Emotion and Proactivity at Work: Where Are We Now?

Kelly Z. Peng and Chia-Huei Wu

Due to globalization and technology innovation, the business environment has become more complex and uncertain. To cope with such a changing environment effectively, employees are expected to be proactive, to respond to and master changes effectively, instead of waiting for their supervisors or organizations to instruct them what to do (Griffin, Neal, and Parker, 2007). Being proactive is about taking control to make things happen rather than watching things happen. To date, scholars in the field of organizational behaviour have invested lots of effort to study employee proactive behaviour (proactivity in brief), that is, self-initiating, future-oriented behaviour aiming to improve the work situations or oneself (Parker, Bindl, and Strauss, 2010). Proactivity is initiated by employees themselves owing to their interests, motivation or beliefs, instead of instructions or demands from others. Proactivity is future-oriented, as it is strongly based on anticipating and thinking about the longer-term future. Proactivity is change-oriented as it acts to address those anticipated challenges by improving or altering the status quo. It involves aspiring and striving to bring about change in the environment and/or oneself to achieve a different future (Grant and Ashford, 2008). That is, being proactive requires more motivational energy.

As a result, scholars have invested lots of effort to identify motivational forces that can drive proactive behaviour (for example, Parker, Bindl, and Strauss, 2010). As Mitchell and Daniels (2003) indicated, employees' behaviour can be driven by cold (or cognitive) processes as well as hot (or affective) processes. Employee proactivity is also driven by cognitive factors such as self-efficacy, an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1994), as well as affective factors such as one's positive
emotions or feelings at work (see Cai, Parker, Chen, and Lam, 2019; Cangiano, Bindl, and Parker, 2016, for reviews). Nevertheless, research so far has paid much more attention to cold (or cognitive) processes than hot (or affective) processes in driving proactivity.

Indeed, emotion at the workplace is attracting more and more attention in management research. Inspired by the affective revolution in organizational behaviour (Barsade, Brief, and Spataro, 2003), emotions have not been considered as barriers to rationality at work (for example, Barsade and Gibson, 2007). Instead, positive emotion can broaden and build our cognitive horizon, which in turn leads to an enlarged action repertoire and behaviour change (Fredrickson, 2001) while also being a source of energy to support the individual to engage and sustain contribution at work (Bakker, 2019; Quinn, Spreitzer, and Lam, 2012). At the same time, emotions could provide social cues for behavioural options (for example, Schwarz, 2011; van Kleef, 2009). Specifically, positive emotions signals that things proceed smoothly and the environment is safe, which can also be a source of energy in initiating proactive actions and helps them deal with any risks or obstacles that occur during the proactive process. For negative emotions, it reveals there is a problematic situation and changes are needed, which may also serve as ‘a priming energy’ to be proactive. In short, emotions could provide motivational energy in priming, driving, and/or sustaining proactivity in various forms and mechanisms (for example, Bindl et al, 2012; Lebel, 2016; 2017; Sonnentag and Starzyk, 2015).

The revolution also goes beyond the traditional approach to classifying moods/emotions as either positive or negative (Brief and Weiss, 2002) by differentiating individual affective experiences in a circumplex model (Russell, 1980; 2003) and draw attentions to directly studying discrete emotion (Brief and Weiss, 2002), a particular subjective feeling toward a certain target (for example, Izard, 1991), to understand ‘the processes and the different outcomes resulting from that particular discrete emotion’ (Ashkanasy and Dorris, 2017, p 70). Discrete emotion literature mainly adopts the functional perspective that each emotion bears a unique functional, adaptive, and relational meaning (for example, Izard, 1991; Lazarus, 1991). As a result, each emotion should link to specific functions and thus lead to specific behavioural tendencies (for example, Frijda, 1987; Izard, 1991; Lazarus, 1991; Levenson, 1994). Researchers have found that different discrete emotion (for example, fear or anger) exert differential effect or go through differential mechanisms to the proactive process. Owing to the affective revolution in organizational behaviour, we now have rich
pool emotional mechanisms to understand the relationship between emotions and proactivity. Nevertheless, studies on emotion and proactivity are ongoing yet there is a lack of synergy to link both fields to move forward. This edited book is aimed to disseminate new thinking in synergistic interaction of emotion and proactivity to advance the understanding of the emotional process of proactivity and forward-looking future research revenues. Starting from this motive, our book is organized into three parts: In Part I, contributors discuss and review why and how should we study proactivity from an emotion lens, offering a foundation for the basic research motive in the topic of emotion and proactivity. In particular, how emotion contributes to proactive process and what works are needed in the specific literature. In Part II, contributors discuss how emotions can shape employees’ proactivity at different levels/contexts. This part addresses issues such as how emotional experiences can shape employees’ proactivity at different levels (events, daily, or team), how different emotions can influence employees’ proactivity (that is, positive affect against negative affect; or the various discrete emotions, like anger, fear, or pride), and how the emotions or emotion expression motivate or inhibit proactivity in an interpersonal context, and how the spillover effects of emotional experiences on proactivity occur across work and non-work domain. Finally, in Part III, the chapters discuss how proactivity can shape employees’ emotional experiences and subjective well-being afterwards, a research avenue that has only attracted attention in very recent years. Below we briefly introduce each chapter in this book.

**Part I: Emotion and Proactivity – Why and How it Matters**

Chapter 1, by Peng, Li, and Bindl, provides a detailed quantitative and qualitative overview of 30 years (up to 2020) of published research on how emotion has been conceptualized and examined in proactivity literature to show a full picture of the ‘hot’ side of proactivity. Different from the previous review (Cangiano, Bindl, and Parker, 2016) that mainly relied on qualitative approaches, Peng, Li, and Bindl add bibliometric analysis (for example, Antonakis et al, 2016; Chatterjee and Sahasranaman, 2018) to visualize the evolution of affect and proactivity literature. They found that the research so far is dispersed and much more systematical effort is required. The chapter further offers a qualitative review of evidence regarding how positive and negative affect and discrete emotions both influence, or
derail, proactive behaviour at work, which is an indispensable topic in proactivity literature. Peng and her colleagues further outline future research avenues in four aspects: (1) discrete emotions and proactivity; (2) affective consequences of proactivity; (3) a dynamic/reciprocal process of emotions and proactivity; and (4) the multilevel process of emotions on proactivity. These research calls all receive echoes from the other chapters in the book.

Chapter 2, by Lebel and Kamran-Morley, adds conceptual development to indicate how we can advance studies on emotion and proactivity. They firstly review how the emotion has been conceptualized in the proactivity literature and specifically focus on how emotions have been studied under the ‘energized-to’ mechanism, proposed by Parker, Bindl, and Strauss (2010). They identify the limitations of the existing conceptualization and investigation and indicate potential avenues for future research. Specifically, they advocate that future research should focus on how discrete emotions may impact proactivity (for example, Bindl, 2019; Lebel, 2017), especially when and why specific negative emotions, in addition to positive emotions, can motivate proactivity (Lebel, 2016; Oh and Farh, 2017). Meanwhile, they discuss why work engagement, a concept that involves cognitive, physical, as well as emotional energy for employees (Rich, Lepine, and Crawford, 2010) should not be used as an indicator to understand emotion and proactivity. Such clarification facilitates greatly for relevant research to specifically focus on emotions instead of related but non-emotion concepts.

Part II: The Role of Emotion in Shaping Proactivity in Different Contexts

As a leading chapter in this part, in Chapter 3 Ashkanasy firstly brings a multilevel model for how we can analyze the impact of emotion on employees’ proactivity at different levels. The model includes five levels of analysis: (1) within-person temporal variation in emotions; (2) between-persons individual differences in experiencing and expressing emotions; (3) perception and communication of emotions in interpersonal relationships; (4) emotions in groups and teams; and (5) emotional culture and culture at the organizational level of analysis. Such a multilevel framework is both dynamic and interactive in organizational dynamics. Emotions, behaviours, and attitudes at each of the five levels, can vary moment by moment or day by day and intricately relate to corresponding variables across every level of the model. This framework helps guide future studies on emotion
and proactivity and links to other chapters discussing emotion and proactivity at the work event level (Chapter 4), a within-person, cross-domain (work versus non work) level (Chapter 5), a between-individual level (Chapter 6), and interpersonal relationship level (Chapters 7 and 8), and a team level (Chapters 9 and 10).

In Chapter 4, Ohly and Venz build a novel framework at the event level by combining the theoretical approaches of affective events theory (AET) and motivation for proactive behaviour, ‘can do’, ‘reason to’ and ‘energized to’. The chapter first provides a short overview of affective events theory and previous research linking affective events to proactive behavior. Grounding on the overview, they incorporate the three motivational mechanisms and the newly developed extension of AET with taxonomy of work event (Ohly and Schmitt, 2014) to discuss additional mechanisms on how various types of affective events can be linked to proactive behavior via several affective states. It is because different event types are likely to foster different appraisal processes, that they may not only spur ‘energized-to’, but also ‘reason-to’ and ‘can-do’ motivation. More interestingly, the proposed framework also discusses how different event types affect the three motivational mechanisms and how various proactive behaviors affect the affective states in different ways. The chapter has developed novel process on how affective events can foster proactive behavior, believe it provides a starting point for future research at event level in the emotion and proactivity field.

In Chapter 5, Ouyang focuses on employee proactivity by looking at the cross-domain interface between work and non-work. She mainly reviewed studies in two categories of non-work factors: one is off-job experiences (employees’ experiences after work) and sleep. More importantly, Ouyang proposes and develops the cross-domain interplay through the emotional energy perspective. Specifically, such non-work-related factors likely influence individuals’ affective experiences, which in turn act as energetical activation for employees to engage in proactive behavior. This theoretical development provides insight into understanding the non-work antecedents of proactivity in the workplace through emotional mechanism, which is relatively overlooked in the past literature. It also expands the scope of this book to the non-work context.

In Chapter 6, Huang, Yu, and Lee focus on job insecurity (JI) (that is, the perceived powerlessness to maintain desired continuity in a threatened job situation) to understand how employees react proactively when they perceive JI and the psychological mechanisms
explaining the effects. Based on the appraisal theories of emotion, people react differently to similar situations based on their appraisals of the situation and each specific emotion has specific behavioural response components (for example, Roseman, 2013) that predict actions. Thus, understanding the four discrete emotions triggered by JI – anger, frustration, fear, and shame – offers us a lens to make sense of employee proactive behaviours, together with other discretionary behaviours, when perceived JI. This conceptual work contributes our knowledge on future research directions for studying JI and employee behaviour relationships from the perspective of discrete emotions.

In Chapter 7, Wu and Li focus on how discrete other-praising emotions (that is, positive emotional responses elicited by exemplary others) can shape different types of proactive behaviour. In brief, they introduce four other-praising emotions – gratitude, elevation, admiration, and awe – and elaborate on how each emotion can drive employees to engage in proactive prosocial, moral, learning and self-transcendent behaviour, respectively. Their chapter illustrates the merits of studying the role of discrete emotions in driving specific forms of proactive behaviour because it not only advances the understanding of each emotion but also enriches the differentiation of different forms of proactive behaviours. In addition, the focus on other-praising emotions helps unpack the role of exemplary others in inspiring an individual’s proactive behaviour at work, contributing to the understanding of social, interpersonal influence processes in driving employees’ proactivity.

In Chapter 8, Liu, Wang, and Liao explore whether and why a leader’s display of anger influences employee voice and share their research journey to address this research question. Based on emotion as social information theory (van Kleef, De Dreu, and Manstead, 2010), they differentiate two types of anger: anger towards tasks (that is, task-focused anger), and anger towards employees (that is, person-focused anger). They acquired empirical evidence and found that task-focused anger signals the leader’s dissatisfaction with tasks or current situations, and it would motivate employees to reflect the status quo, thus leading to upward voice. By contrast, person-focused anger signals the leader’s dominance and status, and it would threaten employees’ self-esteem, thus discouraging voice. In this chapter, they have elaborated on their research journey in conducting an empirical test and indicated potential puzzles for future research. Such sharing will benefit researchers who are interested in this topic.

In Chapter 9, Madrid and Patterson expand the scope of the affect and proactivity relationship to a multilevel perspective, that is, how
the individual level influences the team level through interpersonal mechanisms and social integration processes. Specifically, based on the proposed process models of teamwork, affective tones and team proactive behaviours are emergent states and behavioural processes respectively, which facilitate and contribute to team performance and building the job attitudes of their members. The model contributes to our knowledge that the construction of team-level affect are those associated with the composition of individual differences, like team members’ skills and personality trait. Furthermore, the behavioural process, including voice and innovation, could construct team-level affect and reinforce each other to achieve team effectiveness. This work could be valuable for promoting intervention of teamwork processes in organizations and increasing the possibility of functional team outcomes.

In Chapter 10, Chi moves the focus to group level by focusing on group affective tone (GAT – homogeneous affective reactions within a group) and creativity, a specific form of employee proactivity. The group affective tone can be positive (PGAT) or negative (NGAT). This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the studies on GAT and reviews the theoretical foundations, empirical evidence, and unaddressed questions regarding PGAT and NGAT on team creativity. To integrate the divergent results regarding the GAT–team creativity association, Chi proposes a dual pathway model to highlight the potential mechanisms (that is, promotion- and prevention-focused actions) and boundary conditions (that is, task complexity and team supportive context) of PGAT and NGAT on team creativity. In addition to proposing the theoretical framework, the chapter offers conceptual and methodological suggestions to improve the research on GAT and team creativity in the future.

**Part III: The Emotional Consequences of Proactivity**

Proactive behaviours are not routine behaviours, regularly displayed during one’s workday. Rather, proactivity can be considered as a deliberate self-regulatory process involving considerable volition (Bindl et al., 2012). Therefore, proactivity is not only driven and stimulated by affective states but can also likely elicit intense emotional reactions. In this part, we have one chapter focusing on the impact of proactivity on employees’ well-being specifically and the other chapter framing the emotional consequences of proactivity more broadly.

In Chapter 11, Ji, Chen, and Cangiano extend the conversation to discuss how proactivity can bring consequences on employees’ well-being that involves one’s emotional responses to their proactive actions at work. An overview of the contemporary research on the
association between proactive behaviour and well-being outcomes are started with a scientific mapping of this field of research to identify key clusters and topics. Based on two well-established perspectives adopted in this field, namely the developmental perspective and the resource-depletion perspective, the chapter summarizes the key findings concerning moderators, dynamic spirals, and alternative pathways. The journey of being proactive needs further exploration, by including more contingency factors, especially the contextual factors.

In Chapter 12, Zacher addresses the affective consequences of employees’ proactive personality and behaviour. He introduces a conceptual model on the proximate consequences of (change in) proactive personality and behaviour (that is, change in the self and/or work environment), more distal psychological consequences (that is, change in resources, need satisfaction, goal progress), and affective outcomes. Additionally, the roles of potential boundary conditions, including individual and contextual demands, resources, and barriers, as well as trait affectivity are outlined in the conceptual framework. The chapter further discusses central differences between a within-person perspective (that is, intraindividual change in proactivity and affective experiences over time) and a between-person perspective (that is, individual differences in proactive personality and behaviour and affective experiences) specifically. This work has definitely outlined a full process of how and when proactive behaviour will induce emotional consequences. These theoretical efforts are further strengthened by reviewing conceptual and empirical articles that have examined the affective consequences of different forms of proactivity.

Altogether, this book addresses issues on emotion and proactivity that have not been systematically studied and offers prospective future research directions and agenda. We believe our collection of chapters will inspire more ideas and future research to unpack the emotional journey in driving proactivity and the proactive journey in shaping emotions.

References


