



Personality, freshmen proactive social behavior, and college transition: Predictors beyond academic strategies[☆]

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ABSTRACT

When transitioning to college freshmen must behave proactively in order to strive for success in their collegiate careers and their future life. Past research has mainly focused on the academic strategies of freshmen when investigating the predictors of successful college transition and has paid little attention to students' social strategies. The current research explored the mediating role of freshmen's proactive behaviors (feedback seeking, general socializing, and instructor relationship building) in the effects of two Five-Factor Model personality traits (conscientiousness and extroversion) on freshmen's grade point average (GPA) and engagement in student activities. Results from a sample of 238 freshmen showed that feedback seeking mediates the pathway from conscientiousness to GPA. Also, general socializing mediates the pathway from extroversion to engagement in student activities. The current study highlights the importance of freshmen proactive social behaviors during college transition, and contributes to current understandings of college freshmen's educational development.

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1. Introduction

Just as newcomers display proactive behaviors during organizational adjustment and socialization, freshmen in college develop diverse proactive strategies to reduce the uncertainty in the new environment and to transition successfully into college (Clark, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1994). Despite the recognized importance of college transition (Terenzini et al., 1994; Weidman, 1989) and the numerous studies that have examined cognitive and dispositional variables as predictors of college success (e.g., Komarraju, Karau, & Schmeck, 2009; Poropat, 2009; Ridgell & Lounsbury, 2004), the behavioral mechanisms linking students' personality and college outcomes are not well understood.

Recently, a promising stream of research has examined students' behavioral strategies at college, which are viewed as more proximal predictors of college success than personality traits (e.g., Credé & Kuncel, 2008; Credé, Roch, & Kieszczynka, 2010; MacCann, Fogarty, & Roberts, 2012). Previous research has categorized the strategies that students typically carry out into academic strategies and social strategies (Yazedjian, Toews, Sevin, & Purswell, 2008). However, most research has focused

on the effects of academic strategies (e.g., study habits, skills, and attitudes, Credé & Kuncel, 2008; motivated strategies for learning, Credé & Phillips, 2011), and few studies have examined social strategies with which freshmen create social ties and interpersonal interactions during college transition and their importance to college success (e.g., Elffers, Oort, & Karsten, 2012; Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006).

Based on the similarities between college socialization and organizational socialization (Jablin, 2001; Weidman, 2006), a novel and useful approach to quantify freshmen's social strategies for college transition may be to borrow the terms of newcomers' proactive behaviors previously examined in organizational socialization literature (e.g., Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007; Gruman, Saks, & Zweig, 2006). In this aim, the current study examines a model in which the effects of college freshmen's personality on their academic performance and engagement in collegiate activities are mediated by proactive behaviors. Further, from a cross-cultural point of view, the current study examined a sample of university students from mainland China as compared to Asian American college students sample typically used in previous research (e.g., Yeh & Wang, 2000; for a review see Kuo, 2011). The collectivistic culture in China may render a strong emphasis on interpersonal reliance and conformity, and also individual concerns surrounding dignity (i.e., attempt to save face, Triandis, McCusker, & Hui, 1990). While previous research showed that students under collectivistic culture norms may show pessimistic tendencies and use avoidance coping behaviors during college transition (Sheu & Sedlacek, 2004), we add to current literature by examining how proactive (instead of pessimistic) behaviors may influence college

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outcomes under such a culture. In sum, findings from this study may suggest ways in which freshmen's proactive behaviors in college impact their educational success.

1.1. Proactive behaviors in college socialization context

In organizational socialization research, newcomer proactive behaviors are self-initiated behaviors of new employees aimed at reducing the ambiguity inherent in occupying a new organizational role, and securing a sense of control in their new workplace (Ashford & Black, 1996; Ashforth et al., 2007). We adopted three proactive behaviors from the organizational literature: feedback seeking, general socializing, and boss-relationship building. We selected these proactive behaviors because conceptually they are more focused on social interactions compared with the remaining proactive behaviors (Kammeyer-Mueller, Livingston, & Liao, 2011). Further, as we describe below, these behaviors are most appropriate for an educational context. In the current study, we use the term "proactive social behavior" to emphasize the social nature of these proactive behaviors.

Freshmen may display *feedback-seeking* behaviors in order to reduce the uncertainty inherent in their situation (Kramer, 1994). Upon college entry, freshmen need to make sense of the standards and requirements that are expected of them, and understand how to undertake everyday learning tasks (Christie, Tett, Cree, Hounsell, & McCune, 2008). To achieve this, freshmen do not just passively receive information from lectures and classes. They also actively acquire feedback from sources like teachers, senior students, and peers (Love, Love, & Northcraft, 2010). These comments help newcomers to learn "what to do" and "how to improve", and to gradually make sense of their environment and their tasks (Ashford, Blatt, & Van de Walle, 2003).

The need to reduce uncertainty also highlights the importance of building relationships with important people who act as sources of feedback (Ashford & Black, 1996). At college, where staff–student relationships are often more distal than in high school, college freshmen have to reach out proactively and display *instructor relationship building* behaviors to make connections with their teachers and senior students who typically act as teaching assistants (Christie et al., 2008). Teachers and senior students decide on feedback and performance appraisals, and may provide necessary inputs and resources that help the freshmen to accomplish tasks (Westerman & Vanka, 2005). Though Ashford and Black (1996) defined "relationship building" in terms of one's boss, other researchers have extended the construct of relationship building to other socialization agents, such as one's coworkers (Ashforth et al., 2007). In the current study, instructor relationship building refers to freshmen's building relationships with their instructors, including teachers and senior students.

In addition to the relatively formal relationship building with their instructors, students may also develop informal relationships with classmates and other college students. Through *general socializing* in formal or informal activities (Ashford & Black, 1996), freshmen build social ties that may play vital roles in the formation of their identities, and may also influence their decisions to enter certain roles and activities in college (Tynkkynen, Nurmi, & Salmela-Aro, 2010). Because college students often have classes or even live with people from different disciplines, departmental borders are vague for most undergraduate students, thus examining relationship building with interdepartmental colleagues (i.e., networking, Ashford & Black, 1996) separate from other socializing is difficult and likely meaningless in a collegiate environment. Therefore, we did not include networking in our examination of the proactive social behaviors of college students.

1.2. Personality traits as antecedents of proactive social behaviors

Personality traits have been identified as important predictors of newcomer proactive social behaviors in organizational socialization

research (e.g., Frese & Fay, 2001; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Among diverse conceptualizations of personality, the Five-Factor Model (FFM, see: McCrae & John, 1992) has been found to be particularly useful for studying newcomer proactive social behaviors (e.g., Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Extroversion has been identified as the most important personality trait predicting newcomer proactivity (Ashforth et al., 2007), and conscientiousness has recently been identified as the strongest predictor of person–environment (P–E) fit proactive behaviors (Parker & Collins, 2010; Thomas, Whitman, & Viswesvaran, 2010). Previous research has shown that the other three traits (openness to experience, agreeableness, and neuroticism) were not consistent predictors of proactive social behaviors (Gruman & Saks, 2011; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Thus, we examine the roles of extroversion and conscientiousness in freshmen's proactive social behaviors.

Extroversion is characterized by higher sociability and an orientation toward others (McCrae & John, 1992), and has been linked to higher levels of seeking social support during times of stress (Watson & Hubbard, 1996). Typically, newcomers acquire social support through general socializing and relationship building with colleagues (Nelson & Quick, 1991). Extroverted freshmen are more likely to socialize and participate in social activities and organizations, which may provide them with social support and help them develop a sense of belonging within college (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007). Given their tendency to seek out opportunities to interact with others, extroverted freshmen are more likely to develop closer relationship with their instructors. Moreover, with high levels of self-monitoring and ambition, extroverted people tend to behave more appropriately and successfully during social interactions (Komarraju et al., 2009). Thus, by creating more social interaction opportunities for themselves (e.g., by general socialization and instructor relationship building), extroverted freshmen are more likely to seek and obtain others' feedback to gain valuable information during their college transition. Thus, it is expected that for college freshmen:

Hypothesis 1a. A higher level of extroversion is associated with higher levels of general socializing.

Hypothesis 1b. A higher level of extroversion is associated with higher levels of instructor relationship building.

Hypothesis 1c. A higher level of extroversion is associated with a higher level of feedback seeking.

People with high conscientiousness are labeled as diligent, dependable, and goal-striving (McCrae & John, 1992). The inner motivation to achieve personal goals leads conscientious individuals to proactively plan and optimize their socialization efforts (Thomas et al., 2010), while striving for good environmental fit (Parker & Collins, 2010). Thus, conscientiousness is likely to predict proactive social behaviors during college entry, when freshmen's are tasked with deciding which role(s) they should engage in during college (Terenzini et al., 1994). Thus, conscientious freshmen may seek more feedback to acquire knowledge and information. They may also build up relationships with sources of feedback (i.e., teachers and senior students) to fit into certain roles. However, we do not necessarily expect conscientiousness to predict general socializing because, although conscientious individuals are often viewed as reliable and responsible (McCrae & John, 1992), they are less likely to spare time for social gatherings and activities (Grant & Schwartz, 2011). Thus, it is expected that for college freshmen:

Hypothesis 2a. A higher level of conscientiousness is associated with a higher level of feedback seeking.

Hypothesis 2b. A higher level of conscientiousness is associated with a higher level of instructor relationship building.

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