Understanding newcomer role orientation in the workplace: A self-determination theory perspective

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Purpose. Newcomers can be a source of innovation for organisations, bringing fresh perspectives and novel solutions. Thus, in many organisations, it is desirable for newcomers to adopt an innovative (versus custodial) role orientation. Using self-determination theory (SDT), this study investigated how competence (investiture socialisation tactics), autonomy (job autonomy) and relatedness (perceived insider status) predict newcomers’ motivation (work engagement) to adopt an innovative role orientation. Specifically, in line with SDT, we propose that autonomy and competence will predominantly predict work engagement, whereas perceived insider status is proposed to have a more distal, moderating role on the relationship of work engagement with innovative role orientation.

Design. Longitudinal data across two timepoints were collected from 102 Chinese university graduates.

Results. Support was found for the mediating effect of work engagement on the relationship between job autonomy (but not investiture) and innovative role orientation. Further, newcomers’ perception of insider status had a significant moderating effect such that the positive relationship between work engagement and innovative role orientation was stronger for those newcomers who do not perceive themselves as insiders in their new organisation.

Limitations. Data are self-report and collected from graduates in China; the results may not generalize.

Practical implications. Given the value of graduate newcomers being innovative, we discuss how organisations can leverage these findings to optimise conditions for innovative role orientation.

Originality. While newcomer role orientation has been a theoretical focus of newcomer research, relatively little empirical research has been conducted, especially on the effects of work context.