



# Socialization tactics, proactive behavior, and newcomer learning: Integrating socialization models <sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

The purpose of the study was to examine how socialization processes (socialization tactics and proactive behavior) jointly affect socialization content (i.e., what newcomers learn) and adjustment. Longitudinal survey data from 150 business and engineering graduates during their first 7 months of work indicate that: (1) institutionalized socialization and proactive behavior are each associated with newcomer learning, (2) the socialization processes and learning are each associated with various forms of adjustment, and (3) the socialization processes are associated with adjustment, while controlling for learning. These findings suggest that *how* newcomers are socialized has substantive and symbolic value over and above *what* they actually learn.

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## 1. Introduction

Organizational socialization is typically defined as the process through which individuals acquire knowledge about and adjust to their work context (e.g., Fisher, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). A great deal of research indicates that socialization has a large impact on the adjustment of individuals—typically newcomers—to their jobs, groups, and organizations (see reviews by Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007; Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Fisher, 1986; Moreland & Levine, 2001, and Saks & Ashforth, 1997a). However, adjustment can be regarded as a secondary or distal outcome of socialization (Haueter, Macan, & Winter, 2003; Saks & Ashforth, 1997a). A more primary or proximal outcome is foreshadowed by the definition above: the acquisition of knowledge about the work context. Indeed, newcomer learning is argued to be “at the heart of any organizational socialization model” (Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2005, p. 117). Surprisingly, far less research has focused on how the process of socialization affects the acquisition of knowledge—referred to as socialization content or newcomer learning (see Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002 and Hart & Miller, 2005, for examples of exceptions).

Further, the process of socialization has often been operationalized as either socialization tactics or newcomer proactive behavior. Socialization tactics refer to organization-driven or more or less formalized means of socializing individuals (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), whereas proactive behavior refers to individual-driven or informal means of “self-socializing” (Ashford & Black, 1996; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Traditionally, research has investigated these two processes relatively independently. That said, some research has examined how *specific* socialization tactics and *specific* forms of proactive behavior jointly affect adjustment, though not learning (e.g., Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005; Saks & Ashforth, 1997b). However, what has not been studied is how socialization tactics and proactive behavior *jointly affect newcomer learning*. A joint consideration of organization-driven tactics and individual-driven proactivity should offer a more complete view of the process of learning during adjustment (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bauer et al., 1998; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003).

As mentioned, newcomer learning is proposed to be an important mediator. Saks and Ashforth (1997a) position newcomer learning as a linchpin in bridging (i.e., mediating) the relationship between socialization process and adjustment outcomes. Although theory has placed learning as the integral mediator, empirical support has been mixed. Several studies found that learning indeed mediates (partially, in some cases, and fully, in others) the link between specific socialization processes and outcomes (e.g., Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003) whereas other research has found no such evidence (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999). Our study investigates more deeply the mediating role of learning between the joint socialization process of socialization tactics and newcomer proactivity and a set of fairly typical adjustment outcomes (i.e., job satisfaction, intentions to quit, self-rated job performance, organizational identification, and role innovation). We argue that, while *what* newcomers learn is important, *how* newcomers are socialized has substantive and symbolic value over and above what they actually learn.

In sum, the purpose of the study is to assess a more comprehensive perspective on how the joint socialization process affects socialization content and newcomer adjustment. More specifically, we investigate (1) how newcomer perceptions of socialization tactics and newcomer proactive behavior jointly affect the proximal outcome of newcomer learning (socialization content), and (2) how the process and content of socialization affect the

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