

Coping with newcomer “Hangover”: How socialization tactics affect declining job satisfaction during early employment



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ABSTRACT

New entrants to a job often experience a “hangover effect,” whereby their job satisfaction declines as they become familiar with the job. Socialization scholars thus have sought to identify ways to forestall or ameliorate such declines. Recently, Boswell, Shipp, Payne, and Culbertson (2009) found that the extent of socialization can *exacerbate* the hangover effect. Following up this provocative finding, this study investigated whether *socialization tactics* worsen or dampen the hangover effect and by so doing, affect newcomer attrition. We monitored how newcomers' job satisfaction changed over time by surveying them on four occasions during the first six months of employment. We observed that socialization tactics (especially context and social tactics) *increase* the rate of declining job satisfaction during early employment. Yet all three tactics *decrease* this descent rate when enacted at high levels. Moreover, the present research established that declining job satisfaction translates into a trajectory of increasing turnover intentions and thus higher quits. Further, we found that *extremely high* social tactics can actually suppress the hangover effect and thereby reduce newcomer attrition. Our dynamic research offered a more nuanced understanding of how socialization tactics influence the hangover effect and newcomer attrition.

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A seminal study by Boswell, Boudreau, and Tichy (2005) uncovered the “honeymoon-hangover” effect, whereby employees exhibit upward swings in job attitudes when changing jobs that later decline over time. Though turnover theory and work have long noted how newcomers' job satisfaction falls during initial employment (especially among prospective leavers; Hom & Griffeth, 1991; Meglino & DeNisi, 1987; Rusbult & Farrell, 1983), Boswell et al. (2005) offered striking evidence that job attitudes change before and after a turnover event, implicating psychological processes long overlooked by turnover theorists (cf. Lee & Mitchell, 1994; Mobley, 1977; Price & Mueller, 1981). Various theoretical mechanisms account for this phenomenon. Engaging in sense-making during organizational entry to reduce uncertainty (Louis, 1980), new entrants to a job initially form positive attitudes toward this job when contrasting its superior qualities—prime reasons for its selection—to those of past jobs (which represent a frame of reference for appraising the current job; Hulin, Roznowski, & Hachiya, 1985). The new job's favorable features emerge as “figural” in newcomers' perceptual field (Louis, 1980), enhancing job attitudes. Moreover, they may infer attractive qualities about the new job by “filling in the blanks related to missing information” in their mental schema about good jobs (Zhu,

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Tatachari, & Chattopadhyay, 2015, p. 8). Further inflating initial attitudes, incoming employees likely minimize or downplay the new job's negative attributes to rationalize their job choice, while overestimating their future hedonic state on this job by simulating pleasurable work events (e.g., learning new skills) in their minds (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007). Additionally, new hires may feel an "initial high in job satisfaction" when encountering novel circumstances (Boswell et al., 2009, p. 845).

A "hangover effect"—or declining job attitudes—often ensues as entering incumbents increasingly become familiar with the job as they "learn the ropes" (Boswell et al., 2005; Louis, 1980). *Affective habituation* (Leventhal, Martin, Seals, Tapia, & Rehm, 2007) later sets in as the "initial high of a new job is likely to wear off as employees engage in more mundane job activities and normalization occurs" (Boswell et al., 2009, p. 845). Additionally, they may feel disappointed when finding expected job rewards or experiences to be less pleasurable than they had imagined (Louis, 1980; Wilson & Gilbert, 2005). Beyond this, job entrants begin confronting the job's salient disagreeable features (including interacting with cynical veterans upon leaving the sheltered confines of formal socialization), experiencing reality shock or psychological contract violations (Meglino & DeNisi, 1987; Zhu et al., 2015). Indeed, they might feel more distress when encountering even anticipated negative events if they misjudge how these events would "actually feel" (Louis, 1980; p. 238). That said, Boswell et al.'s (2005) discovery of a cyclical pattern of attitudinal shifts suggests that individual newcomers' "predisposition toward a set point...after a shift in job satisfaction level due to a job change" (p. 888) primarily underlies the honeymoon-hangover effect. Their remarkable finding disputes prevailing accounts emphasizing how post-entry reality shocks drive beginning employees' disaffection and departure (Hom, Robertson, & Ellis, 2008; Meglino & DeNisi, 1987; Porter & Steers, 1973; Weller, Holtom, Matiaske, & Mellewigt, 2009), while casting doubt on employers' ability to arrest the hangover effect during early employment.

While beginning and ending at hedonic equilibrium levels (or "set points"; Bowling, Beehr, Wagner, & Libkuman, 2005), the honeymoon-hangover effect nonetheless can be modulated (Boswell et al., 2009). In particular, Boswell et al. (2009) documented that the extent of socialization (aka, newcomers' accumulated stock of knowledge about the firm, department, and job role) and organizational fulfillment of commitments boost job satisfaction during the hangover cycle. Yet they found that elevating job satisfaction gave way to *steeper* rates of declining job satisfaction. Surprisingly, "the stronger the honeymoon [i.e., higher the initial satisfaction], the stronger the ...hangover will be," conclude Boswell et al. (2009, p. 853).

1. Toward a dynamic model of socialization tactics

Building on Boswell et al.'s (2005, 2009) pioneering work, we test a dynamic model of how socialization tactics—or means by which employers assimilate newcomers by structuring *how* they learn (e.g., collectively or formally) rather than *what* they learn (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979)—affect the hangover effect during the *encounter* stage of socialization (see Fig. 1; Feldman, 1976). Boswell et al. (2009) investigated what knowledge entering employees learn rather than what organizations do to assimilate them (i.e., *socialization content vs. structure*). Yet socialization tactics explain unique—often larger—variance in socialization outcomes (e.g., job attitudes, quit intentions, turnover) than does knowledge learned according to a meta-analytic path analysis (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). To further explore Boswell et al.'s (2009) remarkable finding that socialization efforts can *exacerbate* the honeymoon-hangover effect, we thus consider socialization tactics, which can enhance incoming employees' job satisfaction much like "newcomer information-seeking" (Bauer et al., 2007). Given that they may heighten (if not prolong) the honeymoon period (Allen & Shanock, 2013), socialization tactics—if Boswell et al.'s findings hold true—may worsen the hangover effect and thereby quicken the pace of attitudinal deterioration. Given their prominence in socialization theory and research, it is thus imperative to scrutinize how socialization tactics shape the trajectory of job satisfaction over time. After all, such heretofore overlooked dynamic effects may challenge accepted wisdom of the beneficial effects of such tactics given longstanding cross-sectional evidence for their positive impact on *static* job-satisfaction scores (Bauer et al., 2007) (cf. Dalal, Lam, Weiss, Welch, & Hulin, 2009).

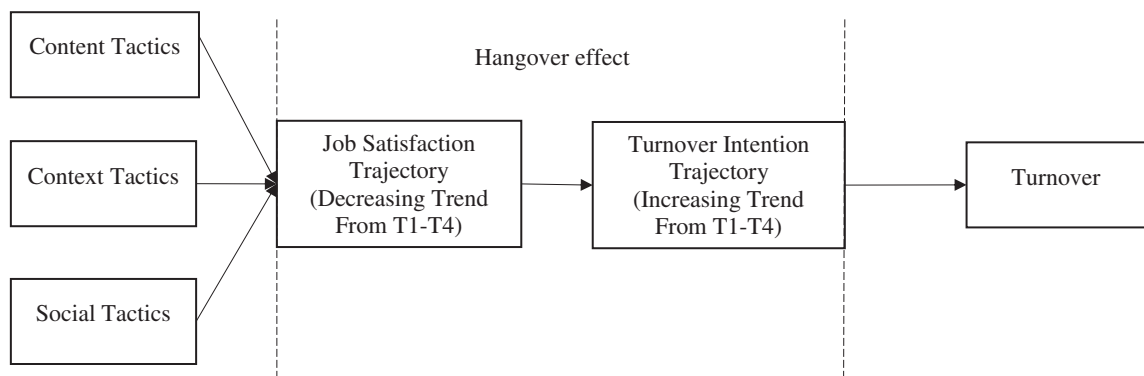


Fig. 1. Socialization tactics' effects on turnover via the hangover effect. *Note.* Control variables (i.e., average levels of job satisfaction, average levels of turnover intention, work complexity, gender and unemployment rate) are omitted for the sake of clarity. The three socialization tactics, job satisfaction and turnover intention measures have a scale from 1 to 5. The average level of job satisfaction trajectory is -0.004 , ranging from -0.151 to 0.047 ; the average level of turnover intention trajectory is 0.026 , ranging from -0.259 to 0.205 .

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