Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict as Mediators of the Relationship between Socialization and Organizational Commitment

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to examine the relationship between employee socialization and organization commitment. The study also aimed at assessing the mediating effect of role ambiguity and role conflict on the relationship between employee socialization and organization commitment in a large telecommunication organization located in Jordan.

A survey was administered to 300 employees, and 256 questionnaires were returned and usable for statistical analysis. Descriptive statistics, correlations and regression analyses were used to test the hypotheses. Findings reported that both proposed mediators, role ambiguity and role conflict, emerged as significant mediators of the relationship between employee socialization and organization commitment. Based on the findings and limitations of the study, further research was needed to examine the correlation of socialization, job stressors, and organizational commitment on other work environments.

Keywords: Role Ambiguity, Role Conflict, Stressors, Orientation, Organizational Commitment, Jordan

Introduction

Organizations increasingly realized that employee was the key to their success and view employer-employee relationship as a mutually beneficial process. Organizational socialization defined how an organization addressed the interests of its employees and how that was reflected in its interest. Organizational socialization helped both the organization and its employees to meet their needs (Hau-Siu Chow, 2002). The first period in joining an organization is very critical for new employees. A basic premise of organizational socialization practices is that the nature of a new employee`s initial experiences is imperative to his adjustment to the new environment (Fogarty, 1992; Saks and Ashforth, 1997).

Due to the fact that a new employee may face a dilemma when he/she joins the organization, the organization should concentrate on how to reduce his/her uncertainty and fear. Successful organizational socialization increases emotional attachments toward the organization. Further, social interactions with other employees are necessary in the process of organizational socialization (Kato, 2010). The successful organization tries to transform new employees, through efficient socialization program, into established organizational employees.

Role ambiguity and role conflicts can be of the outcomes of non-availability of organizational socialization. The main constructs of role stressors, including role ambiguity and role conflict have received a considerable attention, especially in the western literature. Role stressors are often conceptualized as consisting of two related but distinct constructs—role ambiguity and role conflict (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman 1970). Individuals involved in organizations are subject to conflict, whether conscious or unconscious, and the impact of conflict is unavoidable, either positive or negative (Jehn, 1997). For organizations, reduced productivity, high turnover, frequent tardiness and absenteeism are common consequences of workplace stressors (Williams and Cooper, 1998; Elfering et al., 2005). Based on the results of his study, Onyemah (2008) indicated that Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict influenced job performance. However, researchers have not yet reached consensus regarding the factors involved the effects of work stress on individual and organizational behavior.

Organizational commitment has been an important field for business researchers and scholars. Greater organizational commitment has been linked to low rates of absenteeism and also better job performance (Cohen, 1992). The results of the study conducted by Wu & Norman (2006) indicate that there was a positive correlation between job satisfaction and organizational commitment and a negative correlation between job satisfaction and role

conflict and ambiguity. According to a 2010 study, results indicated that satisfaction with work-itself, quality of supervision and pay satisfaction had significant positive influence on organizational commitment (Malik et al, 2010). Anyhow, managers must give more attention to the antecedents and the outcomes of the organizational commitment.

Although, several studies have been conducted on socialization, job stress, and organizational commitment, these variables have not been adequately investigated in Jordan and in the other Arab countries. Consequently, in this study, the researcher intends to investigate and analyze role ambiguity and role conflict as mediators of the relationship between socialization and organizational commitment

Literature Review

1. Organizational Socialization

In the past, organizational socialization was primarily viewed from the perspective of the organization, as a one-way conduit from the organization to the newcomer about technical aspects of the job and the organization's cultural norms and procedures (Miller & Jablin, 1991). Recently, organizations realized that the newcomer practices an interactive role in the socialization process and that his/her perspective must be taken into consideration.

During the first encounter with an organization, newcomers are involved in acquiring new information clarifying their roles, and adjusting their behavior to that expected by the organization. This involvement allows the newcomers to interact with organizational members and settings and ensures that a common meaning and understanding is developed between the organization and its newcomers (Yang, 2008).

Through organizational socialization process, new employees learn the right roles and behaviors to be more effective members in the organization. Kozlowski (1995) described organizational socialization as the process through which newcomers learn more about the organization and become fully assimilated insiders. Socialization helps newcomers adapt to their work environment through facilitating their adjustment to the values and norms of the organization and also through clarifying their role. Schein (1988) stated that organizational socialization also occurs when an employee transfers between departments, gets promoted to another position, or returns to the organization after schooling. In fact, employee socialization most likely occurs any time an employee acquires a new supervisor, joins a new work group, or trains a newcomer (Reio and Callahan, 2004). So the organizational socialization does not include only the newcomers, but it is extended to include any changes take place relating to employees` position or place of work.

Socialization process is a continuous process which is necessary for an employee during his tenure in the organization. All employees, regardless of their position or managerial level, are in need to learn and adapt in response to the organization development. So, the socialization process should not only be associated with new comers for the first week or the first month only, but it should be based on continuous basis. There are two different role orientations: institutionalized and individualized. An institutionalized role orientation results when individuals are taught to respond to a new context in the same way that existing organizational members respond to it. An institutionalized orientation encourages obedience and conformity to rules and norms. An individualized role orientation results when individuals are encouraged to be creative and to experiment with changing norms and values so that an organization can better achieve its values (Jones, 1986).

Louis (1980) argued that there were two aspects of socialization: The first aspect concerned role-related learning which involved knowledge-base, strategy, and mission, while the second one concerns learning culture. During the socialization, newcomers do learn about the organization`s cultural norms, values, and beliefs, yet, little is known about the processes by which such learning takes place (Donavan et al, 2004).

Newcomers may act proactively in behaviors that foster their adjustment. Proactive behavior is defined as changing the status quo by taking initiative so as to improve existing circumstances, or to create new ones (Crant, 2000). Proactive behaviors, such as seeking information or looking for feedback from others, can make newcomers benefit more and consequently improve whole socialization process. Kennedy and Berger (1994, p. 58) highlighted the finding that the highest turnover occurred during the first 4 weeks (in employment). Most of the intentions to leave organizations usually happen during the probationary period because newcomers face new workplace and unmet expectations. To solve this kind of problem, the organization may adopt and implement condensed programs of organizational socialization.

2. Role Ambiguity and Role Conflict

2.1 Job Stressors

There are many types of stressors that occur outside the organization, such as personal circumstances, societal pressures, and financial problems. In addition to that, there are some stressors that occur inside organizations, those

which may be called job stressors. The scope of this study would limit to cover only job stressors, which include role ambiguity and role conflict. Job stressors may refer to any characteristic of the workplace that poses a threat to the individual (Larson, 2004).

Job Stress is a known factor for low motivation and morale, decrease in performance, high turnover rate and sick-leave, more accidents, low job satisfaction, low quality of products and services, ineffective internal communication and conflicts etc. (Schabracq and Cooper, 2000; Murphy, 1995; McHugh, 1993). Moreover, Williams et al. (2001) stated that job stress had been found to negatively affect both job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Recent models of turnover intentions linked perceived job stress with turnover intentions through various intermediate withdrawal cognitions such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Mikkelsen et al., 2000).

Job stress is not always bad for individual performance or organizational effectiveness, because job stressors may lead to either constructive or destructive actions. In fact, it is generally recognized that at least low levels of stress can even enhance job performance. (Weiss et al,1982). Stress can be good as long as the employee can endure it, but beyond that level stress becomes harmful to the person and destructive to the company. Schermerhorn (2002) stated that stress could be either temporary or long-term, mild or severe, depending mostly on how long its causes continued, how powerful they were, and how strong the employee`s recovery powers were. Research in employee socialization suggested that reduction in role stressors such as role ambiguity and role conflict were considered an important organizational outcome of new employee socialization (e.g. Ashforth and Saks 1996). Role ambiguity and role conflict can be extremely dysfunctional when they lead to negative responses or destructive actions.

2.1.1 Role Ambiguity

In case newcomer's roles were not defined in a clear way, those newcomers might experience role ambiguity. This situation might lead to misunderstanding of job requirements, norms, rules, and procedures. Role ambiguity is defined as the existence of a lack of clarity in the roles an employee is expected to fulfill. Since a worker needs to understand clearly what his or her role is, not clearly knowing what one's role is may lead to higher levels of job tension and also directly lead to lower levels of job satisfaction for temporary employees (Slatterya et al, 2008).

Role ambiguity is viewed as the situation where an individual does not have a clear direction about the expectations of his/her role in the job or organization (Rizzo et al, 1970). It occurs when a person's tasks or authority are not clearly defined and the person becomes afraid to act on or take responsibility for anything (Jones, 2007).

Role ambiguity is the perception that one lacks information necessary to perform a job or task, leading the perceiver to feel helpless. It is an employee`s uncertainty about the expectations of different members in his or her role set (Onyemah, 2008). Each formal position in a structure should have clear task requirements to minimize confusion and increase productivity, but in some structures task requirements are ambiguous (Hamilton, 2002). Role ambiguity results from inadequate information or knowledge to do a job. This ambiguity may be due to inadequate training, poor communication, or the deliberate withholding or distortion of information by a coworker or supervisor (Luthans, 1989, p. 200). In brief, we can say that clear job descriptions and obvious authority relationships can contribute to solving ambiguity problems. When people know all details of their position in the organization, they find it comfortable to take responsibility for their actions and to interact with others.

2.1.2 Role Conflict

When two or more employees have different views regarding their work which makes them experience conflicting demands and expectations, and lead them to make incompatible decisions, a situation of role conflict exists. Rizzo et al. (1970) stated that role conflict occurs when an individual is subject to competing or conflicting sets of expectations and demands in the organization, or when the principle of chain of command or the principle of unity of command is violated. The person may be caught between in the crossfire between two supervisors or the needs of two functional groups (Jones, 2007, 132). Role conflict is a feeling of being torn in multiple directions, unable to find a way to make every role partner satisfied. (Onyemah,2008).

A general problem that arises in understanding role behavior is that individuals play multiple roles, adjusting their roles to the group to which they belong at the time. They read their job descriptions, get suggestions from their manager, and watch what their coworkers do. When that individual is confronted by different role expectations, he or she experiences role conflict. (Robbins and Coulter, 2003,p. 401). Facets of role conflict include being torn by conflicting demands from a supervisor about the job and being pressured to get along with people with whom you are not compatible (Ivanceivich, 2008, p. 227).

At a certain point or at the normal range, conflict may be constructive, but beyond that point, conflict may become destructive. Conflict can be positive when it overcomes organizational inertia and leads to organizational

development. Beyond a certain point, however, conflict can lead to organizational ineffectiveness. There are many coping strategies that can be designed by management to reduce job stressors, such as creation of a supportive organizational climate, enriching the design of tasks, reducing conflict and clarity organizational roles, and planning career paths and providing counseling since individuals are left to decide career moves and strategies on their own or get advice once in a while from a supervisor (Luthanns, 1989, pp. 212-3).

3. Organizational Commitment

Organizations are in need of highly committed employees so as to achieve their goals and objectives in an efficient and effective way. Organizational commitment involves employees' psychological state that makes them more loyal to their work and their organization. Organizational commitment has been a popular research topic among organizational and behavioral researchers for decades due to the perception that employee commitment is generally regarded as one of the key determinants of organizational effectiveness and productivity (Fiorito et al., 2007; Meyer et al., 1993). Mowday (1998) defines organizational commitment as the attachment an individual has for his or her organization, and it arises from the person's identification with and participation in the organization. Organizational commitment represents an employee's orientation toward the organization in terms of his or her loyalty to, identification with, and involvement in the organization (Robbins and Coulter, 2003, p. 372). Organizational commitment exists within four factors: commitment to the organization, commitment to top management, commitment to immediate supervisors, and commitment to work groups (Becker, 1992).

Multidimensional approach views organizational commitment as a psychological state that has three distinct components – affective, continuance and normative commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997), which is called three component model of organizational commitment. The Three-component model of organizational commitment has gained substantial popularity since its inception (Wasti, 2005).

The first component, affective commitment, is defined as emotional attachment to the organization. It exists when employees have the desire to remain with the organization because they want to (Allen & Meyer, 1996). This dimension is a bond an individual has to an organization, including feelings of "affection, warmth, loyalty, fondness, and pleasure"(Jaros et al, 1993, p. 954). The second component, continuance commitment, is defined as commitment due to perceived costs from leaving the organization. It exists when employees stay with the organization because leaving it would result in an unacceptable loss (Allen & Meyer, 1996), so it is a need for committed employees. The third component, normative commitment, is defined as commitment due to obligation to the organization, and strong normative commitment causes employees to feel as though they have to remain with the organization (Allen & Meyer, 1996), so it can be considered an obligation.

Berry (2010) defines affective commitment as the personal desire of an individual to remain with an organization. At the same time, Berry (2010) defines the construct of normative commitment as the moral obligation or social pressure an individual perceives to remain with the organization, while he defines continuance commitment as a need to remain with an organization composed of two factors: perceived psychological investments and perceived limited alternatives. A previous research argued that these two variables, job satisfaction and organizational commitment, share a significantly strong relationship (Silva, 2006). Brown and Trevino (2006) suggest in their research propositions that ethical leadership behaviors are likely to contribute to the followers' job satisfaction, but it also is likely to contribute to their organizational commitment. It was also found that organizational commitment was positively with correlated worker satisfaction and negatively correlated with turnover intentions (Fields, 2002).

The hypotheses developed in Sutherland`s (2010) study found positive and statistically significant relationships between ethical leadership and two forms of organizational commitment; affective commitment and normative commitment. Mathieu and Zajac (1990) performed a meta-analysis of organizational commitment research and their findings suggest that poor attendance, absenteeism, turnover, and intention to leave the organization were all consequences of low organizational commitment. Employees are considered to be committed to their organizations if they show willingness to continue to be associated with their organization and make great efforts in achieving organizational objectives (Laschinger & Finegan, 2005; Lok, Westwood, & Crawford, 2005).

The results of all the studies mentioned above prove that organizational commitment is important to organizations because it is considered critical to many organizational outputs, such as job satisfaction, employee performance, and intention to quit. In general, organizational commitment has two sides. The first side involves the way organization management treats employee and behaves towards them ethically and legally. The other side relates to the employee's psychological state that makes him committed to the organization. Because of that, it is unexpected to find a committed employee when at the same time; he/she has been treated unequally or unfairly.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 The Case Study Approach

A large telecommunication group in Jordan was chosen as a case study of this paper research. The case study method was selected to investigate the below mentioned hypotheses. This method was appropriate in this research for the study of role stressors, orientation, and commitment since it provided in-depth contextual information on the subjects of the study. Dyer and Wilkins (1991) argued that a single deep case study is the optimum form of case study research. Before distribution of the main study instrument, the author paid visits to the group and collected detailed information on the case study organization through in depth interviews, observations, and hand written notes. These visits were, on average, two hours each, over a four-week period.

4.2 Sample

The study was carried out in a large telecommunication group in Jordan which renders fixed, mobile, internet, and content services. The Group employs around 3000 employees and serves more than 2.4 million customers in Jordan.

Questionnaires, along with covering letters describing the objective of the study were distributed to a convenience sample of 300 employees, who were assured that their responses would remain confidential, and data collected would be used only for research purpose. A satisfactory response rate of 85.3% was achieved with 256 employees voluntarily completing the questionnaire

4.3 Hypotheses

Based on the discussion of literature, the following hypotheses were formulated and presented in alternative format:

H1: Employee socialization is significantly related to organizational commitment.

H21: Employee socialization is significantly related to role ambiguity.

H22: Employee socialization is significantly related to role conflict.

H31: Role ambiguity significantly mediates the relationship between socialization and organizational commitment.

H32: Role conflict significantly mediates the relationship between socialization and organizational commitment.

The five hypotheses above are displayed in the study model. In this study, the author attempted to test the hypotheses mentioned above and displayed in the path analysis as shown in the conceptual model.

4.4 Measures

Instrument of the study was built depending on the study variables. Socialization questions were adopted from Taormina (1994) 'organizational socialization inventory, or OSI scale, which consists of twenty items. Examples of the items included in the questionnaire are, "This organization has provided excellent job training for me", "I have a full understanding of my duties in this organization", "Opportunities for advancement in this organization are available to almost everyone" and "I can readily anticipate my prospects for promotion in this company".

The House et al (1983) scales of role ambiguity and role conflict were employed in the current study. Examples of the items included in this scale are, "My authority matches the responsibilities assigned to me", and "I often get myself involved in situations in which there are conflicting requirements".

Organizational commitment was measured using Meyer et al (1993) scale, which covers the affective, normative and continuance constructs. Examples of the items included in the scale are, "I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with the organization", It would be very hard for me to leave the organization right now, even if I wanted to", and "I do not feel my obligation to remain with the organization". A seven-point response scale was used, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). An examination of the alpha coefficients indicated satisfactory levels of internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alphas were ranging from .743 for employee socialization to .958 for role conflict.

5. Results

This study assessed role ambiguity and role conflict as mediators of the relationship between employee socialization and commitment. Table (I) presents the means, standard deviations, reliability, and bivariate correlations between variables examined in the study. The highest mean was for organizational commitment (5.639) with a standard deviation (.627), while the lowest mean was for role ambiguity (2.189) with a standard deviation (.574). As for hypotheses, correlation was used for testing them and the results of regression were shown in Table (1) which revealed that socialization was correlated to organizational commitment ($R = .188$, $p < 0.01$), role ambiguity ($R = -.451$, $p < 0.01$); and role conflict ($R = -.508$, $p < 0.01$). These results supported H1, H21, and H22.

To test the mediation model for H31, the author followed Baron and Kenny's (1986) four-step procedure. First, the independent variable, i.e. employee socialization, was significantly related to the dependent variable, i.e. organization commitment, as proven also in Table (1) for H1. Second, the independent variable was significantly related to the mediating variable, role ambiguity, as provided in Table (1) for H21 in this study.

Third, the dependent variable was regressed on the mediator, when controlling for the independent variable. In addition to steps 1 and 2, multiple regression analysis was used to test if there were a significant mediation by role ambiguity on the relation between socialization and commitment. Fourth, to interpret the results, Table (2) showed that the effect of role ambiguity on commitment, when controlling for socialization, is reduced (β for socialization in step -3 which equals .070 is less than β for socialization in step-1 which equals .188), then H31 is supported and role ambiguity is a partial mediator of the relationship between socialization and commitment.

To test the mediation model for H32, first, step one was followed as before. Second employee socialization was significantly related to the mediating variable, role conflict, as provided in Table (1) H22. Third, the dependent variable was regressed on the mediator, when controlling for the independent variable. In addition to steps 1 and 2, multiple regression analysis was used to test if there were a significant mediation by role conflict on the relation between socialization and commitment. Fourth, to interpret the results, Table (3) showed that the effect of role conflict on commitment, when controlling for socialization, is reduced (β for socialization in step -3 which equals .041 is less than β for socialization in step-1 which equals .188), then H32 is supported and role conflict is a partial mediator of the relationship between socialization and commitment.

To ensure the results of the regression analysis, a Sobel test was conducted and revealed that the mediation of role ambiguity was significant (z=3.797, p< .01) between employee socialization and organizational commitment (z=2.902, p< .01). This supports H31 and H32, claiming that role ambiguity and role conflict mediate the relationship between employee socialization and organizational commitment.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This study sought to test the probable influence of employee socialization on organization commitment, and to investigate the moderating effect of role ambiguity and role conflict on this relationship. As hypothesized, the findings provided support for H1, H21, H22, H31, and H32, which indicated that there were significant moderation of role ambiguity and role conflict on the relationship between employee socialization and organization commitment. These finding suggest that newcomers who receive less socialization programs experience higher levels of role stressors, and consequently his commitment towards superiors and organization would likely to be less. Role stressors are statistically significant predictor of commitment, suggesting that those who have higher levels of role ambiguity and role conflict are more likely to be less committed to the organization. This explanation depends on the cause-and-effect relationship, which arguably, makes sense in terms of managing human resources in organizations.

These results would have implications for future research, as well as for managing organizations efficiently. Low job stressors would most likely result in better job satisfaction and organization commitment, since researchers found significant associations between job stress and each of job satisfaction and organization commitment (Jamal and Badawi, 1995). Field research conducted by Ashforth and Saks (1996) and King et al (2005) supported the notion that newcomer's socialization practices are negatively related to role ambiguity and role conflict. More recent empirical research found that role conflict and role ambiguity were related to employee attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and turnover intention (Bettencourt and Brown 2003; Harris, Artis, Walters and Licata 2006).

In general, it could be concluded that employees who receive intensive socialization programs tend to perceive low role ambiguity and role conflict, and at the same time, those who perceive low role ambiguity and role conflict tend to have higher level of organization commitment. In order to reduce role ambiguity and role conflict, organizations management should introduce effective orientation to their newcomers and enhance their employee socialization programs. The findings of the present research gave a new perspective on organizational commitment, and provide JTG and other organizations in Jordan with insights into methods to decrease the role ambiguity and role conflict of employees so as to enhance their organizational commitment.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

The contributions of this research should be viewed in the light of some limitations. First, this study was conducted in a specified time, while its results could be more fruitful if it was conducted on longitudinal basis which would improve the reliability of results, because without the use of longitudinal studies, we are unable to understand the relationships that occur over time. Second, this study was limited to JTG of Jordan as a case study, which limited the

generalization of the findings. It may be worthwhile for future researchers to investigate different variables that may have impact on organizational commitment. Findings of this study might be important for competitive advantage of organizations since, managers and practitioners could examine how the findings of the present study influence management decisions and practices towards newcomers.

From a practical view, the structural model of the study could prove beneficial to organizations management in its recruiting and retention policies. By understanding the necessity of enhancing employee socialization, reducing role stressors, organizations might increase employee level of commitment, and consequently, improve its performance.

The author proposed a causal model of factors that may correlate employee socialization and organization commitment with role ambiguity and role conflict, moderating the entire process. However, additional studies in this area could focus on improving the model by examining the effects of other variables, such as demographic distribution of the sample, organizational culture, and management policies, on role ambiguity and role conflict.

It is important to examine other possible mediators that may affect the relationship between employee socialization and organizational commitment. Future researchers may also wish to consider exploring the antecedents and influences of organizational commitment on achieving the organization goals efficiently and effectively.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Correlations of the Study Variables

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev.	1	2	3	4
1. Socialization	4.263	.503	(.743)			
2. Role Ambiguity	2.189	.574	-.451**	(.908)		
3. Role Conflict	2.761	1.594	-.508**	.417**	(.958)	
4. Commitment	5.639	.627	.188**	-.293**	-.311**	(.806)

Notes: **p < .01; n=256

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Tests of Mediation

Steps	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable(s)	β	SEB	t	Sig
Step-1:	Commitment	Socialization	.188	.077	3.052**	.003
Step-2:	Role Ambiguity	Socialization	-.451	.064	-8.052**	.000
Step-3:	Commitment	Socialization X Role Ambiguity	.070	.084	1.043	.298

Notes: **p < .01; n=256; R^2 change = .090

Table 3. Hierarchical Regression Tests of Mediation

Steps	Dependent Variable	Independent Variable(s)	β	SEB	t	Sig
Step-1:	Commitment	Socialization	.188	.077	3.052**	.003
Step-2:	Role Conflict	Socialization	-.508	.171	-9.403**	.000
Step-3:	Commitment	Socialization X Role Conflict	.041	.086	.589	.557

Notes: **p < .01; n=256; R^2 change = .098