



The neglected role of proactive behavior and outcomes in newcomer socialization

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the direct, mediating, and moderating effects of proactive outcomes in the relationship between newcomer proactive behaviors and socialization outcomes. Based on a sample of 204 co-op university students who completed surveys at the end of their work term, the results indicated that newcomers who more frequently engaged in a proactive behavior (e.g., information seeking) were more likely to receive the corresponding proactive outcome (e.g., information). We also found that proactive outcomes mediate the relationship between proactive behaviors and socialization outcomes and several of the proactive behaviors were more strongly related to socialization outcomes for newcomers who obtained more proactive outcomes. These results indicate the important yet previously neglected role of proactive outcomes for understanding the relationship between newcomer proactive socialization behaviors and outcomes.

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Organizational socialization focuses on how newcomers adjust to their new surroundings and learn the behaviors, attitudes, and skills necessary to fulfill their roles and function effectively as a member of an organization (Fisher, 1986). Socialization has become more important in recent years as organizations realize the potential positive long-term effect of the on-boarding process on new hires' performance and retention and as a result of the increased mobility of the workforce (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). As noted by Bauer et al. (2007), individuals will need to navigate their socialization more often in their careers and organizations must provide for the socialization of newcomers more often.

One of the most significant shifts in the socialization literature has been "an acknowledgment that newcomers often play active roles in facilitating and shaping the socialization process" (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998, p. 174). Newcomer proactivity is the means by which newcomers actively engage with their work environment through proactive socialization strategies such as seeking information about their role and work environment to reduce uncertainty (Ashforth, Myers, & Sluss, in press; Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). Proactive behaviors enable newcomers to learn about their abilities, better understand the work environment and specific tasks, and adjust their behavior to improve their socialization and career success (Ashford & Black, 1996; Morrison, 1993a, 1993b; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000).

However, research on newcomer proactivity has focused primarily on the frequency with which a newcomer engages in proactive behaviors in relation to traditional socialization outcomes. Absent from previous research is consideration of whether newcomers obtain the outcomes they seek by being proactive. For example, although newcomers engage in feedback-seeking behavior because they desire feedback, previous research has not actually measured whether or not newcomers who sought

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feedback received it. This is a serious shortcoming because the extent to which a newcomer's proactive efforts result in socialization outcomes likely depends on whether their proactive efforts obtained what they were seeking.

This study investigated the immediate outcomes of newcomer proactivity or what we call *proactive outcomes*. First, we test the direct relationship between proactive behaviors and proactive outcomes. Then, we investigate the extent to which proactive outcomes mediate as well as moderate the relationship between proactive behaviors and socialization outcomes.

Previous research

Research on newcomer proactivity has focused on a number of proactive behaviors in which newcomers may engage during their socialization. Among the most commonly studied proactive socialization behaviors are *information seeking* (seeking information about one's job, role, work group, and the organization; Morrison, 1993a,b), *feedback-seeking* (soliciting feedback about one's work and performance; Ashford, 1986), *general socializing* (participating in social events; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), *networking* (getting to know people outside of one's department or area; Ashford & Black, 1996), *relationship building* (developing friendships and relationships with others; Ashford & Black, 1996), *boss-relationship building* (developing a friendship and relationship with one's boss; Ashford & Black, 1996), and *job change negotiation* (attempts to change or modify one's tasks; Ashford & Black, 1996). Research has found that proactive behaviors relate to traditional socialization outcomes such as job satisfaction, intention to turnover, actual turnover, and job performance (Ashford & Black, 1996; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000) as well as proximal outcomes such as social integration, role clarity, task mastery, and learning (Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007; Chan & Schmitt, 2000; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006; Morrison, 1993a; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000).

Among the different proactive behaviors, information seeking has received the most attention. A recent meta-analysis found that information seeking related positively to role clarity and social acceptance which mediated the relationship between information seeking and socialization outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction; Bauer et al., 2007). However, the results for the other proactive behaviors have been mixed and at times weak (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007). For example, Wanberg and Kammeyer-Mueller (2000) found that feedback seeking and general socializing had the most frequent associations with work-related outcomes while Ashford and Black (1996) failed to find a significant relationship between feedback seeking with either job satisfaction or job performance. Finkelstein, Kulas, and Dages (2003) failed to find significant relationships between general socializing and job satisfaction, role clarity, and intention to quit in two populations.

Thus, although previous studies have found relationships between newcomer proactive behaviors and socialization outcomes, the results have been mixed with regard to the relationship between particular proactive behaviors and various outcomes (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007; Morrison, 2002). We suggest that one of the reasons for the mixed findings might be due to an emphasis on the *frequency* with which newcomers engage in proactive behaviors and a lack of attention to the *outcomes* of proactive behaviors.

Proactive outcomes

Newcomers engage in proactive behaviors for specific reasons. They seek information to obtain information about their job, role, and the organization; they seek feedback to learn how they are doing; they socialize to make friends and develop relationships, and so on. Thus, the most direct outcome of newcomers' proactive behaviors and the very reason that they engage in proactive behaviors is to obtain what it is they are seeking – information, feedback, relationships, and so forth. However, previous research has not measured proactive outcomes or even acknowledged their importance for newcomers, but rather makes the implicit assumption that those who are more proactive will be more successful.

For example, research on information-seeking assumes that just the act of seeking information will lead to more positive socialization outcomes because it facilitates learning and lowers uncertainty (Morrison, 2002). In addition, models of socialization and newcomer proactivity show direct links between proactive behaviors and proximal and distal socialization outcomes (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007; Griffin, Colella, & Goparaju, 2000; Morrison, 2002; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Thus, an implicit assumption in research and models of newcomer proactivity is that newcomers who engage in proactive behaviors more frequently achieve more positive socialization outcomes.

However, the success of newcomers' proactive behavior depends both on the behavior itself and – importantly – also on the responses of others. For example, a newcomer might try to socialize with coworkers but may not be successful in making friends and developing relationships (Feldman, 1977). Similarly, coworkers and supervisors might refuse or be unable to provide feedback regardless of how often a newcomer requests it. Clearly, frequent proactive behavior may or may not result in the desired outcomes.

Study hypotheses

As described below, we predict direct, mediating, and moderating relationships for proactive outcomes.

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