

EDITORIAL

New directions for exploring the consequences of proactive behaviors: Introduction to the special issue

Summary

This special issue introduces new directions for exploring the consequences of proactive behaviors. The authors summarize the new scopes of consequences, new social contexts, and new methods in this exploration. They also identify several limitations of the existing literature and call for more future research in this stream.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Employees are expected to be proactive in this age where flatter organizational structures, rapid changes in customer demands, and empowerment practices are prevalent. Proactive behaviors are those that are self-initiated, future-oriented, and change-oriented (e.g., Grant & Ashford, 2008). They have been studied under labels such as voice, proactivity, taking charge, personal initiative, feedback seeking, or issue selling (Parker & Collins, 2010). Research has provided valuable insights on the antecedents of these behaviors. Underpinning this focus on antecedents is an assumption that proactive behaviors are beneficial to individuals, teams, or organizations.

Although there is evidence that these proactive behaviors enhance individual performance (e.g., Chamberlin, Newton, & Lepine, 2017), as well as team performance (e.g., Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013), many important questions remain about their consequences. To begin with, only a narrow set of outcomes of proactive behaviors have been explored. For instance, there is little research on how enactment of those behaviors impacts health or well-being of individuals. Do proactive behaviors increase burnout or stress that comes with attempts at changing the work context? Or, does the sense of agency that employees experience from being proactive increase their sense of well-being?

Additionally, there has been limited research on how the outcomes of proactive behaviors are impacted by the work context in which they are enacted. It is likely that the context can mitigate or facilitate positive outcomes for employees behaving proactively. At the same time, proactive employees do not merely respond to their circumstances but seek to change their context to make it more receptive to proactivity. Hence, there is a need for research that examines how the context affects the success of proactive behaviors, as well as how proactive behaviors enable changes in such context.

To address such questions, a multilevel perspective that examines the phenomenon in a both bottom-up and top-down manner is essential.

Furthermore, research has paid limited attention to examining how proactive behaviors function differently in distinct cultures (Morrison, 2014) and how “time” impacts proactivity at work. Scholars have noted that, “proactive behaviors are not isolated incidents that occur at one point in time. Rather, they are informed, cultivated, and constrained by past experiences, successes, and setbacks” (Grant & Ashford, 2008). To enrich our understanding of the consequences of proactive behaviors, we need to examine proactive behaviors in different cultural contexts and consider temporal issues.

The goal of this special issue is to deepen our understanding of the consequences of proactive behaviors by expanding the scope of outcomes, integrating them with work contexts, and adopting new methodologies. We are excited to present seven articles that cover a wide range of the consequences of proactive behaviors, including employee daily work outcomes (Cangiano, Parker, & Yeo, 2019), personal initiative training outcomes for entrepreneurs (Mensmann & Frese, 2019), social status (Weiss & Morrison, 2019), affective and well-being consequences (Zacher, Schmitt, Jimmieson, & Rudolph, 2019), career success (Smale et al., 2019), and team innovation (Guzman & Espejo, 2019; Liang, 2019). Many of these studies have seriously considered social contexts at different levels, including the intra-individual level (Cangiano et al., 2019), the team level (Guzman & Espejo, 2019; Liang, 2019), and the national cultural level (Smale et al., 2019). These studies also collectively cover a diverse range of research designs, such as a longitudinal survey (Zacher et al., 2019), experience sampling methodology (Cangiano et al., 2019), laboratory experiments (Weiss & Morrison, 2019), and field experiments (Mensmann & Frese, 2019), as well as the application of relatively new analytical methods in this field, such as latent change score modeling (Zacher et al., 2019).

2 | ARTICLES

Weiss and Morrison (2019) extend the voice literature by looking at whether and why voice might result in social status. Previous research has often suggested that social status can enhance voice, yet it has neglected the potential for reverse causality—that voice might lead to social status. Based on status attainment theory and social judgment perspective, the authors argue that employees who engage in voice

are perceived to have greater agency and communion, which in turn lead to bestowal of greater social status on them by observers. The authors demonstrate this across a survey study and two laboratory experiments. This article reminds us that, besides task-related consequences, proactive behaviors can also have important social functions in the work context, such as the emergence of social hierarchy.

Mensmann and Frese (2019) examine the effects of proactivity training for individuals using a unique sample of entrepreneurs from Togo. They argue that although proactivity training can increase personal initiative, such initiative can decay or diminish overtime as entrepreneurs can revert to their earlier less-proactive habits. This might be unfortunate as maintenance of personal initiative over time can potentially have positive consequences for the subjective well-being of the entrepreneurs. They examined whether personality characteristics made a difference in enhancing the ability of individuals to retain knowledge and skills learnt in the training and continue to derive personal benefits from such training. They found that, indeed, entrepreneurs who had higher need for cognition were able to maintain their personal initiative for a longer time following their training. However, such need for cognition did not enable them to derive greater well-being from such training, indicating that the ability to maintain personal initiative over time does not necessarily enhance subjective sense of well-being for individuals.

This issue of why subjective well-being of individuals might not be associated with their proactivity is taken head-on by Zacher et al. (2019). Building on the control-process theory, these scholars show that change in personal initiative resulted in a decrease of positive mood. It also, however, led to an increase of negative mood, but only when perceived organizational support (POS) was low. In turn, the changes in positive and negative mood 6 months later predicted the changes of emotional engagement and exhaustion. Meanwhile, based on action regulation theory, the authors found that the change of personal initiative led to an increase of job autonomy, which did not predict any change in emotional engagement or exhaustion. This paper suggests that being proactive is mostly positive for employees' well-being, but it can impair well-being when there is a lack of support in the environment.

Cangiano et al. (2019) integrate self-determination theory and the stressor-detachment framework to similarly examine the both "bright" and "dark" sides of proactive behavior on subjective well-being, but at the daily level. They identify two pathways through which proactive behavior may influence employee well-being. On the one hand, in an energy-generating pathway, when individuals engage in proactive behavior, they feel more competent, and hence experience greater end-of-day vitality. On the other hand, proactivity can also lead to end-of-day anxiety, leading to poorer detachment from work at bed time. The authors argue that punitive supervision serves as the boundary conditions for these two pathways. Using experience sampling method data from 94 employees, the "bright" pathway was confirmed as a main effect: When employees behave proactively, they feel more competent and vital. The "dark" or strain pathway, in contrast, applied only when individuals had highly punitive supervisors. This study along with that of Zacher et al. (2019) helps identify conditions in which proactive behaviors have beneficial effects on well-being: They both highlight that support from the organization in general or specifically

from the immediate leaders matters. The synergy between these two papers is encouraging, especially given very different time scales (from day to day in Cangiano et al., 2019, but over months for Zacher et al., 2019), and different well-being outcomes.

The articles by Guzman and Espejo (2019) and Liang (2019) investigate the connection between voice behavior and innovation at the team level. Guzman and Espejo (2019) showed that team promotive voice behavior (expressing new ideas or suggestions for improving the overall functioning of their work unit or organization) predicted team members' willingness to express ideas, which then predicted team innovation. This positive indirect route was stronger when available resources were high rather than low. One survey study and one vignette study provided evidence for these hypotheses. This paper highlights that, to transfer team-level voice into innovation, organizations need to provide critical resources.

Liang's (2019) paper explores the connection between voice and team innovation from another angle. These authors argue that the content of team voice (promotive vs. prohibitive) matters because they serve different functions for team innovation. Team promotive voice enhances team innovation through team knowledge utilization, whereas team prohibitive voice enhances team innovation through team reflexivity in a nonlinear fashion. Moreover, the differential effects of team member promotive and prohibitive voice will be stronger at idea generation stage rather than idea implementation stage in the innovation cycle. Survey data from 78 R&D teams provided support for most of the hypotheses. This paper offers insights as to how not only the content but also the timing of voice influences how it contributes to team innovation.

Smale et al.'s (2019) paper brings national culture into the picture. Culture shapes people's perceptions and interpretations of proactive behaviors (Huang, Van de Vliert, & Van der Vegt, 2005), but so far we know little about whether culture plays a role in understanding the consequences of proactive behaviors. This paper, based on a social information processing perspective, theorizes how different cultural values moderate the effects of proactive career behavior on subjective career success. With cross-sectional survey data from 11,892 employees from 22 countries, this paper reported interesting findings of how national cultural values moderate the relationships between proactive career behavior and two aspects of subjective career success (i.e., financial success and work-life balance).

3 | REFLECTIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The papers in the special issue provide remarkable insights into the consequences of proactive behavior, highlighting the importance of moderators, timing, and culture. Nevertheless, several important questions still remain. Next, we reflect on several issues that will further our knowledge about the consequences of proactive behaviors.

3.1 | "How" one is proactive matters

The manner in which individuals enact proactivity can matter for how effective they are in changing their environment. To better understand

the consequences of proactive behaviors, it is important to examine the specific ways in which proactivity is demonstrated by employees. For instance, do employees choose the right issues that are critical for team functioning as domains for their proactivity? Do employees seek the support and sponsorship of right authority figures when seeking to improve their environment? Are proactive employees able to effectively self-regulate so as to help themselves maintain vitality and energy as they work on issues they care about? In a similar vein, individuals might need to time their proactivity at appropriate junctures. As shown by Liang and colleagues (2019), the timing of voice within the innovation cycle determines its efficacy. When timing of proactivity is inappropriate, it is less likely to be effective. As Parker, Wang, and Liao (in press) note, it is important for employees to be proactive in a wise way. "Wise proactivity" involves the balanced consideration of the task and strategic context within which proactivity is being initiated, consideration of others in the social and interpersonal context, as well as self-control. For another instance, in one recent research by Lam, Lee, and Yang (in press), they have shown that being direct about change-oriented suggestions will increase managerial endorsement when the voicers are also polite and credible. Future research should further explore *how* employees engage in proactive behaviors in achieving different outcomes.

3.2 | Team proactive behavior dynamics

Most of the current research on proactivity at the team level has conceptualized team proactive behavior as the mean or aggregation of individual members' proactive behavior. One implicit assumption of such a conceptualization is that team members' proactive behavior is equally distributed, a situation that is likely to be rather rare. For example, Venkataramani and Tangirala (2010) found that some team members (those with high personal influence) are more likely to speak up. The outcomes of proactivity might depend on the distribution patterns, including how these interact with other factors. For example, Sherf, Sinha, Tangirala, and Awasty (2018) took a novel approach to examine voice centralization in the team context. They argued and found that voice centralization had negative effects on team performance when it occurred around members who were more socially dominant or were less reflective, because it was harmful to the utilization of members' expertise in the team. In other words, in the team context, voice is rarely equally distributed among team members and taking the mean level of team member voice may neglect some important team dynamics that, in turn, shape the impact of this behavior.

We contend that future proactive behavior research at the team level should capture the distribution or structure of proactive behaviors among team members in exploring the collective consequences of team proactive behaviors. Imagine three teams: one with equally distributed voice among team members, another with only high-competent member voice being heard, and another with low-competent member voice being dominant. Which team would perform better, and why? Given that proactive behaviors are agentic and change-oriented in nature, we believe that they may serve as an important bottom-up mechanism leading to emerging team states

and processes (Wang, Liu, & Ling, 2017). More importantly, the consequences of proactive behaviors in the team context are likely to be influenced by who in the team is engaging in these behaviors. A closer examination of micro-dynamics of proactive behavior in the team context may be important (Humphrey & Aime, 2014), which will be aided by examining more nuanced patterns of who is engaging in voice.

3.3 | Cross-cultural perspective

Although research on proactive behaviors has been conducted in Australia, China, Europe, North America, and so forth, with the exception of Smale et al. in this special issue, cross-cultural studies in which culture is explicitly compared are rare and deserve greater attention. Future research should address the following questions: Does the meaning of proactive behavior vary across cultures? How does culture shape the enactment of proactive behaviors? What are the strategies that people use to achieve their proactive goals, and are these strategies the same or different across cultures? How do authorities in various cultures view proactive behaviors and will proactive behaviors be rewarded similarly or differently? Investigating such questions will help us to understand what sorts of proactivity will be maximally effective in which cultures.

4 | CONCLUSION

The goal of this special issue is to enrich our understanding of the consequences of proactive behaviors. Based on our review of the seven accepted papers, we can draw the following conclusions. First, our special issue appears to be timely, capturing a growing interest in this research domain. Second, researchers have started to examine the bright and dark side of proactive behaviors, as well as when and how different outcomes emerge at different levels. Finally, we hope that our special issue stimulates future research in exploring *how* employees engage in proactive behaviors in achieving different outcomes, investigating team proactive behavior dynamics, and examining outcomes of proactive behaviors across cultural contexts.

Keywords

consequences, new directions, proactive behavior

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