Socialization Process of Incumbent Newcomers: Job Change and Cognitive Coping Strategy

Yu Chin Lee (Corresponding Author)
College of Management,
I-Shou University,
Kaohsiung,
Taiwan
Email: maggie210uk@hotmail.com

Julia Lin
Department of International Business
I-Shou University,
Kaohsiung,
Taiwan
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Abstract

Research in organizational socialization has primarily focused on newcomers who first entering an organization or taking a new job while the definition of organizational socialization has never been limited to complete newcomers but to all employees going through their career passages. Therefore, this paper attempts to draw attention upon incumbent newcomers who are not new to the organization but forced to change roles or location and their cognitive coping strategy. It is assumed that these incumbent newcomers who have gone through prior socialization stage and remained with the organization have higher degree of proximal and distal socialization outcome. However, such positive outcome may be deteriorated due to subsequent job changes within an organization. This paper suggests that to prevent the impact of detrimental effect (e.g., negative feelings lead to bad performance), incumbent newcomers could exercise positive framing strategy to cope with such distress.

Keywords: Organizational socialization, incumbent newcomer, job change, positive framing
1. Introduction

Organizational socialization is defined as the process by which an individual comes to understand the values, abilities, expected behaviors, and social knowledge that are essential for assuming an organizational role and for participating as an organizational member (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Louis, 1980a). Thus organizational socialization is often identified as the primary process by which people adapt to new jobs and organizational roles (Chao et al., 1994). Furthermore, it has been clearly noted by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) that the problems of organizational socialization refer to any and all passages undergone by members of an organization. In other words, from the beginning to the end, a person's career within an organization represents a potential series of transitions from one position to another.

A vast amount of socialization research has focused on newcomer learning and adjustment because the transition process (i.e., individual adjustment, cognitive demand, and uncertainty) is probably most obvious (both to the individual and to others on the scene) when a person first enters the organization (Ashford & Taylor, 1990), and least obvious when an experienced member of an organization undergoes a simple change of assignment, shift, or job location (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Nevertheless, a period of socialization accompanies each passage.

Without a doubt, learning to fit in is also challenging for employees who are changing jobs, position, or organizational unit. Despite it all, learning continues even when one remains within the same job (Bauer et al., 1998). Therefore, this paper proposes that regardless of what career passage that an employee is currently experiencing, he or she will, to some extent, go through a socialization process. The only difference from absolute newcomers is, the incumbent newcomers may be less likely to exhibit overt proactive behaviors, and thus more of cognitive coping or self-management tactics.

Yet, very few studies have discussed the relevant issues regarding the socialization of incumbents facing role transition, promotion, or change of location within the same organization. Therefore, a background introduction to organizational socialization will be presented in this paper followed by three propositions and discussion.

2. Theoretical Background

Due to the undisputable definition of organizational socialization, it was literally proposed as stage models at the beginning of literature development (Feldman, 1976; Reichers, 1987). Wanous et al. (1984) and Reichers (1987) both summarized some of the stage models proposed to explain socialization and concluded with a few stages of
the assimilation process. The first stage involves the period prior to the newcomer's entry into the organization plus their initial confrontations with organizational reality and the anxiety that accompanies reality shock. Subsequent stages proceed with decreased newcomer anxiety and increased concern with the resolution of role conflict, the achievement of role clarity, and, ultimately, commitment to the organization and general satisfaction.

In contrast to stage models, process models of newcomer socialization attempt to account for the "hows and whys" of the changes that newcomers experience in their progression from one stage to another (Reichers, 1987). The hows and whys have 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, whereas proactive behavior refers to individual-driven or informal means of “self-socializing” (Ashforth et al., 2007). The extent of effort that organizations or individuals invest during socialization process will then create various degrees of outcomes.

These outcomes were categorized by Feldman (1981) as affective (general satisfaction, internal work motivation, and job involvement) and behavioral (carrying out role assignments dependably, remaining with the organization, and innovation/spontaneous cooperation) variables that may reflect individuals’ progress in organizational socialization. These variables were then classified by recent researchers as proximal and distal outcomes (Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wangberg, 2003).

Their distinction was made based on past frameworks that suggested by immediate confrontation of context. Newcomers that encounter the new work situation must facilitate themselves quickly enough to master the role-required tasks and socialize themselves around the group and organization. Thus, proximal outcomes are typically implied to task mastery, role clarity, group integration, and political knowledge (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wangberg, 2003). In the contrary, distal outcomes are often mediated by the proximal outcomes which will determine longer-term movement in occupational terms. Thus, distal outcomes are those chosen to reflect unique and important attitudinal (organizational commitment) and behavioral (work withdrawal and turnover) reactions to the workplace that are conceptualized to be influenced by more proximal learning and social integration on the part of the employee.

Another prevalent measure of organizational socialization was proposed by Chao et al. (1994) and was vastly adopted by researchers. They believed that organizational socialization is concerned with the learning content and process by which an individual adjusts to a specific role in an organization. The socialization of individuals
to new organizational contexts requires that they learn to understand and make sense of their new setting. Thus, in mastery of these areas: performance proficiency (i.e., learning the ropes), people (i.e., establishing successful relationships with organizational members), politics (i.e., individual’s success in gaining information regarding formal and informal work relationships and power structures within the organization), language (i.e., individual’s knowledge of the profession’s technical language as well as knowledge of the acronyms, slang, and jargon that are unique to the organization), organizational goals and values, and history (i.e., understanding of the organization's traditions, customs, myths, and rituals that may transmit cultural knowledge) ensure newcomers’ career effectiveness (i.e., performance, attitude, adaptability, and identity) as indicated by their result. Although these are not all-inclusive dimensions of the things that newcomers will learn or adapt to during the socialization process, they represent a good subset of various content areas that have been studied in previous socialization research (Wesson and Gogus, 2005). Its usefulness has been supported by vast number of studies that adopted their scale of measurement with cautious warning of their inappropriateness for every study.

However, the identification of those specific content areas will allow more accurate measurement of how well an individual has learned certain aspects of the job and organization. Mastery of these contents has been proved to be related to both proximal and distal socialization outcomes, which in most cases the role clarity, organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and intentions to leave (Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Lankau & Scandura, 2002; Klein et al., 2006).

In the next section, three propositions concerning the socialization process of incumbents who change jobs/roles within the same organization (hence termed ‘incumbent newcomers’) will be postulated with some theoretical support.

3. Socialization Process of Incumbent Newcomers

As summarized from the above, research conducted with a focus among newcomers who first join an organization would more or less follow the context of stage or process models described above. However, when it comes to incumbent newcomers, i.e., incumbents changing roles/jobs within the same organization, who has once gone through the newcomer stage, the socialization process associated with them might have to be discussed differently and separately.

3.1 Tenure and satisfied workers

At this point, an evident difference between newcomer and incumbent newcomer should be noted, and that is tenure. It is suggested that individuals with an organization a relatively short time may differ from those with the organization close
to a year (Allen, 2006) because individuals learn more about their organizations the longer they have worked there. Schneider’s (1987) attraction-selection-attrition model also signifies that individuals leave organizations where they do not fit, suggesting that tenure should be positively related to person-organization fit. Therefore, those who chose to remain in the organization should indicate higher degree of proximal and distal socialization outcomes compare to newcomers. Hence:

**Proposition 1a:** The relative tenure suggests a self-willingness to remain in the organization, thus suggesting higher degree of proximal socialization outcome such as skill acquisition, person-organization fit, and social integration.

**Proposition 1b:** The relative tenure suggests a positive attitude to remain in the organization, thus suggesting higher degree of distal socialization outcome such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and role conformity.

### 3.2 Job change and unhappy workers

Job changes may pose different meanings and cause various reactions among incumbents. Usually job changes within an organization are seen as a positive phenomenon, contributing to organizational flexibility and employee development (Tsui et al., 1995). However, according to Van Dam (2005), it may imply costs, such as the end of a satisfying work situation, an unwanted career move, increased workload, new training requirements, or increased travelling time. From a learning perspective of socialization, a new job requires learning new tasks and routines, and there will be a new social position and physical setting to cope with (Van Der Velde & Feij, 1995). Therefore, job transition can encompass many cognitive, emotional and behavioral adjustments.

Derived from Van Dam’s (2005) investigation, this paper draws on three of her four typology of involuntary (organizational imposed) job changes, which are (a) changing job content; that is, performing different tasks; (b) changing departments; that is, moving to another department at the same location; and (c) relocation; that is, moving to another location to work at a similar department. A typology of such changes aims to determine various degrees of resistance that might take place in considering of the amount of effort that one needs to invest in.

Although Van Dam (2005) found indifference in employees’ attitudes toward various types of job changes, Louis (1980b) suggested that discrepancy between anticipation and experience indicates an error in the individual's mapping of the situation. Such erroneous cognition or disconfirmation of the belief-like anticipations may produce a sense of failure, frustration, denial, and regret. Thus, the greater the
gap between anticipation and experiences in the role (i.e., surprises), the greater a negative feeling will be developed. Accordingly:

**Proposition 2:** Incumbent newcomers that are new to a job, i.e., changing job content, will develop less negative feelings comparing to incumbent newcomers that are being new to a department or location.

### 3.3 Positive framing

During the socialization process, newcomers do not merely rely on passive means (i.e. orientation training programs) to become effective members of the organization. Griffin (2000) argued that early work in the area of socialization focused primarily on how organizations socialized newcomers, i.e., emphasis was placed on what organizations did. In the 1990s then, researchers fulfilled such insufficiency by concentrating on the on the manner in which newcomers proactively behave to facilitate their own socialization process.

In conjunction with this idea, Crant (2000) defined the action of taking initiative in improving current circumstances or creating new ones as the proactive behavior. In considering of complete newcomers, they often exhibit help-seeking or information-seeking behavior to get help in interpreting the events they experience, to learn the many nuances of seemingly clear-cut rules, and to learn the informal networks (Ashforth et al., 2007).

However, when it comes to incumbent newcomers who have immersed in the organization for some time, those behaviors might not be that evident. Instead, they may internalize such proactive behavior for the same purpose as to reduce the level of anxiety or bad feelings stem from job changes to the minimum. Such strategy is termed as cognitive self-management mechanism to gain control over ambiguous situations (Ashford & Black, 1996). One particularly potent cognitive self-management tactic is positive framing. It occurs when individuals' attempt to alter their understanding of a situation by explicitly controlling the cognitive frame they place on the situation. Like seeking information to gain cognitive control, incumbent newcomers may attempts to positively frame their new situations thus find inner poise and accept whatever situations they are facing. Following this line of reasoning, we propose:

**Proposition 3:** When incumbent newcomers are informed about the job change appointment, they may develop some negative feelings if required change is out of their expectation. However, if the situation is irreversible, and withdraws from
work is never an option, the incumbent newcomer may develop positive framing as a cognitive strategy to minimize their negative feelings.

4. Discussion

Although the topic of organizational socialization has been studied for almost three decades, there have been no new developments on organizational socialization theory or effective measurement of such. However, this does not mean that it has reached its dead end; rather, it remained problematic and deserves more attention to explore undiscovered areas.

The majority of organizational socialization literature has focused on newcomers’ socialization and ignored the importance of incumbent newcomers who may also face adaptation problems. Learning continues even when one remains within the same job, therefore a slight change on location, group membership, or tasks would bring about uncertainty and anxiety that any newcomers, including incumbent newcomers, would like to diminish.

However, recent studies have again proved the linkages between the antecedents of organizational socialization (e.g., socialization tactics), proximal outcomes (e.g., content of socialization learning), and in turn, distal outcomes (e.g., organizational commitment, job satisfaction, intention to leave), but all in terms of newly entered workers. This again stressed the necessity to revisit the primary definition of organizational socialization theory and develop socialization measures that distinctively address different players in socialization process.
References


