demonstrated to be an important characteristic in the demography literature as well (e.g., Tsui, Egan & O'Reilly, 1992; Kirchmeyer, 1995).

Though we expect that similarity in surface-level characteristics is likely to affect the proactive behaviors of newcomers, similarity in deep-level characteristics is also important. The importance of deep-level similarity has been demonstrated in recent research in a variety of contexts. For example, attitudinal similarity predicted protégés' satisfaction with mentors, even more so than demographic similarity (Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Marelich, 2002). Additionally, Turban and Jones (1988) found that deep-level similarity was a stronger predictor of performance and satisfaction than was demographic similarity. Again, whether one seeks out information or builds relationships will likely be facilitated by how comfortable one feels with one's coworkers. Additionally, as these theories of diversity suggest that individuals are attracted to demographically similar others because they anticipate that their own attitudes will be upheld (e.g., Barsade et al., 2000; Byrne, 1971), we expect that surface level perceived diversity would predict deep level perceived diversity. In our study, this means that characteristics like age, gender, ethnicity, and education level will be positively related to perceived deep level diversity.

**Hypothesis 1.** Perceived surface level similarity is positively related to perceived deep level similarity among organizational newcomers.

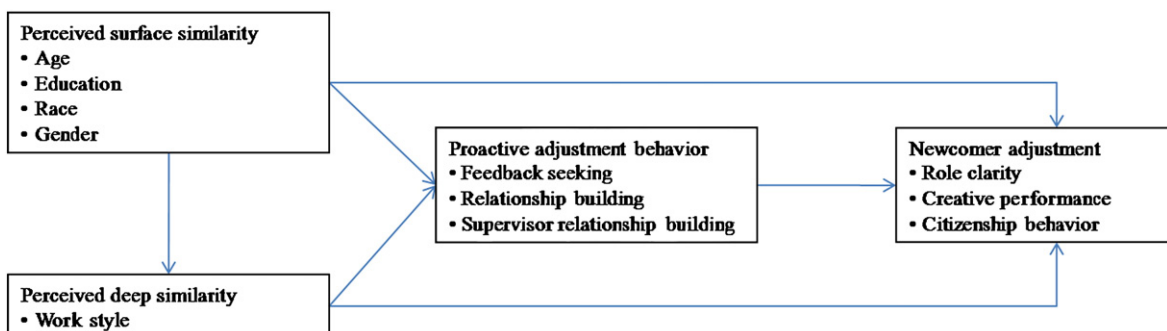


Fig. 1. A model of work group diversity and proactive behavior.

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