Socialization preferences and intentions: Does one size fit all?

Jamie A. Gruman [a,*], Alan M. Saks [b,1]

[a] Department of Business, and School of Hospitality and Tourism Management, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada, N1G 2W1
[b] Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, University of Toronto, 121 St. George Street, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5S 2E8

A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study was to investigate student preferences for socialization tactics and their intentions to be proactive when they begin a new job. We examined the relationship between the Five Factor Model of personality and proactive personality with socialization tactics preferences and proactive behavior intentions in a sample of 243 undergraduate university students enrolled in a cooperative management program. The results indicate that personality predicts preferences for socialization tactics and intentions to be proactive. In particular, individuals high on agreeableness prefer institutionalized socialization tactics and individuals high on extraversion and proactive personality report higher intentions to be proactive when they begin a new job. These results suggest that one size does not fit all newcomers when it comes to socialization. The implications for research and practice before and after organizational entry are discussed.

© 2011 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Organizational socialization is the process by which new hires acquire the attitudes, behaviors, and knowledge required to participate and function effectively as a member of an organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The manner in which organizations socialize new hires is important because it can influence employee attitudes, behavior, and retention. An effective socialization program can result in employees who are committed and productive (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998), and influence employees' long-term adjustment by triggering a cycle of success or failure (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007).

In the socialization literature, two main approaches to socialization have been emphasized. The organization-initiated approach focuses on the socialization tactics used by organizations to structure newcomers' socialization experiences (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The newcomer-initiated approach focuses on the proactive behaviors exhibited by newcomers to navigate the ambiguity and reduce the uncertainty inherent in occupying a new organizational role (e.g., Ashford & Black, 1996).

Research on both perspectives, however, has implicitly taken a "one size fits all" approach to socialization. In other words, it is generally assumed that all newcomers prefer the same socialization tactics and will be similarly proactive. Furthermore, research on socialization tactics focuses on the organization's perspective by suggesting that organizations might choose certain tactics to achieve desired outcomes (e.g., innovation versus commitment) (Bauer et al., 1998). Much less attention has been given to the newcomer's perspective even though individuals might have preferences for how they want to be socialized. This is an important issue because newcomers' job attitudes might be "affected by the similarity between their preferences with respect to various socialization tactics and the tactics actually adopted by their organization" (Bauer et al., 1998, p.164).

In addition, research on newcomer proactivity has not considered individuals' intentions to be proactive or if their intentions are partly a function of individual differences. As noted by Ashford and Black (1996), individuals differ in their motivation to be proactive and engage their environments. Given the importance of newcomer proactivity for socialization, it is important to learn more about individuals' intentions to be proactive and if their intentions differ as a function of individual differences.

The purpose of this study was to investigate individuals' preferences for socialization tactics and their intentions to be proactive. In particular, we investigate the extent to which personality variables (the Big Five and proactive personality) predict

---

* Corresponding author. Fax: +1 519 823 5512.
   E-mail addresses: jgruman@uoguelph.ca (J.A. Gruman), saks@utsc.utoronto.ca (A.M. Saks).
[1] Fax: +1 416 978 5696.

socialization tactics preferences and proactive behavior intentions. Understanding these relationships is important for designing effective socialization programs that meet the needs of different types of individuals.

1. Organizational socialization tactics

The most frequently studied theory of organizational socialization is Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) framework of socialization tactics. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) defined socialization tactics as "the ways in which the experiences of individuals in transition from one role to another are structured for them by others in the organization" (p. 230). They identified six tactical dimensions that exist on a bipolar continuum with considerable range between the two poles.

The tactic of *collective (vs. individual)* socialization refers to whether newcomers go through common learning experiences, designed to produce uniform responses to situations, or idiosyncratic experiences that permit a variety of responses. *Formal (vs. informal)* socialization refers to whether newcomers are isolated from other organizational members while they learn their roles, or whether they become part of work groups immediately upon occupying their new positions and learn on-the-job. *Sequential (vs. random)* socialization refers to whether newcomers receive clear guidelines regarding the sequence of activities and experiences they will encounter or an ambiguous sequence. *Fixed (vs. variable)* socialization pertains to whether newcomers receive detailed knowledge of the timetables associated with completing each stage in the socialization process, or no such information about completion of a stage of learning. *Serial (vs. disjunctive)* socialization refers to whether veteran organizational members act as role models for newcomers, or whether newcomers are required to make sense of their experiences on their own. *Investiture (vs. divestiture)* involves either confirming and reinforcing newcomers' self-identities and providing social support or stripping them away through negative communication and rebuilding them in the form the organization desires.

Jones (1986) classified the tactics as being either *institutionalized* (consisting of collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture) or *individualized* (consisting of individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture). Institutionalized socialization reflects a more structured and formalized socialization process, while individualized socialization tends to reflect an absence of structure such that newcomers are socialized more by default than design (Ashforth, Saks, & Lee, 1997).

Jones (1986) also found that the six tactics represent three broad factors. He argued that the *social* tactics (investiture and serial) may be most important "because they provide the social cues and facilitation necessary during learning processes" (p. 266). He predicted that the *content* tactics (sequential and fixed), which have to do with the content of the information given to newcomers, would be the next strongest predictors of adjustment, followed by the *context* socialization tactics (collective and formal), which concern the way in which organizations provide information to newcomers.

Two recent meta-analyses found that institutionalized socialization tactics were negatively related to role ambiguity, role conflict, and intentions to quit, and positively related to fit perceptions, self-efficacy, social acceptance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and a custodial role orientation. In addition, the social tactics were more strongly related to socialization outcomes than the content and context tactics (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Saks, Uggerslev, & Fassina, 2007).

However, even though institutionalized tactics have been found to be related to positive outcomes, previous research has not considered newcomers' preferences for socialization tactics. This is an important issue because newcomers might differ in their preferences and needs for specific socialization tactics and as noted by Bauer et al. (1998), the attitudes of new hires might be affected by the extent to which the socialization tactics used by an organization reflect their socialization preferences.

A rare exception is a study by Feldman and Weitz (1990) that found that student interns preferred investiture rather than divestiture tactics and also preferred formal, structured orientation and training over more informal programs. Bauer et al. (1998) suggested that newcomers might prefer institutionalized socialization tactics because they relieve some of the performance pressure and ambiguity of socialization. They also noted that the "implications of newcomers' preferences for different types of socialization tactics is an issue that deserves future research attention" (p.164). As described below, we argue that personality might predict individual preferences for socialization tactics.

2. Newcomer proactive behaviors

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 et al., 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 et al., 2007). Proactive behaviors enable newcomers to learn about their abilities, better understand the work environment and specific tasks, and adjust their behavior in order to improve their socialization and career success (Ashford & Black, 1996; Morrison, 1993a,b; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). It has been suggested that newcomers receive more information and more useful information through their own active efforts than from organization-initiated socialization programs (Ashforth et al., 2007).

Previous research has focused on a number of proactive behaviors such as information seeking (Morrison, 1993a,b), feedback seeking (Ashford, 1986), general socializing (Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000), networking, boss-relationship building, and job change negotiation (Ashford & Black, 1996). These proactive behaviors have been shown to be associated with a variety of positive outcomes including reduced turnover intentions and increased job satisfaction, commitment, role clarity, task mastery, job performance, and perceptions of PJ and PO fit (Ashford & Black, 1996; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005; Morrison, 1993a,b; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000).