

DOCTORAL THESIS

Putting yourself in someone's head: third-party meta-perception in socialization context

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Abstract

Although third-party meta-perception—one’s perception of how another person perceives a third person—plays an important role in how people pick up social cues about others, it has received virtually no attention in the organizational behavior literature. In this thesis, we investigate the significance of third-party meta-perception to the interpersonal processes involved in socialization. Integrating uncertainty reduction theory with research on heuristic information processing, we develop a new theory of third-party meta-perception. Our theory suggests that at an early stage of socialization, person’s perceptions of how a significant other (e.g., leader or mentor) perceives the traits of an interacting target will affect the assessment of the ability and integrity of that target.

We develop two models to examine our theory. Model 1 describes the initial interaction between a newcomer and a coworker and examines the newcomer’s perceptions of how a leader perceives the coworker. We propose that newcomer’s third-party meta-perceptions of the coworker’s agentic qualities (agency; e.g., competence, efficiency, and cleverness) and communal qualities (communion; e.g., sincerity, honesty, and fairness toward others) based on the leader’s view have an indirect positive influence on the newcomer’s feedback and information seeking from the coworker through perceptions of the coworker’s ability and integrity. Model 2 describes the initial interaction between a leader and a newcomer, and examines the leader’s perception of how a mentor perceives the newcomer. We propose that leader’s third-party meta-perceptions of the newcomer’s agency and communion based on the mentor’s view have an indirect negative influence on the leader’s

directive behavior and an indirect positive influence on the leader's delegating behavior toward the newcomer through the leader's perceptions of the newcomer's ability and integrity. We also propose that the effects of third-party meta-perception are contingent on team size. Using four-wave longitudinal data on 439 newly hired employees and their supervisors at four companies, we find support for the hypothesized indirect impact of third-party meta-perceptions on feedback and information seeking in Model 1, and support for the hypothesized indirect impact of third-party meta-perceptions on delegating behavior in Model 2. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings of the thesis are discussed.

Keywords: Third-party meta-perception, socialization, agency and communion, feedback seeking, information seeking, directive behavior, delegating behavior

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