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The effects of early socialization experiences on content mastery and outcomes: A mediational approach [☆]

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Abstract

This field study examined how early socialization experiences affect new employee mastery of socialization content and socialization outcomes. New employees reported the realism of their preentry knowledge and the helpfulness of socialization agents. A follow-up survey assessed mastery of socialization content along with role clarity, job satisfaction, and affective organizational commitment. The results, based on 194 new employees of a large educational institution and using structural equation modeling, were highly supportive of the hypotheses. Realism of preentry knowledge and agent helpfulness, the two indicators of early socialization experiences, were associated with greater role clarity, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. In addition, the mastery of specific socialization content dimensions, the often-assumed intervening processes, was explicitly shown to mediate those relationships. The specific patterns of mediation observed further advance our understanding of the relationships

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between new employee mastery of socialization content and the determinants and consequences of that mastery.

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1. Introduction

Organizational socialization is the process by which employees learn about and adapt to new jobs, roles, and the culture of the workplace (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Research indicates that socialization occurs rapidly (Bauer & Green, 1994), the resulting adjustment is relatively stable (Adkins, 1995; Morrison, 1993), and early socialization experiences are related to important outcomes for both organizations and new employees (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Feldman, 1981; Jones, 1986). Socialization research has, however, tended to focus on those outcomes without sufficient attention to the processes underlying the development of those outcomes (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Fisher, 1986; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Current conceptualizations of the socialization process view the mastery of socialization content as a key mediator of the relationships between the antecedents and outcomes of socialization. For example, in the process model presented by Saks and Ashforth (1997), a wide range of factors influence the acquisition of information, uncertainty reduction, and learning. That learning, in turn, influences various proximal and distal outcomes.

Yet, only a few empirical studies (e.g., Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003) have actually examined the asserted mediating role of employee learning. The purpose of the current study is to further substantiate the mediating role of socialization content mastery and to begin identifying specific key links between early socialization experiences, the mastery of socialization content dimensions, and socialization outcomes. The model presented in Fig. 1 outlines the specific variables examined in the current study and the relationships expected among them. The rationale for the selection of these variables and support for the hypothesized relationships among them are provided below.

1.1. *Early socialization experiences*

Early socialization experiences are shaped by (a) formal efforts to facilitate newcomer adjustment such as recruitment (e.g., Wanous, 1992; Williams, Labig, & Stone, 1993) and orientating practices (e.g., Klein & Weaver, 2000; Louis, Posner, & Powell, 1983), (b) informal efforts undertaken by organizational members, and (c) proactive behaviors on the part of new employees (e.g., Morrison, 1993). The focus of the present study is not on specific experiences but on two overall indicators of early socialization experiences—the realism of preentry knowledge (RPK) and the helpfulness of socialization agents.

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