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Cue consistency matters: how and when newcomers respond to supervisor creativity expectations

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ABSTRACT

Organizations may hire newcomers as a source of creativity, bringing fresh ideas and novel solutions to benefit organizational performance. However, the conditions that foster newcomer innovation are not well understood. Drawing on behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories, we investigate the combined influence of new job self-efficacy and two work design factors (work autonomy and work demands) affecting how supervisor creativity expectations (SCEs) translate into newcomers behaving innovatively. Two-wave data were collected from 108 graduates of a university in China. Results using reliability-corrected single indicator latent moderated structural equation modeling (RCSLMS) supported our hypotheses. Thus, SCEs predicted newcomer innovative behavior more strongly for newcomers with low new job self-efficacy. Moreover, supporting cue consistency theory, newcomers who perceived high SCEs and low new job self-efficacy demonstrated the highest level of innovative behavior when work autonomy was high or work demands were low. These results broaden the application of behavioral plasticity theory for understanding newcomer behaviors. Further, our findings emphasize the importance of consistent work environment cues to encourage newcomer innovation.

KEYWORDS

Newcomer; supervisor; innovation; work design; self-efficacy

Introduction

Employee innovation contributes to business performance and longevity, with newcomers an essential resource for innovation (Boulamatsi et al.,

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2021; Gu et al., 2017). Specifically, newcomers bring distinct skills and unique experiences that can contribute to positive workplace change (Harris et al., 2014). Yet, unlike completing core job requirements, employees who innovate may challenge and even violate established ways of doing things (Janssen, 2003). Given the uncertainties associated with being new (Bauer et al., 2007; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2020), newcomers may heed contextual cues provided during socialization that promote or suppress innovative behavior (Boulamatsi et al., 2021).

In line with this contextual focus, earlier socialization research investigated organizational influences, such as organizations' use of highly structured institutionalized socialization tactics that led to custodial rather than innovative orientations (Jones, 1986; Saks et al., 2007). More recently, research has examined the local context affecting newcomer innovation, such as supervisor behaviors (Boulamatsi et al., 2021; Nifadkar et al., 2019) and supervisor creativity expectations (SCEs; Dufour et al., 2020; Montani et al., 2019). This matches the supervisor as a crucial resource for newcomers, providing information and clarifying job requirements that enable adjustment (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012; Nifadkar et al., 2012, 2019).

Aligning with the predominant influence of the supervisor, the Pygmalion effect emphasizes how supervisor expectations influence follower self-expectations, motivation, and performance (Eden, 1984). The Pygmalion effect is demonstrated by research showing that, compared to employees facing low supervisor expectations, employees who perceive high supervisor expectations exert greater efforts and thus achieve better performance (Eden, 1990, see also McNatt, 2000; Tierney & Farmer, 2004). Findings from empirical studies with longer-tenured employees support such an argument by showing a positive association between SCEs and employee creativity and innovation (Carmeli & Schaubroeck, 2007; Jiang & Gu, 2017; Scott & Bruce, 1994). For newcomers, they look to their supervisors to understand contextual norms, and supervisors can influence their creative performance (Harris et al., 2014). Nevertheless, our understanding on how and when supervisor expectations can influence newcomers is still limited (Montani et al., 2019). Accordingly, in line with an interactionist perspective on newcomer adjustment (Reichers, 1987), this study aims to investigate the conditions when SCEs can translate into higher levels of newcomer innovative behavior by examining critical individual and contextual factors. Newcomer innovative behavior is considered the key outcome in this study, representing the valuable implementation of creative ideas (Baer, 2012).

Specifically, we draw on behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories as a basis for our ideas. Behavioral plasticity theory suggests

that individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to contextual cues; that is, they are more plastic (Brockner, 1988). Pierce et al. (1993) noted other stable individual characteristics, apart from self-esteem, might equally be involved in behavioral plasticity. In line with this, scholars using experimental designs have confirmed that behavioral plasticity holds for self-efficacy (Eden & Aviram, 1993; Eden & Kinnar, 1991). Evidence also extends to the socialization context, with newcomers' self-efficacy affecting their susceptibility to contextual factors (Saks, 1995; Sluss et al., 2012). Here, we investigate new job self-efficacy as a specific form of self-efficacy (Jones, 1986), arguing that newcomers with low new job self-efficacy may be more malleable and respond to SCEs by exhibiting innovative behavior.

Further, we draw on cue consistency theory (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991) to consider the broader context within which newcomers experience socialization. Cue consistency theory suggests that individuals rely on multiple external cues to make sense of their surrounding environment, with consistent cues exerting a stronger influence over individuals' thoughts, feelings, and actions (Anderson, 1981). When cues are inconsistent, individuals will discount those deemed least relevant (Slovic, 1966).

In this study, we incorporate two work design factors, namely work autonomy and work demands, as boundary conditions that shape new employees' perceptions of their work environment by modifying the influence of SCEs (Amabile et al., 1996; King et al., 2007; Zhu et al., 2022). We argue that high work autonomy gives newcomers the freedom to respond positively to SCEs. Similarly, low work demands allow newcomers more time and energy to experiment and act innovatively. Additionally, both high autonomy and low work demands allow for uncertainty, which may accentuate the influence of supervisor expectations. Thus, we propose that SCEs exert stronger effects on low new job self-efficacy newcomers who experience either high work autonomy or low work demands.

This study contributes to the existing research in several ways. First, we take the novel approach of using behavioral plasticity (Brockner, 1988) and cue consistency theories (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991) together to illuminate the boundary conditions when environmental cues combine with individual differences to influence newcomers' plasticity. Moreover, going beyond the analysis of a two-way interaction effect (situational factor × self-efficacy) on newcomer adjustment (Jones, 1986; Saks & Ashforth, 2000; Sluss et al., 2012), our study contributes to illustrating the conditions that foster newcomer innovative behavior by considering the joint effects of SCEs, self-efficacy, and work design factors. In exploring the role of work design, our study also responds

to Saks and Gruman (2012) call for more studies analyzing newcomers' work features. Additionally, as emphasized by Karakowsky et al. (2012), past research often simplifies the Pygmalion effect by assuming that managerial expectations directly translate into employee performance and paying little attention to the conditions enabling or constraining employees' responsiveness (Duan et al., 2017). Our study addresses this concern and provides valuable insights into the importance of consistent cues supporting the Pygmalion effect.

Theory and hypotheses

Reactions to SCEs

As they transition into a new organization, newcomers are alert to environmental cues that help them make sense (Bauer et al., 2007). Among various environmental cues, supervisors are a critical source of information, setting performance expectations and providing information to help newcomers adjust (Nifadkar et al., 2019). For example, when supervisors expect creativity, newcomers will aim to follow suit (Montani et al., 2019). SCEs can influence sensemaking processes such that newcomers will interpret engaging in innovative activities as desirable (Huang et al., 2016). That said, Karakowsky et al. (2012) emphasized that followers are not passive adopters but active agents who can decide whether to modify their efforts toward supervisor expectations. Indeed, there is evidence that newcomers behave proactively in response to individual characteristics, insider actions, and their interactive effects (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012; Montani et al., 2019; Sluss et al., 2012). For example, Major and Kozlowski (1997) found two- and three-way interactions between newcomer self-efficacy with task interdependence and access to insiders. Thus, similarly guided by the interactionist perspective (Reichers, 1987), we argue that new job self-efficacy as newcomers' personal characteristics, and work autonomy and work demands as work design features, are key factors explaining when SCEs elicit newcomer innovative behavior.

The moderating effect of new job self-efficacy

Based on behavioral plasticity theory, we argue that SCEs impact newcomers with low new job self-efficacy more strongly because they are more uncertain about their ability to meet job requirements and expectations, and thus tend to be more responsive to external factors (Brockner, 1988; Sluss et al., 2012). Indeed, a small amount of research on newcomers shows low self-efficacy is associated with greater seeking out or responding to environmental cues. For example, Smith and Kozlowski

(1994) found newcomers with high discretion (similar to autonomy) and low self-efficacy sought out coworkers for assistance, whereas those with high self-efficacy were more independent. They suggest low self-efficacy newcomers may need supervisors and coworkers to provide a more structured and supportive experience. Similarly, Saks (1995) investigated how professional training predicted outcomes, such as job performance and (reduced) intent to quit the profession for accountancy newcomers, and found those with low self-efficacy benefited most from training.

Self-efficacy is domain-specific, relating to a person's confidence in performing a task competently (Eden & Kinnar, 1991). In line with two previous studies of newcomers' self-efficacy in support of behavioral plasticity theory (Jones, 1986; Sluss et al., 2012), we investigate newcomers' views of their self-efficacy relative to their new job, which we term new job self-efficacy. New job self-efficacy describes the newcomers' general belief in their abilities and competencies to successfully fulfill their new job requirements (Jones, 1986).

According to behavioral plasticity theory, newcomers with low new job self-efficacy are more willing to mold themselves to fit role requirements; thus, supervisor expectations provide helpful guidance (McNatt, 2000). In the case of SCEs, these reassure low self-efficacy newcomers that innovative endeavors are appropriate and valuable. In contrast, newcomers with high new job self-efficacy show less plasticity. That is, they are less likely to rely on environmental cues, such as their SCEs, due to their greater confidence in their own approaches to tasks (Brockner, 1988). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

> Hypothesis 1: The positive relationship between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior is moderated by new job self-efficacy, such that the relationship is stronger for those with lower new job self-efficacy.

The moderating effects of work design factors

After entering the organization, newcomers often report substantial uncertainty (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2020). Following behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988), newcomers with low new job self-efficacy are more likely to lack confidence in judging the correctness of their workplace behavior, and respond to this uncertainty by heeding external cues. In contrast, newcomers with high new job self-efficacy are less affected by uncertainty, remaining confident in their own judgments of how to respond to environmental cues.

While behavioral plasticity identifies that newcomers lacking confidence in their abilities are more easily shaped by contextual cues (Brockner, 1988; Sluss et al., 2012), it does not specify the nature of

those cues. Thus, we draw on cue consistency theory, which identifies that consistent cues are more influential in shaping behavior (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991), to examine whether work design factors further influence newcomers' reactions to SCEs.

Given the paucity of newcomer work design research, it is unsurprising that only a few studies have examined interactions of self-efficacy and work design factors in the process of newcomer adjustment. Of the two studies we found, Smith and Kozlowski (1994) investigated discretion (akin to autonomy) as one of four work demands. They found newcomers with low self-efficacy but high autonomy relied more on colleagues to learn how to do their job. The second study comes from Sluss et al.'s (2012) study which tested and supported the interaction effects of task significance and self-efficacy on newcomer work attitudes such as job satisfaction and identification.

In this study, we focus on two work design factors: work autonomy and work demands. Work autonomy is 'the degree to which the job provides substantial freedom, independence, and discretion to the employee in scheduling the work and in determining the procedures to be used in carrying it out' (Hackman & Oldham, 1975, p. 162). Work autonomy signals a sense of control, allowing individuals to freely express themselves (Breaugh, 1985). Employees with more autonomy have more decision latitude and the ability to customize their work (Dierdorff & Jensen, 2018) and are more likely to behave creatively and innovatively (Amabile et al., 1996; Liu et al., 2011). Nonetheless, a high level of work autonomy may cause uncertainty, confusing newcomers, and lead to stress (Katz, 1978; Saks & Gruman, 2012).

Given that work autonomy offers newcomers a double-edged sword, we argue consistent environmental cues are particularly critical for regulating newcomer behaviors, especially for newcomers with low new job self-efficacy. To explain, high work autonomy and high SCEs (or low work autonomy and low SCEs) indicate consistent cues, which helps to reduce uncertainty about the appropriateness of behaviors. Such consistent cues are particularly useful for newcomers with low new job self-efficacy who rely on external cues for behavioral guidance. Further, high work autonomy allows more chances to engage in change-oriented attempts than low work autonomy (Liu et al., 2011). Thus, the positive interaction effect of SCEs and new job self-efficacy on newcomers' innovative behavior will be stronger under high work autonomy.

In contrast, low work autonomy and high SCEs (or high work autonomy and low SCEs) signal inconsistent cues: if work autonomy is low but newcomers experience SCEs, there is little flexibility for them to act innovatively and meet expectations for creativity; if newcomers experience high work autonomy, but there is little indication that they should

act innovatively, high work autonomy may increase their level of uncertainty and stress (Katz, 1978, Saks & Ashforth, 2000). Further, newcomers with low new job self-efficacy may be more negatively affected by inconsistent environmental cues and this may restrain their innovative efforts. Newcomers with high self-efficacy are, however, less likely to rely on environmental cues as they are more confident about their abilities to judge the need of being innovative. We thus predict the following:

> Hypothesis 2: The positive association between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior will be moderated by new job self-efficacy and work autonomy, showing the strongest positive association for newcomers with low new job self-efficacy and high work autonomy.

The second work design element we examine is work demands, reflecting a stressful work context (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). High work demands comprise heavy workloads, intense time pressure and inadequate resources (King et al., 2007). Innovative behavior requires an individual to invest time and energy without certainty over results (Amabile et al., 1996; Zhu et al., 2022); because high work demands absorb time and energy, they may hinder an individual from acting innovatively. Supporting this, King et al. (2007) showed work demands negatively predicted perceived organizational climate for innovation, while Zhu et al. (2022) found executives' job demands negatively predicted firm innovation.

Drawing on these findings, newcomers with low work demands are not burdened with too many trivial tasks and insufficient resources to complete them, and thus have the freedom to generate and champion innovative ideas. Following behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories, newcomers with low self-efficacy will be particularly malleable as they react to contextual cues (Brockner, 1988; Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991; Slovic, 1966). That is, additional to low self-efficacy newcomers being more responsive to SCEs as cues stimulating innovative behavior, such newcomers will have the capacity to be more responsive when their work demands are low. We thus hypothesize the following:

> Hypothesis 3: The positive association between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior will be moderated by new job self-efficacy and work demands, showing the strongest positive association for newcomers with low new job self-efficacy and low work demands.

Method

Sample and procedure

As part of the university system, graduates provide a source of innovation that contributes to economic growth (Gu et al., 2017). Given that

organizations hire graduates to benefit from their unique attributes and perspectives, resulting in creative performance (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2011), it was appropriate to sample graduate newcomers. To this end, we collected data from recent graduates from a university in China at two time points, four months after graduation (Time 1) and then two months later (Time 2). As part of a larger study, we collected data by sending email invitations to graduates from two departments, requesting participation from those who had started a new job after graduation. Participation was voluntary and acknowledged with a gift voucher. The survey was hosted online using Qualtrics.

At Time 1, we collected demographic information, SCEs, new job self-efficacy, work autonomy and work demands; at Time 2, we measured newcomer innovative behavior. At Time 1, 178 graduates responded; we sent these individuals the Time 2 survey two months later and 119 responded (67%, including 11 unmatched cases). Our final combined sample comprised 108 matched respondents who provided usable data at Times 1 and 2. A multivariate analysis of variance revealed no significant mean differences between participants who responded at Time 1 only *versus* those who responded at both Times 1 and 2 in terms of age, gender, employment type, and the hypothesized variables. The majority of participants were women (66%), with an average age of 23 years, and an average tenure of 104 d.

Measures

We applied the back-translation method suggested by Brislin (1986) to develop the Chinese version of the survey. We used 5-point Likert scales for all measures (1 = 'strongly disagree' to 5 = 'strongly agree'). Cronbach alphas were 0.77 – 0.89 (see Table 1).

SCEs were assessed using Carmeli and Schaubroeck (2007) four-item scale. An example item is: 'My supervisor expects me to be creative'.

New job self-efficacy was assessed by adopting four items from Jones (1986) eight-item scale, in line with previous studies measuring self-efficacy

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha and correlations among variables.

	Mean	S.D.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Self-efficacy	4.05	0.55	(0.77)							
2. Autonomy	3.10	0.94	0.23*	(0.87)						
3. Demand	2.84	0.83	−0.35***	−0.03	(0.83)					
4. SCEs	3.28	0.76	0.26**	0.46***	0.04	(0.87)				
5. Innovate	3.69	0.61	0.22*	0.24*	−0.15	0.44***	(0.89)			
6. Gender	1.66	0.48	0.11	0.06	−0.06	−0.07	−0.16	–		
7. Age	23.33	1.24	−0.05	−0.16	0.10	0.03	−0.01	−0.22*	–	
8. Tenure	104.14	36.68	0.01	0.04	−0.01	0.04	−0.05	0.13	0.03	–

Self-efficacy = New job self-efficacy, Autonomy = Work autonomy, Demand = Work demands, SCEs = Supervisor creativity expectations, Innovate = Newcomer innovative behavior

$N = 108$, Cronbach's alphas appear on the diagonal in parentheses. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$ and ***$p < .001$.

(e.g. Chen & Bliese, 2002). Our rationale for rejecting the remaining four items was their lack of relevance to self-efficacy or poor psychometric properties, such as measuring overqualification or satisfaction, and being double-barreled with unclear meaning. The four items we retained conceptually matched new job self-efficacy as a judgment of personal confidence, and related to the specific context of new employee adjustment. An example item is 'My new job is well within the scope of my abilities'.

Work autonomy was measured using Breaugh's (1985) three-item work method autonomy scale. An example item is: 'I am free to choose the method(s) to use in carrying out my work'.

King et al. (2007) seven-item scale was used to measure work demands. An example item is: 'I do not have enough time to carry out my work'.

Innovative behavior was measured with Scott and Bruce (1994) six-item scale. An example item is: 'I promote and champion new ideas to others'.

Analytic strategy

The hypothesized model is very complex, with two three-way interactions and five two-way interactions among latent variables. Hence, we adopt the reliability-corrected single indicator latent moderated structural equation modeling (RCSLMS) approach recommended by Cheung et al. (2021) for the data analyses. Cheung et al. (2021) demonstrate that RCSLMS substantially reduces the computational requirements and provides estimates comparable to the latent moderated structural equation modeling (LMS) approach, the preferred approach for testing latent interaction effects. The procedure for RCSLMS comprises 4-steps: (a) conducting a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to examine the quality of measurement, (b) estimating a baseline model without latent interaction, (c) estimating the latent interaction model with all latent interactions and (d) probing the latent interactions with simple slope tests and graphical representation of the interaction effects.

Results

Means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha and correlations among variables are displayed in Table 1. Since gender, age and tenure are not significantly correlated with other variables in the model, these demographic variables are not included in the analytical model as control variables.

Measurement model

The first step in the 4-step procedure is to run the CFA to examine measurement quality. The 5-factor model (SCEs, new job self-efficacy,

work autonomy, work demands and innovative behavior) with all items did not provide an acceptable fit (χ^2 (242) = 371.67, p < .001; CFI = 0.88, RMSEA = 0.07, and SRMR = 0.08). The factor loadings are reported in Table S1A of the Supplementary file. All standardized factor loadings exceed 0.5 except for two work demands items. We reran the CFA with those two items for work demands removed. The fit indices (χ^2 (199)=295.55, p<.001; CFI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.07 and SRMR = 0.08) show that the model fits the data adequately. All standardized factor loadings are higher than 0.5 (Table S1B of the Supplementary file); the construct reliabilities are between 0.77 and 0.89; and the largest correlation is 0.53 (between SCEs and work autonomy), which is significantly lower than unity. Hence, our measurements have demonstrated adequate reliability and convergent and discriminant validity. Results reported in subsequent sections are based on the reduced model with two items of work demands removed. For transparency, we also ran the analyses with all items included, and the results are reported in the Supplementary file. Differences in the estimated parameters from the two sets of results are minimal.

Hypothesis testing

The second step of the RCSLMS procedure is to estimate the baseline model without latent interaction (Model 1). Under the RCSLMS approach, each latent variable is measured by a single indicator, the simple average of item scores. The factor loading is fixed at unity, and the measurement error is fixed at (1 – Cronbach's alpha) times variance. Since this model is a just-identified model with zero degrees of freedom, the typically reported fit indices indicate this model fits the data perfectly. Hence, the evaluation of model fit is based on the Loglikelihood values. The estimated parameters of this model are reported in Table 2. The four exogenous variables together explained 32.7% of the variance of newcomer innovative behavior.

Two models with latent interactions were estimated in Step 3. The first model (Model 2) includes all main effects and five two-way interactions. The difference in loglikelihood values between Model 2 and Model 1 is 18.56 with 5 degrees of freedom, indicating Model 2 fits the data significantly better than Model 1. The five two-way interactions have explained an additional 31.6% of the variance of newcomer innovative behavior. Then the two three-way latent interactions are added (Model 3). The difference in loglikelihood values between Model 3 and Model 2 is 32.68 with 2 degrees of freedom, indicating Model 3 fits the data significantly better than Model 2. The two three-way interactions have explained an additional 7% of the variance

Table 2. Moderating effects of SCEs, new job self-efficacy and work design factors on newcomer innovative behavior.

	Newcomer innovative behavior					
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Independent variables	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
SCEs	0.50***	0.14	0.62***	0.13	0.72***	0.13
New job self-efficacy	0.00	0.17	0.13	0.18	0.35*	0.16
Work autonomy	−0.04	0.09	−0.02	0.08	−0.02	0.08
Work demands	−0.15	0.09	−0.18	0.09	−0.16	0.09
SCEs × New job self-efficacy	–	–	−0.49	0.33	−0.87**	0.29
SCEs × Work autonomy	–	–	0.33***	0.09	0.23**	0.08
SCEs × Work demands	–	–	−0.32**	0.12	−0.21	0.12
New job self-efficacy × Work autonomy	–	–	0.04	0.17	0.04	0.16
New job self-efficacy × Work demands	–	–	−0.16	0.16	0.05	0.14
SCEs × New job self-efficacy × Work autonomy	–	–	–	–	−0.50***	0.13
SCEs × New job self-efficacy × Work demands	–	–	–	–	0.43*	0.18
R^2	–	0.33	–	0.64	–	0.71
R^2 change	–	0.33	–	0.31	–	0.07

SCEs: supervisor creativity expectations
N= 108. * p<.05, ** p<.01 and ***p<.001.

of newcomer innovative behavior. All estimated parameters are reported in Table 2.

In Hypothesis 1, we proposed the positive relationship between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior would be moderated by new job self-efficacy. The results of Model 3 in Table 2 show that the two-way interaction of SCEs and new job self-efficacy on innovative behavior is significant (B= −0.87, p=.002). However, this result should be interpreted cautiously because the two three-way interactions are also statistically significant, indicating this moderating effect depends on the levels of work autonomy and work demands. Nevertheless, results of simple slope tests show that when work autonomy and work demands are at the mean level, the positive effect of SCEs on innovative behavior is stronger when new job self-efficacy is low (mean − 1 standard deviation; B = 1.13, p<.001) than when new job self-efficacy is high (mean + 1 standard deviation; B = 0.30, p=.030). The relationships are shown in Figure 1. This supports Hypothesis 1.

For Hypothesis 2, we proposed a three-way interaction whereby newcomers with low new job self-efficacy would show a stronger positive association between SCEs and innovative behavior when they also reported high work autonomy. The effect of the three-way interaction among SCEs, new job self-efficacy, and work autonomy on innovative behavior is statistically significant (B= −0.50, p=.000). Step 4 of the RCSLMS approach is to probe the interaction effects by plotting the figure and conducting simple slope tests. We follow the procedures outlined in Cheung et al. (2021) and Dawson (2014) for probing three-way interactions. Full results of simple slope tests are shown in Table S4 in the Supplementary file. Figure 2 shows the relationship

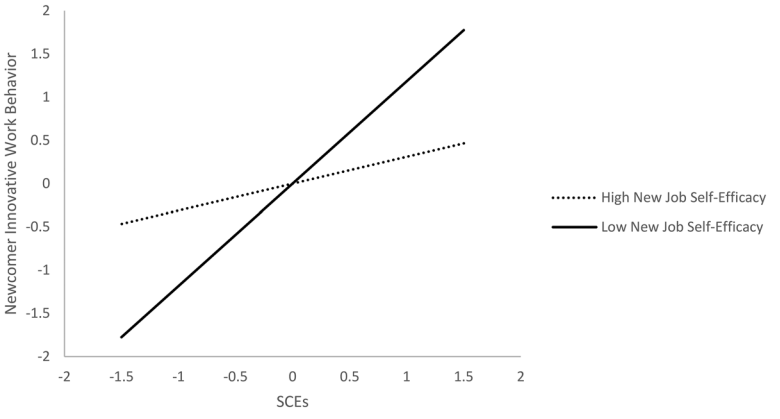

Figure 1. Standardized two-way interaction effects of SCEs and new job self-efficacy on newcomer innovative behavior.

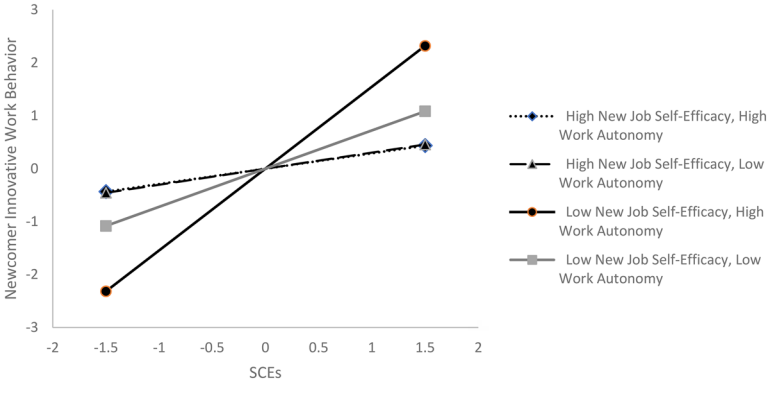

Figure 2. Three-way interaction effects of SCEs, new job self-efficacy and work autonomy on newcomer innovative behavior.

between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior at various combinations of high (mean plus one standard deviation) and low (mean minus one standard deviation) levels of work autonomy. Simple slope tests reveal that the positive relationship between SCEs and innovative behavior is highest for newcomers with low new job self-efficacy and high work autonomy (simple slope = 1.55, $p<.001$), with slope difference tests indicating this relationship is stronger than the other combinations of self-efficacy and work autonomy. This supports Hypothesis 2.

For Hypothesis 3, we proposed a three-way interaction such that newcomers with low new job self-efficacy would show a stronger positive association between SCEs and innovative behavior when they had low work demands. Results of Model 3 in Table 2 show that this three-way interaction is significantly associated with innovative behavior (B = 0.43, $p=.017$). The complete results of simple slope tests are shown in Table S4 in the Supplementary file. Differences in simple slopes show that the

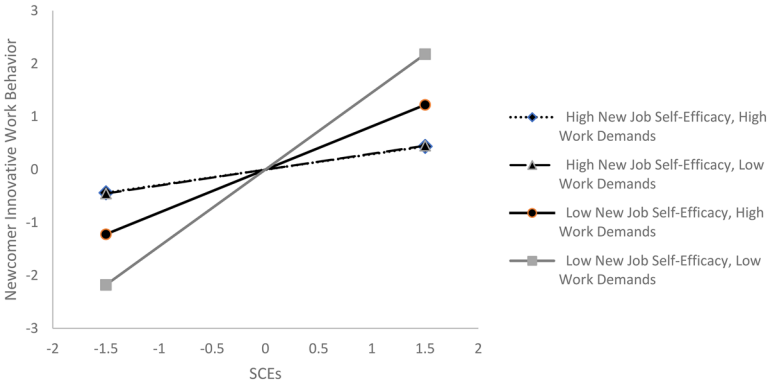

Figure 3. Three-way interaction effects of SCEs, new job self-efficacy and work demands on newcomer innovative behavior.

relationship between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior at low new job self-efficacy and low work demands (simple slope = 1.45, $p<.001$) is stronger than other combinations of self-efficacy and work demands. Similarly, Figure 3 shows that the relationship between SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior at low new job self-efficacy and low work demands is the strongest among all combinations of new job self-efficacy and work demands. Thus Hypothesis 3 is supported.

Discussion

Given the potential for newcomers to bring fresh ideas that benefit organizations' innovative performance, our study aimed to investigate the conditions fostering newcomer innovative behavior. We argued that the Pygmalion effect should not be taken for granted (Karakowsky et al., 2012), whereby newcomers' perceptions of SCEs necessarily yield innovative behavior. Rather, based on behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories, our study theorizes and provides empirical evidence that new job self-efficacy and work design factors combine to amplify the effect of SCEs in encouraging newcomer innovative behavior.

More specifically, we first drew on behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988) to propose that newcomers with low new job self-efficacy would be more responsive to the contextual cue of SCEs, thus demonstrating higher innovative behavior. Consistent with behavioral plasticity theory and its interpretations using self-efficacy (Brockner, 1988; Eden & Aviram, 1993), Figure 1 shows that newcomers with low new job self-efficacy are more malleable in meeting SCEs, thus exhibiting more innovative behavior. Further, matching cue consistency theory (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991), Figures 2 and 3 show SCEs are heeded more by newcomers with low new job self-efficacy in combination with

high work autonomy or low work demands. These findings indicate that newcomers with low new job self-efficacy are more responsive to SCEs to generate innovative behavior when work design features provide consistent and enabling cues.

Theoretical implications

Our study makes several theoretical contributions. First, responding to calls to consider boundary conditions of behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988), our study advances newcomer research by theorizing and testing when newcomers are more apt to follow environmental cues. This is enabled by integrating behavioral plasticity theory with cue consistency theory. Behavioral plasticity theory identifies low self-efficacy as an individual characteristic that makes newcomers more susceptible to contextual cues, but it does not further specify the cues (Eden & Aviram, 1993; Eden & Kinnar, 1991), while cue consistency theory identifies consistent cues as being more influential (Maheswaran & Chaiken, 1991). Our integrated approach of investigating two- and three-way interactions reveals the relevance of behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories to newcomer adjustment. We might expect newcomers to be malleable, particularly when newcomers have low new job self-efficacy, the integration of cue consistency theory helps to advance our understanding of how newcomers' plasticity can be motivated toward desired behaviors, such as being innovative.

Second, in a related vein, our study broadens the application of behavioral plasticity theory in the socialization studies and provides insights into previous mixed findings. For example, Jones (1986) found that low self-efficacy newcomers who experienced strong and structured environmental cues *via* institutionalized socialization tactics exhibited the desired custodial role orientation. Sluss et al. (2012) hypothesized and found the association between task significance and newcomer job attitudes is stronger for higher self-efficacy newcomers. Their findings support the use of behavioral plasticity theory (Brockner, 1988). However, Saks and Ashforth (2000) obtained minimal support for behavioral plasticity theory, with only one significant interaction of fourteen tested for newcomer general self-efficacy moderating the associations of role stressors (e.g. role overload and role conflict) with a range of newcomer attitudes and performance. We suggest two potential reasons for these varying results. First, our integrated approach of using both behavioral plasticity theory and cue consistency theory demonstrates the importance of providing newcomers with a coherent set of cues that motivate desired behaviors. Thus, behavioral plasticity may not always provide a sufficient explanation alone, with low self-efficacy newcomers needing consistent

cues – as in Jones (1986) study where a coherent set of organizational socialization tactics enable low self-efficacy newcomers to achieve the desired outcome of a custodial role orientation. Second, and relatedly, theorizing about a broader range of cues, and thus going beyond two-way interactions, may capture the complexity of newcomer adjustment processes and clarify how these unfold. Socialization scholars may benefit from this and related integrated approaches in examining person-situation interactions in future research endeavours.

Our third theoretical contribution is investigating work autonomy and work demands, which heeds calls to explore how work design factors influence newcomer socialization processes (Saks & Gruman, 2012). A decade after Saks and Gruman (2012) noted only a handful of studies had investigated work design, their critique still holds. There is no study on work demands, and the few studies that have investigated newcomer autonomy generally find positive associations with newcomer adjustment outcomes such as organizational commitment and lower withdrawal cognitions (e.g. Chong et al., 2021). Our investigation supports Saks and Gruman (2012) view that attention should be paid to newcomers' work design as an integral element of their adjustment. Our findings demonstrate high work autonomy and low work demands respectively enable newcomers with low self-efficacy to meet supervisor expectations. This only scratches the surface, suggesting more investigations of newcomer work design will yield important insights.

Finally, examining the impact of SCEs and newcomer innovative behavior adds to a growing literature establishing how supervisors play an important role for newcomers (Nifadkar et al., 2012, 2019; Dufour et al., 2020). Prior research suggests that supervisors can motivate newcomers and improve their job performance by conveying positive expectations *via* the Pygmalion effect (e.g. Chen & Klimoski, 2003). Our study builds the logic and investigates the impact of SCEs on newcomer innovative behavior by considering the combined moderating factors of self-efficacy and work design factors. We argue that SCEs may differ in their motivational influence due to some newcomers being particularly sensitive to contextual cues (Bauer et al., 2007; Katz, 1978). Our findings provide additional evidence to explain how and when supervisor expectations can influence newcomer behaviors.

Practical implications

Our results also have several implications for managers wishing to achieve innovation when hiring newcomers with fresh perspectives and new ideas. First, drawing on our finding that SCEs resulted in greater innovative behavior for newcomers with lower new job self-efficacy,

managers should note that employees' self-efficacy is a relevant factor influencing receptivity to supervisor expectations. As such, an initial assessment of newcomers' new job self-efficacy would enable supervisors to invest their limited energies strategically. Supervisors of newcomers with low self-efficacy may tailor expectations toward achieving desired innovative behavior; in contrast, supervisors of newcomers with high self-efficacy may need to find other ways to shape newcomers' behaviors to desired ends.

Second, the three-way interaction effects indicate that, if supervisors do try to influence newcomer innovative behavior, they must be certain that such expectations are aligned with supportive work design features. This is because newcomers' plasticity relies on consistent external cues, especially those with low new job self-efficacy. Therefore, when supervisors communicate expectations for creativity, it is important to also consider whether newcomers are enabled to implement such change-oriented attempts. If autonomy cannot be provided, or if the work is known to include a high quantity of demands, then SCEs may be less likely to be fulfilled.

Finally, newcomers can be proactive in pursuing their own adjustment (Cooper-Thomas & Burke, 2012; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014), but newcomers with low self-efficacy may hesitate to clarify requirements unless the context enables this (Major & Kozlowski, 1997). Increasing accessibility and establishing positive relationships with supervisors may enable newcomers to value and deliver on innovation expectations (Nifadkar et al., 2012, 2019).

Limitations and future research areas

Despite the contributions of this study, certain methodological challenges should be noted. First, because this study focused on newcomers who recently joined an organization, our sample was constrained by the number of graduates starting new jobs. While larger sample sizes are typically desirable, the statistically significant results in our study imply the effect sizes for the interaction effects are substantial. Relatedly, although graduates may be expected to deliver innovation at work, they are neither representative of new employees at large, nor of all new employees expected to be more innovative. Second, our measures are based on self-reports from newcomers, that is, a single source. Although the study involved two measurements across 2 weeks, some key variables were measured at the same time, indicating a potential concern of common-method variance (CMV) (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, it is also important to note that the focus of the study was on interaction effects for which CMV has a dampening effect, and the significant

interaction effects cannot be artifacts of CMV (Siemsen et al., 2010). That said, future research using data from multiple sources would further offset concerns. Third, we collected data from graduates in China. Although previous studies indicate that the Pygmalion effect generalizes to the Chinese culture (e.g. Duan et al., 2017), and that innovation is expected from many employees, from shopfloor workers to senior executives (Zhu et al., 2022), it would be useful to replicate the findings in other cultures and samples. Illustrating this with regard to samples, Saks et al. (2007) report stronger meta-analytic associations across a range of socialization tactics with newcomer adjustment outcomes for graduates *versus* other types of newcomers, and suggest this may reflect graduates' greater sensitivity and willingness to meet socialization cues. Finally, we did not measure details of newcomers' jobs, organizations or industries and therefore could not assess these effects.

Beyond these limitations, there are several promising directions for future research. From a theoretical stance, our study benefited from using both behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories; these may guide future research investigating how to shape socialization to optimize and enable newcomer behaviors. We focused on new job self-efficacy to investigate newcomer plasticity, but other specific self-efficacy constructs could provide insights, including creative self-efficacy (Jiang & Gu, 2017). We chose supervisory and work design contextual cues relevant to employee creativity and innovation (Amabile et al., 1996; Zhu et al., 2022), but others are possible. For example, innovation expectations and guidance from organizational insiders beyond the supervisor may support newcomer innovative behavior (e.g. coworker: Li et al., 2011). Moreover, beyond (high) autonomy and (low) demands, other features of work design might encourage newcomer innovative work behavior. For example, Major and Kozlowski (1997) found newcomers with low self-efficacy and two relational work design features, task interdependence and access to insiders, proactively sought task-related information. This fits with other socialization research showing the importance of social elements for newcomer adjustment (Chen & Cooper-Thomas, 2021). The implication for contextual cues is that both task and relational work design elements may influence newcomer behaviors.

Conclusion

Drawing on behavioral plasticity and cue consistency theories, this study reveals the conditions under which newcomers meet SCEs by demonstrating innovative behavior. Our results showed that newcomers with low new job self-efficacy are more responsive to SCEs, and this

interaction effect is strengthened under high work autonomy or low work demands. Our focus on aligning individual characteristics and environmental cues may be expanded to understand and foster other desirable newcomer behaviors.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available as they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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