

# Imagining the newcomer–supervisor relationship: Future relational self in the workplace

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## Abstract

People develop images of themselves in the future reflecting hopes in relation to their work, namely the future work self. In this study, we introduce the concept of Future Relational Self (FRS), conceived as a relevant dimension of the future work self that illustrates the representation of the relationship that an employee aspires to build with significant stakeholders in the workplace (i.e., the supervisor). In addition, we investigate its motivational power shaping role and relational outcomes at work. Using data collected among 215 newcomers in three different waves with a one-month time lag, we examine the indirect effect of two characteristics of the FRS—namely salience and attribution of control—on newcomers' adjustment (i.e., role clarity and social adjustment) via leader–member exchange (LMX) quality. Results reveal that only the FRS attribution of control is positively associated with LMX quality. Moreover, the results indicate that LMX quality mediates the effects of attribution of control on both newcomers' social adjustment and role clarity. Contributions for theory and implications for practice are highlighted.

**Abbreviations:** FRS, future relational self; LMX, leader member exchange.

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**KEYWORDS**

attribution of control, future relational self, future work self, leader-member exchange, role clarity, salience, social adjustment

**Practitioner notes****What is currently known?**

- Individuals develop a mental representation of their future work self.
- Future work self likely stimulates agentic behaviours and a greater motivation.
- Practitioners often underestimate the importance of future work self.
- Future work self, as any other form of possible self, can have multiple foci.

**What this study adds?**

- A focus on an understudied dimension of the future work self, namely future relational self (FRS), related to the hoped relationship with one's future supervisor;
- A theoretical model suggesting that attribution of control is an important characteristic of the FRS;
- Empirical data supporting the idea that the FRS can shape newcomers' perception of role clarity and social adjustment; and
- An explanation of the mechanisms underlying this process (i.e., LMX quality).

**Implications for practitioners**

- Supervisors should acknowledge that newcomers may think in advance about how to build their relationship with the new boss.
- Newcomers should be encouraged to develop a sense of control over their possible selves.
- The onboarding process may be redesigned considering these important points.
- Exercises on the future relational self may be introduced into the onboarding process.

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Human behaviours are largely driven by the desire to accomplish future goals and aspirations. For example, prior research has shown that individuals often seek to shape their careers by engaging in proactive behaviours to attain professional aspirations (Direnzo et al., 2015). An influential factor that can promote individual proactive behaviours is the hoped-for possible self, which is a cognitive representation of the type of person that an individual may become, wants to become or is afraid of becoming in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The hoped-for possible self is an important motivator, as identifying what is likely or possible to achieve in the future can help people visualise and then pursue (or avoid pursuing, in the case of a feared self) the course of actions that can favour the attainment of their desired self (Hoyle & Sherrill, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986). For example, the desire to become a 'supportive partner and father' can shape important career decisions, as it has been recently announced by Rubin Ritter who decided to step back as CEO of Zalando to accommodate the needs of his young family and give priority to his wife's career.

Among the different hoped-for possible selves--that is, the school self (Zhu & Tse, 2015), the best self (Roberts et al., 2005) and the provisional self (Ibarra, 1999)--organisational literature has recently paid greater attention to the concept of future work self, which encompasses the set of future hopes and/or aspirations that individuals have in relation to their occupation (Strauss et al., 2012). Prior research has shown that the future work self is associated with positive individual and organisational outcomes, including proactive career behaviours (Strauss et al., 2012), career adaptability (Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015), job search (Guan et al., 2014) and organisation member proactivity (Strauss & Parker, 2018). Albeit primarily dealing with personal hopes and/or aspirations, scholars agree that the future work self is a social construct that may also incorporate images, schemes and goals pertaining to the desired relationships that an individual hopes to build with other meaningful work stakeholders (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Lord et al., 1999; Markus & Cross, 1990; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). However, current research is largely dominated by studies that focus on the individual dimension of the future self, ignoring this social aspect. This is unfortunate, given that the individual's self-structure, feelings and behaviours are largely shaped by social interactions, which contribute to developing a fundamental sense-making of the daily experiences at work (Markus & Cross, 1990). Indeed, scholars agree that the hoped-for possible self is not a single structure--rather, it is a complex, multifaced collection of experiences, cognitive and affective schemes that are developed in different contexts and through multiple social interactions (Lord et al., 1999).

In this study, we introduce the concept of future relational self (FRS), which captures a relational dimension of the future work self, as it considers the mental representation of the type of relationship that an individual wishes to develop with significant stakeholders in the workplace (i.e., the supervisor). Our goal is to examine if and how the salience of this mental representation in recently hired employees' mind (hereinafter *newcomers*), as well as their perception of how easy its accomplishment (i.e., attribution of control) is, can shape their capacity to adjust to the social dynamics of the new workplace (i.e., social adjustment) and to develop a clear understanding of the expectations associated with their new role (i.e., role clarity). Using data collected in three waves with a 1-month time lag, we also examine whether the quality of the relationship with the new supervisor (i.e., leader-member exchange [LMX]) can mediate the relationship between the FRS and social adjustment and role clarity. Indeed, the goal of our study is not just to demonstrate the importance of FRS in favouring the adjustment to a new organisation, but also to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of this effect.

We consider this research to be both theoretically and practically relevant. Theoretically, we expand the current literature on the future work self by devoting more scholarly attention to the relational dimension of this concept, as opposed to previous studies that generally focused simply on the private dimension (Lord et al., 1999). Moreover, we focus on a novel characteristic of the future work self, namely attribution of control, that has been considered as an important but overlooked dimension of this concept (Strauss et al., 2012). We also contribute to prior research by shedding light on the process that relates the concept of FRS to indicators of an effective adjustment to a new organisation. Our study demonstrates that the quality of relationship with the supervisor is a potential mechanism linking FRS to newcomer adjustment, an area of study that has been overlooked thus far. In so doing, we also contribute to research on the antecedents of LMX, as the future work self has never been considered among the followers' characteristics as an important factor that can shape the LMX quality, whereas much of prior research has focused on the followers' personality or cultural dimensions (see Dulebohn et al., 2012 for a review on LMX). Finally, we contribute to research on newcomer adjustment by demonstrating that the self-concept plays a critical role in adjusting to a new organisation. This is important, as prior research has primarily focused on individual and organisational tactics as predictors of successful adjustment, whereas the role of self-concept has been overlooked (Bauer et al., 2007). Moreover, prior studies have mainly examined the importance of self-concept among students (Cai et al., 2015; Guan et al., 2014; Taber & Blankemeyer, 2015; C. Zhang et al., 2017) and/or tenured employees (Lin et al., 2016), but omitted to investigate this concept among newcomers, who are coping with a so-called 'reality shock' (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 215; Ng & Feldman, 2007) and whose adjustment to the new organisation represents 'an important task of Human Resource Management [HRM]' (Eberl et al., 2012, p. 346).

Practically, this study contributes to advancing the understanding of factors that can support newcomers in the early stages of the employment relationship. Even though FRS is important for any employee, we believe that developing a mental representation of the future working relationship with the supervisor is crucial for newcomers. Indeed, the early stages of the employment relationship are characterised by greater uncertainty regarding how the relationship with new organisational stakeholders will unfold, which leaves greater room for imagination. In this study, we demonstrate that the mental representation of the anticipated relationship with a supervisor can instil greater consciousness of the necessary actions that newcomers may undertake to navigate social relationships at work in a way that matches their personal preferences, hopes and aspirations. Finally, supervisors may benefit from the results of this study, which suggest that it is crucial to approach the topic of FRS with newcomers, seeking to understand what are the personal hopes and aspirations regarding the relational dimension of their new work experience. We do hope that this greater awareness on the newcomers' FRS can support a more fruitful dialogue between newcomers and their supervisors, resulting in a greater person-organisation fit and in the development of more authentic relationships. This is particularly relevant for new generations of newcomers, as it has been widely acknowledged that it is necessary to find ways to integrate newcomers' hopes and aspirations into the employer-employee relationship for more successful integration at work (Brant & Castro, 2019).

## 2 | FUTURE RELATIONAL SELF

FRS captures the mental representation of the relationships that an individual hopes to create at work with various stakeholders, like the supervisor. Even though the future work self primarily deals with personal hopes, aspirations, and dreams, scholars argue that when imagining their future, individuals often include images, schemes, prototypes and expectations associated with their role-related relationships (Markus & Cross, 1990). In fact, individuals often develop their self-concept by imagining themselves in a particular situation (Markus & Cross, 1990) and incorporating opinions, attitudes and information coming from their significant others (Baldwin et al., 1990; Baldwin & Holmes, 1987). By way of illustration, consider the case of Julia, a young PhD graduate, who has recently started her academic career. Julia's future work self may surely embody images of herself as a respected scholar in the field, publishing in prestigious academic journals and attending research seminars and conferences. However, other images pertaining to the relational dimension of her role are undoubtedly salient and can contribute to the development of her "situated identity" (Markus & Cross, 1990, p. 594). For example, Julia's future work self may likely incorporate images of her as a collaborative mentor towards PhD students, a supportive colleague in university's commissions, a respectful lecturer teaching to bright and motivated students and so forth.

Building on prior research, we argue that the FRS can be positive or negative. It is positive when it reflects an individual's hopes, dreams and aspirations. An example is an individual who hopes that the relationship with a future supervisor will be characterised by trust and mutual support. It is negative when it reflects an individual's fears and threats. An example is a newcomer who fears that the relationship with the new supervisor would be disrespectful and abusive. However, consistently with prior studies showing that the future work self is more prevalent than the negative one, due to people's need to build positive identities at work (Cross & Markus, 1991; Strauss et al., 2012), we contend that a positive FRS is more powerful and has a greater motivational role than a negative one. A positive FRS can help an individual to better visualise the specific affective, cognitive and behavioural schemes that must be followed to attain the imagined relationship with the new work stakeholders. Instead, a negative FRS may elicit negative feelings and deplete important cognitive resources, leading to disengagement and apprehension about a given relationship.

Strauss et al. (2012) argue that the future work self may present several characteristics, likewise salience, elaboration, attributions of control and the level of positivity. In this study, we focus only on salience and attribution of control for the following two reasons. First, salience, which captures the clarity of the cognitive

representation of the future work self, is by far the most influential characteristic of the future work self, as it is considered a critical attribution of self (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Second, attribution of control, which refers to the individual perception of how easy and under direct control is the attainment of desired end states, has been demonstrated to be a crucial determinant to favouring engagement in each situation (i.e., Ajzen, 2011; Kahneman & Tversky, 1982; Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, it has been never considered in prior research, making it an attribution worth studying (Strauss et al. 2012).

## 2.1 | Future relational self and leader–member exchange

If asked, all individuals can think of whom they would like to become in the future even if they had never thought about it (Strauss et al., 2012). However, the motivational power of this mental representation is not identical for all and it mostly depends on its salience. Prior research has shown that since salient identities are chronically accessible— that is, they are activated and used frequently (Bargh, 1982)—they can become powerful forces in shaping individuals' energies and behaviours toward their accomplishment (Leondari et al., 1998). Consistently, Strauss et al. (2012) demonstrated that a salient future work self plays an important motivational role as a 'salient self brings the future into the present, facilitating positive adjustment' (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016, p. 114). A salient future work self can help individuals notice the discrepancies between their current and ideal situation, thereby shaping self-directing behaviours that are instrumental to reduce or eliminate these discrepancies (Strauss et al., 2012).

A novel characteristic of the future work self that we examine in this study is attribution of control (Strauss et al., 2012), which refers to individuals' perception of how easy and controllable the process of attaining the desired self is. An individual with a high attribution of control believes that the attainment of FRS is plausible and mostly depends upon personal behaviours and decisions. An individual with a low attribution of control believes that the attainment of FRS is a difficult process and primarily depending upon the actions and behaviours undertaken by the supervisor. A high attribution of control may lead individuals to become more persistent in their future self-attainment as perceiving to be in control over a given situation may instil greater motivation, energy and positive feelings (Nix et al., 1999).

In this study, we hypothesise that newcomers who develop a salient FRS and who perceive its attainment to be an easy process, may be more likely to successfully adjust to the new organisation due to an enhanced capacity to build a high-quality relationship with their supervisor. Several studies in the LMX literature suggest that followers can play an important role in developing a high-quality relationship with the supervisor (Dulebohn et al., 2012), especially in the early stages of an employment relationship (Lapierre et al., 2006). In the first weeks, a positive (negative) first impression of a newcomer may largely depend upon the positive (negative) reactions to the supervisor's initial requests that may cover both role-related as well as extra-role aspects (Graen & Scandura, 1987). For instance, a newcomer could be evaluated positively (negatively) based on the decision of joining (not joining) the new supervisor and the team for an evening drink at a pub. When positive, the newcomer's decision can signal the availability to socially integrate into the team and to go beyond the formal task-related obligations, which can create optimal conditions for the development of a high-quality relationship. When negative, the decision can signal the newcomer's intention to build a relationship that is limited to the task-related obligations only (i.e., a low-quality relationship).

We suspect that when newcomers develop a salient FRS and perceive its attainment as likely, they are in a better condition of building a high-quality relationship with the supervisor. This situation is likely to occur for two reasons. First, having a salient FRS can help newcomers become more conscious of the behaviours that are critical to enhance the supervisor's perception that they are responsive and available. Prior research has consistently demonstrated that a salient self-concept can help individuals broaden their personal creativity in relation to the necessary actions and requirements for attaining their desired end state (Kosslyn, 1987; Strauss et al., 2012). Second, when the creation of a high-quality relationship is perceived to be an easy scenario mostly depending upon personal actions, as it is the case for a high attribution of control perception, it can enhance

individuals' engagement and determination (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) since gaining a feeling of control is crucial to coping with life events (Taylor, 1983). Notably, Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that an individual may develop multiple cognitive representations of their hoped-for-possible selves; however, not all these representations are pursued or produce a real change in behaviours. Those representations that are perceived as difficult or impossible are removed from one's self-concept and are mentally classified as remote possibilities, with low motivational power. Conversely, the representations perceived as easy or attainable can instil greater motivation and energy, enhancing the likelihood that newcomers could assume a proactive approach in shaping the relationship with the new supervisor as planned. We, therefore, argue that having a salient FRS and perceiving its attainment to be an easy scenario can enhance the newcomers' proactivity and determination in building a high-quality relationship with their supervisor.

**H1** : *FRS salience (H1a) and FRS attribution of control (H1b) are positively related to LMX quality.*

Adjustment is the process through which newcomers acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to perform effectively in the new roles (Allen et al., 2017). The main goal that newcomers pursue in the adjustment process is to reduce the uncertainty regarding the tasks to be performed, the role-related expectations and social dynamics (Lord et al., 1999). The adjustment process has received a lot of scholarly attention in recent years, as it can influence newcomers' long-term attitudes and behaviours, as well as their job performance and retention (Bauer et al., 2007; Saks et al., 2007). In this study, we hypothesise that LMX quality mediates the relationship between FRS (salience and attribution of control) and adjustment. More specifically, we contend that newcomers with highly salient FRS and who perceive its attainment to be easy and under their direct control, are more likely to experience a successful adjustment due to their enhanced capacity to build a high-quality relationship with their supervisor. Prior empirical studies support this argument by showing that the quality of the relationship between newcomers and the new supervisor is associated with a more successful adjustment (Ashford & Black, 1996; Saks et al., 2007; Sluss & Thompson, 2012; Z. Zhang et al., 2012). A high-quality relationship with the supervisor can help a newcomer experience optimal conditions in the new work (Z. Zhang et al., 2012). In the presence of a high-quality relationship, supervisors may assign newcomers challenging and important projects, provide greater decision-making authority, share more information and give greater social support (Aryee & Chen, 2006). Relevant to our research are also the studies showing that the supervisor's attitude in this process is influenced by the employees' proactivity (Bauer et al., 2007; Fang et al., 2011). Ellis et al. (2017) have found that supervisors were more likely to share information and provide social support to the newcomers perceived as more agentic and proactive on the job. Therefore, since FRS salience and attribution of control may foster greater proactivity among newcomers, and proactivity is fundamental to create the basis for a high-quality relationship between the newcomer and the new supervisor, we suspect that LMX quality can represent an important mechanism underpinning the effects of FRS on newcomers' adjustment (role clarity and social adjustment).

**H2** : *LMX quality mediates the relationship between FRS salience and newcomers' adjustment (role clarity and social adjustment) (H2a), and between FRS attribution of control and newcomers' adjustment (role clarity and social adjustment) (H2b).*

## 3 | METHOD

### 3.1 | Participants and procedures

All participants in this study were recently hired individuals who had not yet started their jobs. We recruited participants through Prolific, a platform for data collection. In recent years, such platforms have become a popular

tool among behavioural scientists to collect data (Litman et al., 2017). Several studies have shown that these samples are representative of the general population (Goodman et al., 2013) and reflect national norms (Duffy et al., 2014).

We collected data in three different waves with a time lag of one month between each wave. The first wave was administered before the newcomers entered the workforce and it was aimed at capturing the newcomers' FRS salience and attribution of control as well as their demographic information; 364 participants completed the first survey. The second wave was administered 4 weeks after the newcomers had started their new job and was aimed at assessing their perceptions of LMX quality; 278 participants completed the second wave, with a response rate of 76.4%. Finally, the third wave was administered 4 weeks after the second wave and was aimed at assessing the newcomers' perceptions of adjustment to their new organisation. In total, 215 participants completed all three waves with a final response rate of 59.1%. The average age was of 28.2 years old ( $SD = 8.2$ ) and the sample was fairly distributed across gender (49.3% were men). Of the participants, 52.6% of newcomers had completed secondary education, and the rest had a degree.

We ran analyses to assess if attrition and nonresponse biases resulted in a final sample that differed from the overall sample, by comparing the final sample to two groups: (1) those who did not respond to the second wave and (2) those who did not respond to the third wave. We compared demographic variables and the baseline measure of FRS salience and attribution control for these groups. The results show that the data are reliable<sup>1</sup>.

## 3.2 | Measures

We used five-point scales to record responses against the measures described below. Unless stated otherwise, the scale anchors read as *strongly disagree* (=1) and *strongly agree* (=5).

### 3.2.1 | FRS salience and attribution of control

FRS salience and attribution of control were measured at Time 1. Participants were asked to freely consider the relationship they hoped to build with their future supervisor and describe it using their own words, with no space or word limits. A sample description is as follows: 'I imagine my relationship with my supervisor to be very informal because I think that the best way to achieve professional goals within the company is to collaborate. I would appreciate a direct approach and constant support from my future supervisor'. Thereafter, we invited participants to fill in a five-item scale adapted from Strauss et al. (2012) to measure FRS salience. An example item is 'I am very clear about what kind of relationship I want to build with my supervisor'. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for this scale was 0.89. To measure FRS attribution of control, we asked participants to answer the following two items: 'It will be very easy for me to realise the future relational self that I have just imagined', and 'I am confident that I can realise my future relational self if I want to'. This scale was developed by the research team building upon Markus and Nurius' (1986) seminal contribution. The composite reliability ( $\rho_{\text{composite}}$ ) equals 0.60 (Bagozzi & Yi, 2012).

### 3.2.2 | LMX quality

We used the LMX-7 scale, as recommended by Bauer and Uhl-Bien (1995), which asks each follower to evaluate the relationship with his or her supervisor from different angles. It has seven items with responses anchored to different labels. An example item is 'How well does your supervisor understand your job problems and needs?' (1 = *not a bit*; 5 = *a great deal*). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.85.

### 3.2.3 | Newcomers' adjustment

Two five-point scales were used to assess the newcomers' perceptions of adjustment to the new organisation, namely role clarity and social adjustment, which capture the newcomers' learning and assimilation in the new organisation, respectively (Fang et al., 2011). Role clarity was measured with a six-item scale developed by Rizzo et al. (1970). A sample item is 'I know what my responsibilities are'. Social adjustment was operationalised with the six-item scale developed by Chao et al. (1994). A sample item is 'I am usually included in informal networks or gatherings of people within this organisation'. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.80 for role clarity and 0.84 for social adjustment.

### 3.2.4 | Control variables

Participants' demographics, including gender, age, education, ethnicity and work experience, were measured as control variables, since they could be related to our outcomes (Ellis et al., 2017).

## 4 | RESULTS

### 4.1 | Measurement validation

To test for convergent and discriminant validity, we ran a confirmatory factor analysis with Lisrel 10.2 for the five latent variables underlying the model, namely FRS salience, FRS attribution of control, LMX, social adjustment and role clarity. This model fits well, confirming convergent validity:  $\chi^2(25, N = 215) = 32.302, p = 0.15, RMSEA = 0.04, NNFI = 0.99, CFI = 0.99, \text{ and } SRMR = 0.04$ . The five factors correlated among themselves at levels less than 1.00 by margins greater than two standard errors. A current practice in confirmatory factor analysis calls for researchers to compare their performance with rival structures (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Hence, as a robustness test, we tested rival models in which the measures were combined. In the first rival model, we tested a three-factor structure whereby items related to FRS salience and attribution of control were loaded onto the first factor, LMX items were loaded onto the second factor, and social adjustment items and role clarity items were loaded onto the third factor. This model had a worse fit than our hypothesised measurement model:  $\chi^2(32, N = 215) = 176.249, p = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.15, NNFI = 0.76, CFI = 0.83, \text{ and } SRMR = 0.11$ . In the second rival model, we tested a single factor structure, and even this model had a worse fit than our hypothesised model:  $\chi^2(35, N = 215) = 176.249, p = 0.00, RMSEA = 0.15, NNFI = 0.39, CFI = 0.39, \text{ and } SRMR = 0.15$ . To further verify the goodness of our measures employed in the CFA, we analysed the  $\varphi$  matrix (correlations between constructs and corrected for attenuation). Because none of the confidence intervals of the  $\varphi$ -values ( $\pm$  two standard errors) included the value of one, this test provides evidence of discriminant validity (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988). Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations and correlations among constructs and control variables. The two variables related to the FRS correlate significantly with LMX ( $p < 0.001$ ), providing initial support for H1. In addition, both FRS-related variables and LMX correlate significantly with the outcomes ( $p < 0.001$ ), providing initial support for H2. As the control variables did not significantly correlate with the mediator and outputs, they were not included in the following analyses (Bernierth & Aguinis, 2016).

### 4.2 | Structural equation model estimation

Structural equation models were applied to the sample to test H3 and H4. This model fit well overall:  $\chi^2(30, N = 215) = 53.948, p = 0.005, RMSEA = 0.06, NNFI = 0.96, CFI = 0.97, \text{ and } SRMR = 0.08$ . Figure 1 presents the



TABLE 1 Means, standard deviation and Pearson correlation coefficients

Variable	M	SD	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.
1. FRS salience	3.90	0.76									
2. FRS control	3.55	0.68	0.39**								
3. LMX	3.47	0.69	0.19**	0.22**							
4. Social adjustment	3.27	0.68	0.21**	0.18**	0.27**						
5. Role clarity	3.72	0.64	0.20**	0.18**	0.34**	0.32**					
6. Gender	0.55	0.81	0.14**	0.00	0.11	0.04	0.08				
7. Age	27.71	7.76	0.08	-0.07	0.01	0.00	-0.06	0.02			
8. Ethnicity	2.33	1.27	0.00	0.01	-0.08	0.09	-0.02	0.07	-0.00		
9. Education	3.54	1.73	0.17**	-0.04	0.04	-0.02	0.10	0.05	0.22**	-0.07	
10. Work experience	4.29	3.40	0.15**	0.01	0.07	-0.01	-0.01	0.02	0.53**	-0.01	0.13*

Abbreviations: FRS, future relational self; LMX, leader-member exchange; M, mean; SD, standard deviation.

\* $p < 0.05$ .

\*\* $p < 0.01$ .

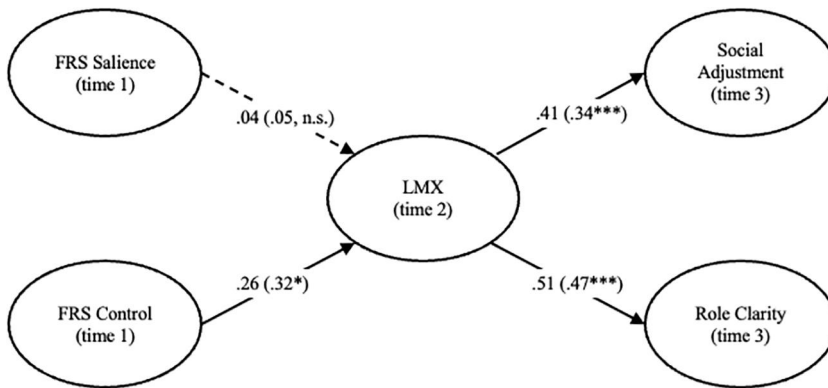


FIGURE 1 Results of the hypothesised research model. Figure inserted in a separate file. Note:  $n = 215$ . Unstandardised path coefficients are reported; completely standardised path coefficients are in parentheses. Dashed line: not a significant path; solid lines: significant path. \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$

parameter estimates of the model. H1 suggests that both FRS salience and attribution of control have a positive impact on newcomers' perceptions of LMX quality. A positive relationship was found for attribution of control ( $\beta = 0.26$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t = 2.31$ ), providing support for H1b. No such effect was found for salience ( $\beta = 0.04$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.09$ ,  $t = 0.41$ ), and hence H1a was not supported. Overall, these results reveal the primary role played by attribution of control in shaping LMX quality (Figure 1). As hypothesised, LMX quality mediates the effects of attribution of control on both social adjustment ( $\beta = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $SE = 0.11$ ,  $t = 3.82$ ) and role clarity ( $\beta = 0.51$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $SE = 0.10$ ,  $t = 5.03$ ), providing support for H2b. To assess whether LMX quality mediates the effects of attribution of control on newcomers' adjustment, we added direct paths from control to social adjustment and role clarity. The results show that neither of the direct paths is significant, that is,  $\beta = 0.14$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.14$ ,  $t = 0.99$  and  $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p > 0.05$ ,  $SE = 0.13$ ,  $t = 1.17$ , respectively. Thus, LMX quality fully mediates the effects of

attribution of control on newcomers' adjustment, as hypothesised. A  $\chi^2$  difference test is used to further ascertain mediation. We compared the model in Figure 1 to the same model where direct paths are added from future relational selves to adjustment outcomes:  $\chi^2(4, N = 215) = 9.28, p > 0.05$ , indicating that the partial mediation model does not provide better fit to the data. The principle of parsimony, therefore, recommends the fully mediated model best fits the data (James et al., 2006).

## 5 | DISCUSSION

Supervisors play a crucial role in shaping a newcomer's successful adjustment to a new organisation (Preston, 1993). While there is consensus that newcomers can similarly play an important role in shaping the fundamental characteristics of the relationship with their new supervisor (Ellis et al., 2017), prior research has rarely considered the importance of newcomers' self-concept in this process (Gross et al., 2020). This is a shortcoming given that one's self-concept has an important motivational role, which can lead a newcomer to become more conscious of the necessary actions and behaviours that are instrumental to attain the desired self (Markus & Cross, 1990; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Strauss et al., 2012). In this study, we theorised and examined the role of the FRS, which captures the mental representation of the relationships that a newcomer hopes to create at work with various stakeholders, like the new supervisor. More specifically, our goal was to examine whether and how mentally anticipating the nature of the future relationship with the new supervisor could influence a newcomer's capacity to build a high-quality relationship with the supervisor, and adjust well to the new organisation. Advancing current research, we considered not only the salience of FRS but also the attribution of control, which refers to individual perception of how easy and under control the attainment of the future relational self is.

We contributed to the literature on possible selves, LMX and newcomers' adjustment in several ways. First, we have demonstrated that FRS is an important relational dimension of the future work self that can influence newcomers' relationship-building behaviours and adjustment. Prior scholars (e.g., Lord et al., 1999; Strauss et al., 2012) have theorised the importance of having a clear representation of the future relationship with meaningful stakeholders at work to enhance personal agency. However, to the best of our knowledge, there are no empirical studies that have focused on this concept, on its outcomes and/or that have investigated the mechanisms underlying its effects. The results of our study demonstrate that attribution of control plays a critical role in shaping newcomers' capacity to build a high-quality relationship with the supervisor, which was an important underlying mechanism explaining the beneficial effect of FRS on adjustment. This is an important theoretical advancement, given that most prior studies have demonstrated the importance of future work self on proactive career behaviours and job search (Guan et al., 2014), but have not focused on the behaviours that are necessary to ensure a great start of the employment relationship.

In doing so, our study contributes to adjustment research by showing that future self is an important individual factor shaping a successful adjustment experience. Prior research has devoted much importance to the role of organisational tactics and supervisors' behaviours in the adjustment process (Bauer et al., 2007; Eberl et al., 2012; Gross et al., 2020; Sluss et al., 2012). We advance prior research (Ellis et al., 2017; Gross et al., 2020) by demonstrating that newcomers' FRS also plays a crucial role in shaping their adjustment to the new organisation. A useful strategy to attain this goal is to consider, ahead of time, the type of relationship that newcomers aspire to build with their new supervisor and to perceive this process under their control. It is important to achieve this goal as scholars have demonstrated that supervisors are more likely to support newcomers who are perceived as proactive in their role (Ellis et al., 2017).

Finally, most prior research has considered salience and elaboration as the most critical characteristics of the future work self (Strauss et al., 2012). We advance prior research by showing that it is not just the salience of FRS that matters, but it is also the perception that the attainment of FRS is possible and under personal control. This result empirically corroborates an important assumption of the literature on hoped-for-possible selves claiming

that individuals may be likely to develop multiple self-concepts in their minds (i.e., more self-concepts can be simultaneously salient in one's mind) but only some of these self-concepts, namely those who are perceived as attainable, will be pursued (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In considering the role of attribution of control, we respond to the call by Strauss et al. (2012), whom invited to examine additional characteristics of the future work self. We also contribute to advancing current research on the LMX as the future work self has been never considered as an important antecedent shaping the followers' perceptions of LMX quality (Dulebohn et al., 2012). We have demonstrated that LMX quality serves as an important mechanism explaining the effects of FRS attribution of control on newcomers' adjustment as perceiving greater control over the attainment of the FRS can provide individuals with greater energy and determination and a clear capacity to envision the course of action that are instrumental to build a high-quality relationship with the supervisor.

This study has practical significance as follows. The results suggest that it is important for newcomers to reflect on the type of relationship they want to build with their future supervisors. This is a fundamental component for successfully navigating this critical moment of the employment relationship (Bauer et al., 2007). Several organisational interventions could help newcomers work on this mental representation and understand its beneficial effects. For example, after signing the employment contract, a newcomer could receive information from the organisation regarding the notion of the future self and presented with practical evidence regarding its main benefit. Notably, a dedicated activity on the FRS may be also included in the formal onboarding activities, such as the one adopted at Wipro, an Indian call centre. At Wipro, newcomers are invited to reflect individually and in teams on how to bring their best self to the workplace (Cable et al., 2013). A similar activity could be designed around the concept of FRS, by encouraging newcomers to engage in a personal and collective reflection on the actions that may help them build the relationships with the new work stakeholders as hoped. This practice may enhance the perception of person-organisation fit (Cable and Parsons, 2001) as well as of high psychological safety in the new team (Edmondson, 2010) and signalling to the newcomers that self-expression is encouraged and valued in the company (Cable, 2019).

It could be also beneficial for a supervisor to discuss with newcomers the nature of relationship they aspire to develop, and how each party can contribute to make it happens. Explorative questions on the newcomers' prior good and bad experiences with former supervisors or organisations, as well as an open discussion on what matters in relationship at work, could help to develop a more sustainable hoped-for possible relationship. Discussing these aspects may also contribute to reducing the initial state of uncertainty and accelerate the learning of the behaviours that are required (or that must be avoided) to build a strong connection between both parties. This exchange could favour a 'reciprocal response pattern' (Graen & Scandura, 1987, p. 178), which may help a supervisor gather information about a newcomer's needs and aspirations, leading to a more authentic and fruitful dialogue. For instance, if a supervisor realises that a newcomer expects the development of a supportive relationship covering both work-related and non-work-related aspects, then the supervisor could reflect on the opportunity to adopt more family supportive behaviours that enhance the perception of being cared for (Russo et al., 2018).

## 6 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Our work has several limitations that suggest opportunities for future research. First, we focused on mechanisms explaining the relationship between FRS and newcomer adjustment, but we did not consider any potential boundary conditions that may affect such relationships. It would be interesting for future research to examine individual factors that affect newcomers' FRS as well as factors that moderate its effects. For instance, the individual's locus of control could be considered as a possible boundary condition. Newcomers with an internal (external) locus of control may more (less) easily believe that the attainment of the desired FRS is a plausible (difficult) process depending (not depending) upon their own actions and behaviours, which might have positive (negative) repercussions on their relationship building efforts. Similarly, the personality congruence between

newcomers and supervisors could play a role in this process; in the absence of personality congruence, supervisors might evaluate individuals' proactive behaviours negatively, as more of a threat than an opportunity (Z. Zhang et al., 2012). Although it is likely that supervisors represent an important focus of individuals' FRS, it is possible that imagining future relationships with other important organisational actors, such as the colleagues, clients and subordinates, could also play an important motivational role that promotes positive organisational outcomes. Finally, it is important to examine the attainment of FRS over the course of the employment relationship to verify what organisational factors could facilitate or constrain the entire process. The organisational culture could be an important consideration in verifying whether the characteristics of an organisation enable or constrain the newcomer's hoped-for possible relationship attainment. For instance, if a newcomer hopes his or her relationship with the supervisor to be amicable and frank to discuss both work and nonwork matters but the organisational culture does not encourage the discussion of family and/or personal issues at work, the relationship might not evolve as planned.

## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

This study focused on an understudied dimension of the future work self, namely FRS, and highlighted its positive influence on newcomers' adjustment. Moreover, we found that the FRS attribution of control sustains newcomers' ability to build a high-quality relationship with their supervisor (LMX quality), which we found to be an important underlying mechanism explaining the beneficial effect of FRS on newcomer adjustment. These findings provide a novel perspective regarding the modalities through which newcomers adjust to the new organisation, by leveraging on their aspirations and self-concept regarding the hoped-for possible relationship with their new supervisor.

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## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interests.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> For the first comparison, the two groups did not differ in terms of any variable considered:  $M_{\text{gender}(1)} = 0.55$  ( $SD = 0.73$ ),  $M_{\text{gender}(2)} = 0.52$  ( $SD = 0.50$ ),  $t = 0.38$ ;  $M_{\text{age}(1)} = 28.23$  ( $SD = 8.19$ ),  $M_{\text{age}(2)} = 28.05$  ( $SD = 7.70$ ),  $t = 0.16$ ;  $M_{\text{ethnicity}(1)} = 2.34$  ( $SD = 1.25$ ),  $M_{\text{ethnicity}(2)} = 2.21$  ( $SD = 1.19$ ),  $t = 0.73$ ;  $M_{\text{education}(1)} = 3.56$  ( $SD = 1.74$ ),  $M_{\text{education}(2)} = 3.73$  ( $SD = 1.84$ ),  $t = -0.66$ ;  $M_{\text{workExp}(1)} = 4.38$  ( $SD = 3.48$ ),  $M_{\text{education}(2)} = 4.65$  ( $SD = 3.60$ ),  $t = -0.53$ ;  $M_{\text{FRS salience}(1)} = 3.93$  ( $SD = 0.71$ ),  $M_{\text{education}(2)} = 3.85$  ( $SD = 0.76$ ),  $t = 0.78$ ;  $M_{\text{FRS control}(1)} = 3.60$  ( $SD = 0.66$ ),  $M_{\text{education}(2)} = 3.44$  ( $SD = 0.68$ ),  $t = 1.67$ . For the second comparison, although age differed slightly ( $M_{\text{age}(3)} = 26.2$ ,  $SD = 6.50$ ,  $t = 2.08$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), the two groups did not differ in terms of any of the variables under investigation:  $M_{\text{gender}(3)} = 0.56$  ( $SD = 1.14$ ),  $t = -0.09$ ;  $M_{\text{ethnicity}(3)} = 2.40$

( $SD = 1.39$ ),  $t = -0.38$ ;  $M_{\text{education (3)}} = 3.38$  ( $SD = 1.62$ ),  $t = 0.83$ ;  $M_{\text{workExp (3)}} = 3.84$  ( $SD = 3.02$ ),  $t = 1.26$ ;  $M_{\text{FRS salience (3)}} = 3.87$  ( $SD = 0.85$ ),  $t = 0.64$ ; and  $M_{\text{FRS control (3)}} = 3.52$  ( $SD = 0.70$ ),  $t = 0.98$ ).

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