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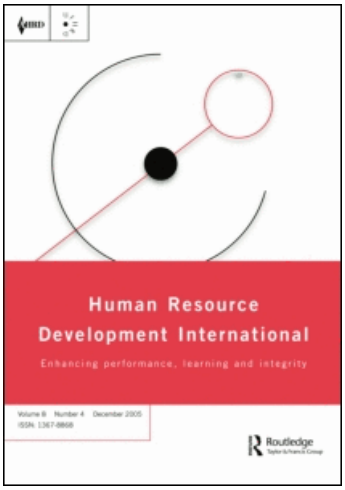

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'First, get to know them': a relational view of organizational socialization

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'First, get to know them': a relational view of organizational socialization

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An important episode in workplace learning is the socialization of newly hired people into the organization. Typically, the literature conceptualizes the socialization of new employees as a learning process whereby the newcomer is responsible for learning to fit into the organization. This perspective seems to underestimate the social influences of co-workers and managers. Research and theorizing on social exchange and interpersonal relationships identify the quality of relationships between members of a group as a fundamental factor moderating the quality and outcomes of other interactions related to learning and work. This paper presents the findings of a recent study of organizational socialization experienced by new engineers recently hired into a large, global manufacturing company based in the US. Results of this qualitative case study explore and explain the socialization process from a relational perspective providing compelling evidence that relationship building is a primary driver of the socialization process in organizations.

Keywords: socialization; workplace learning; workplace relationships; social exchange

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An important episode in workplace learning is the socialization of newly hired people into the organization. Typically, the literature and practice of organizational socialization conceptualize the socialization of new employees as a learning process whereby the newcomer is responsible for learning to fit into the organization. This paper presents the findings of a recent study of organizational socialization as experienced by new engineers hired into a large, global manufacturing company based in the US. An important piece of advice given to newcomers in this study was to first build good relationships with their coworkers. As one manager told a newcomer, 'You need to really get to know them [and] earn their respect'. Arguably, this was one of the first objectives for new hires to accomplish as they began their new jobs.

The socialization of newcomers into organizations is a critical process influencing what they learn about their work, as well as their performance, satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Ostroff and Kozlowski 1992; Van Maanen and Schein 1979; Wanous 1992). Preliminary interviews with several engineers and

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managers indicated that the social dynamics of the workplace were the most troublesome aspect for new hires. Poor experiences when starting a new job discouraged individuals, wasted talent, reduced productivity, and squandered resources.

The typical view of organizational socialization (henceforth called socialization) assigns primary responsibility to the newcomer to learn to fit in, i.e. 'sink-or-swim'. Organizational tactics to facilitate socialization (if present) tend to focus on those whom the organization believes will help the newcomer learn the tasks of his or her job and the expectations of the organization. Newcomers find much of this information of little use (Moreland, Levine, and McMinn 2001) and organizational orientations often overlook or, at best, underestimate the influence of the social context immediately experienced by newcomers in their work groups. It is plausible that the existing social systems in organizations exert far more influence on the socialization of newcomers than current understanding acknowledges. The problem addressed by this study is to understand better the effects of social systems on the socialization of newcomers in organizations.

This study investigated the socialization experiences of newly hired engineers in a large manufacturing organization. This paper begins with a brief review of the theoretical framework guiding this study, along with its relevance to organizational socialization. The next section describes the research design, questions, and methods, followed by a presentation of the major findings of the study. A discussion of the findings follows, which considers a reconceptualization of the socialization process. The paper concludes by providing some thoughts on the implications for human resource development of this alternative view of organizational socialization.

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Review of the literature and theoretical framework

Three theoretical perspectives guided this investigation of the socialization of newly hired engineers: social cognition, social exchange, and relationship studies. While many researchers of socialization based their work on social cognitive theory (Saks and Ashforth 1997), few researchers employed the perspectives of social exchange theory or the work on relationships. A brief review of each theoretical perspective follows.

Social cognition related to socialization

Many models of socialization describe stages through which newcomers pass, as they become organizational members (Wanous 1992). Learning is a common thread throughout these models as newcomers learn specific job tasks and responsibilities, work-group procedures, management's expectations, and the values and mission of the organization (Bauer, Morrison, and Callister 1998; Ostroff and Kozlowski 1992).

Recent developments in learning theory strive to present a broader view of learning by integrating cognitive, emotional, and social factors into an interdependent system (Illeris 2003; Yang 2003). For example, Illeris (2003) proposed a tripartite model of learning based on cognitive, affective, and social dimensions. Similarly, Yang (2003) proposed a theory of learning explaining the interdependencies among domains of technical knowledge, practical knowledge, and affectual knowledge. There is a useful correspondence between these broader views of learning and the requirements of learning in the socialization process as described by a

seminal article on socialization by Van Maanen and Schein (1979). In other words, the newcomer needs to learn what to do (technical knowledge), how to do it (practical knowledge), and why it is done this way (values and affect).

Encountering a novel situation (e.g. a new job) prompts newcomers to search for information to make sense of the situation (Louis 1980). This search often involves social and personal sources of information, as well as cognitive and affective factors in the learning process. Social cognition describes the interactive process by which newcomers acquire, encode, and retrieve information in an attempt to link their personal frame of reference with the collective frame of reference of a group (Bandura 2001; Louis 1980).

Socialization is a complex process comprising multiple actors and interactions (Chao et al. 1994; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson 2006; Jones 1983; Morrison and Brantner 1992; Saks and Ashforth 1997). Viewing the socialization process narrowly as the newcomer's responsibility to learn to fit into the organization underestimates important social influences on the newcomer's learning process, as well as his or her ability to integrate into the organization.

Wanous (1992) proposed that increasing the level of interactions between the newcomer and his or her environment increased the success of socialization. However, it is important to examine the quality of interactions – not just the level of activity. Increasing the wrong kind of interactivity might encourage the wrong kind of learning. The quality of interactions is a key dimension in social exchange theory.

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Social exchange related to socialization

Social exchange theory describes a type of ongoing relationship between people (actors) as a series of interactions in which actors exchange resources guided by the rules of exchange, e.g. social norms (Cropanzano and Mitchell 2005). Recent theorizing has begun to expand social exchange theory beyond its behavioural and economic roots to include cognitive and affective constructs. For example, Lawler (2001) proposed an affective theory of social exchange that links emotions and sentiments to the actors' perceptions of fairness, satisfaction, solidarity, trust, leniency, and commitment to their exchange relationships. He identified emotions as mediators of the exchange process and found that positive or negative emotions generated by an exchange experience influenced future expectations for exchange.

Earlier, Graen (1986) described organizational roles as somewhat ill-defined, requiring individuals to negotiate and clarify roles through interactions (exchanges) between leaders and members. Leader-member exchange theory (a type of social exchange) states that work roles are developed and established gradually through a process of exchanges or 'interacts' between a leader and member. The leader offers increased responsibility and membership benefits to the subordinate, and in return, the subordinate offers increased contribution and commitment to the work group. Leader-member relationships are unique to each individual dyad and might develop into high-quality relationships based on trust and respect or they might degenerate into low-quality relationships merely fulfilling the employment contract (Bauer and Green 1996).

An important finding from research on leader-member exchange theory shows that perceptions of a relationship often differ significantly between the leader and member. Studies have shown a low correlation between members' and leaders' perceptions of their relationship (Gerstner and Day 1997). This difference in

perceptions might easily foster misperceptions, misunderstandings, and misinterpretations of events, exchanges, and expectations during the socialization process.

Another important tenet of leader-member exchange theory is that once newcomers join the organization, relationships form quickly and tend to endure (Miner 2002). Thus, the initial interactions between newcomers and their work groups are extremely important, because they establish the quality of the relationship, which in turn affects the newcomers' attitudes, satisfaction, and performance on the job. So, even though work roles might develop gradually, relationships form quickly.

Relationships and socialization

In addition to learning job tasks and procedures, most models of socialization identify a need for newcomers to learn to interact successfully with others in the organization. Despite the recognition of interpersonal behaviour as one of the important domains of learning for newcomers, it is still perceived to be the responsibility of the newcomer to learn. There is little explication of this domain in the socialization literature.

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Relationships have been studied more thoroughly in social psychology (Fitness, Fletcher, and Overall 2003), communication studies (Villard and Whipple 1976), and education (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). These fields have identified key elements and processes explaining the development of relationships between people.

Various perspectives on interpersonal relationships have identified key elements of relationships as the dimensions of attribution, attachment, and quality (Fitness, Fletcher, and Overall 2003); collaboration, support, and empathy (Merriam and Caffarella 1999); and inclusion, control, and affection (Villard and Whipple 1976). These relational views of social interaction assumed the reciprocal nature of relationship formation in a particular sociocultural context, as well as the influence of participants' past experiences. For example, Fitness, Fletcher, and Overall (2003) described a cognitive model of relationship development comprising the events of the situation; personal cognitions based on idiosyncratic beliefs, expectations, and ideals; and the outcomes of the interactions between the individual's cognitions and the situation. According to Fitness, Fletcher, and Overall (2003), the basis of an individual's beliefs and expectations for a relationship derives from his or her general theories of how and why relationships form, and how and why a particular relationship is forming as it is.

Specifically related to learning, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) reviewed the work of several authors proposing a relational view of the learning process. This work emphasized the importance of connectivity and stated that learning – especially in social contexts – depends on connecting one's experiences and ideas with those of others. From this perspective, learning – especially in social contexts – depends on the quality of collaboration, mutual support, cooperation, and empathy among learners and instructors.

Villard and Whipple (1976) described the goals of relational communications as the individual's needs for growth and social relatedness. They stated that an individual's identity is highly dependent on social relationships. In their view, interpersonal relationships occur along a continuum between the extremes of one-time encounters on one end and intimate social relationships on the other. Encounters describe simple relationships in which the participants agree to focus on

specific activities, such as work, conversation, or information gathering. At the other end of the continuum, intimate social relationships become more complex and personal – involving the individuals' identities and self-concepts. Work relationships typically fall somewhere between these extremes and affect the level of involvement expended by the individual, as well as his or her work identity. For example, poor-quality relationships at work leave the individual feeling underappreciated, exploited, and excluded (Villard and Whipple 1976).

Relationships develop from the mutual interactions among peoples' past expectations, their present experiences with others, and the context (Bandura 1986; Fitness, Fletcher, and Overall 2003). In work dating back to the 1940s and 1950s, Lewin, Cattell, and Schutz described interpersonal behaviour as an emergent phenomenon distinct from individual personality factors (Mahoney and Stasson 2005). Schutz (1966) developed the FIRO-B model of interpersonal behaviour (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behaviour) based on three dimensions: inclusion, control, and affection. The degree of *inclusion* afforded to a newcomer indicates his or her significance in the interpersonal activity of the relationship. *Control* describes the distribution of power in the relationship and affects positions of dominance or submission. *Affection* describes the emotional aspect of relationships. In work settings, affection appears as qualities of liking or friendliness among workers. Affection indicates the level of emotional engagement individuals have for a relationship and strongly affects individual work identities. High-quality relationships form from high levels of mutual acceptance and support (inclusion), confirmation and empathy (affection), and shared control (Mahoney and Stasson 2005; Villard and Whipple 1976).

While some research on the FIRO-B model has found little distinction between inclusion and affection, there is evidence that these concepts endure. A two-dimensional construct of interpersonal behaviour identifies dimensions of dominance-submissiveness (similar to control) and socioemotional affect (similar to inclusion and affection). This discrepancy might be related to the ability of participants to distinguish subtle variations or might be an artifact of the research instruments (Mahoney and Stassen 2005). Regardless of whether there are two or three dimensions to interpersonal relationships, the elements are nearly identical.

Of importance to socialization is the temporal component of relationship building. People in work situations continuously negotiate their relationships with others along the dimensions of inclusion, control, and affection. There is a chronological structure to the development of relationships that begins with the dimension of inclusion (Villard and Whipple 1976). Generally, before the newcomer negotiates the distribution of power (control) or develops emotional bonds with the group (affection), the newcomer must gain entry or access to the group. Negotiating the dimension of inclusion is often the first step in the development of relationships during socialization.

While several studies have examined the relationships among specific variables in the socialization process, Bauer, Morrison, and Callister (1998) stated that there has been little empirical work examining how these variables collectively interact to contribute to the socialization of the individual into the organization. Focusing too narrowly on the newcomer's ability and responsibility to fit in may risk overlooking the powerful influences of the established social system on the success of the socialization process. For this reason, a broader view of socialization was taken to explore the process beyond the narrow focus on individual learning.

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Research design

Based on the exploratory focus of this study, it seemed most appropriate to conduct a qualitative inquiry. Several authors described a qualitative methodology as not only appropriate but also more likely to provide insights into complex social phenomena (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Patton 2002; Silverman 2005). Stake (1995) described qualitative case-study research as an appropriate design for acquiring an in-depth understanding of the complex interactions and functions of people in the context of a specific situation. Also, Yin (2003) described case-study designs as relevant strategies for research questions of *how* and *why*, as well as relevant strategies for research focused on contemporary events within a real-life context and in which the researcher had little to no control over. Thus, the characteristics of this study (examining a complex social phenomenon in context) supported the choice of a qualitative case-study research design.

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Research questions

This study addressed the broad question of *how* newly hired engineers learned to work within the social systems of the organization as they began new jobs. Preliminary investigations into the phenomenon of socialization from initial interviews with practicing engineers and managers indicated that the socialization process was problematic. The crux of the problem that emerged from these initial discussions focused on the social dynamics of the workplace. Therefore, this study focused on the learning processes whereby new engineers (newcomers) learned the social norms that governed how work behaviour was perceived and done in the organization. The specific research questions guiding this study were:

(1) How do new engineers learn to work within the social systems of the organization?
(2) What are the factors influencing this learning process in the organization?

Sampling, data collection, and analysis

Participants in this study were members of the engineering workforce for a large multinational manufacturing company. At the time of this study, the company employed over 250,000 people around the world and was the top-selling manufacturer in the market. In the year preceding the study, the company hired nearly 200 new engineers at their US-based technical centre – some of these new hires were just out of school and some already had previous experience working as engineers in other organizations. The engineers were involved in research and development, as well as designing and testing products for manufacture. The engineering workforce was organized into workgroups supporting various inter-related stages in the production process. Approximately 8 to 20 engineers formed a workgroup and reported to a group manager.

Following the logic of theoretical or purposeful sampling (Patton 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1998), the researchers, in collaboration with the organization's human resources managers identified newly hired individuals from various groups to interview for the purpose of collecting rich, in-depth information addressing the

research questions. Three categories of engineers composed the sample, drawn from 26 different workgroups. The categories of participants were:

- New grads: 17 newly hired engineers that were recent graduates from higher education. This was their first engineering job out of school.
- Experienced hires: 13 newly hired engineers having previous job experience.
- Managers: six managers of work groups with newly hired engineers.

The interviews were semistructured, following the Critical Incidents Technique (Ellinger and Watkins 1998; Flanagan 1954; Gremler 2004). After introductions, a description of the study, and the consent process, the interviewer generally asked each participant to describe how he or she learned the way things were done at work. From that starting point, careful probing of their answers helped elicit detailed and concrete descriptions of how they learned to do things and their perceptions of what they were doing and why. Interviews took place in the organization and lasted from approximately 45–90 minutes. All interviews were recorded by the researcher and transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. The researcher checked the transcriptions for accuracy by comparing the transcripts with the original recordings. The researcher also removed or revised all text that could identify participants or that identified confidential programmes or plans of the company. All participants were offered the chance to review the transcripts. Furthermore, after the transcripts were initially analyzed, the researcher reported the findings back to the participants and asked for their feedback and assessment of the accuracy of the findings. The feedback of those participants that responded, as well as managers in the engineering group, supported the accuracy of the findings.

To help triangulate the data gathered, the researcher interviewed six managers that had newly hired engineers in their groups. Managers in human resources selected these managers for interviews. Interviews with these managers generally followed the questioning protocol of the new hires, except that the focus was not on the managers' socialization, but on the new hires. The researcher asked managers their perceptions of how new hires learned how things were done in the organization. Subsequent questions probed the managers' beliefs and experiences with the socialization process of new hires. These interviews were also recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy by the researcher and the participants.

The analysis of the texts followed qualitative analysis procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). Four steps constituted the analysis process: the researcher (a) reviewed the transcripts and attached predetermined codes to statements that described learning and interpersonal experiences; (b) retrieved all statements coded as learning and exchange experiences, and proceeded to open code (Strauss and Corbin 1998) these statements at a finer level of detail, staying close to the participants' language; (c) sorted the resulting open codes into thematic categories; and (d) identified the thematic categories emerging from these data.

After the open coding process of the texts related to learning and exchange, the researcher sorted the open codes using an affinity process to categorize these codes into groups having similar themes. The researcher carefully went back and forth between the original texts and the emerging themes checking for coherence and plausibility in the categorical groups. In addition, the researcher presented the emerging findings to other scholars familiar with the study's sample and topic, as

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well as managers and participants in the organization. Throughout this collaborative review of the data, a more coherent view of the experiences of new hires formed.

Findings

After a careful sorting of the open codes attached to participants' descriptions of their socialization experiences, four general themes emerged. These themes were described as (a) building relationships, (b) communicating, (c) learning the context of their work, and (d) learning the tasks and procedures of the job (see Table 1). And while one of the themes explicitly focused on relationships in the work group, there were also less explicit relational messages evident in the other three themes. The importance of the relational elements of communication and learning appeared throughout the texts of newcomer experiences. Overall, a predominant theme was the critical importance of quickly building good relationships with coworkers and managers in the organization. The quality of the relationships developed between the newcomer and members of the work group seemed to strongly influence the quality of the learning process experienced by new hires as they learned about the context of their work, as well as the tasks, and procedures of their jobs. Furthermore, newcomers implied that the quality of their relationships with members of their work groups affected not only the quality of their learning, but also their levels of job satisfaction and perceptions of the company.

With little prompting, the participants in this study recounted their recognition of the importance of relationships and their efforts to build relationships as an initial step toward becoming productive members of the work group. Consider the following quotes.

> It's like around here you're going to run into a lot of people that are very laid back, and if they don't think you're [a] priority or your work's priority, you'll be on the back burner for a year on something. And so you'll learn that you've really got to network and really learn people around here and really, really get to know them on a personal level and earn their respect.

> I think the biggest thing is to develop a good relationship with your coworkers .... Be understanding that it's not their job to help you along, and so they have their own work that has to be done, yet they're taking time out of their day to come over and walk you through this process.

These quotes typify the numerous views of most of the participants about the importance of forming relationships with co-workers in the organization as a precursor to becoming a productive member of the organization. As newcomers to the work groups, new hires recounted their experiences about learning how to communicate with others in the organization as a means for learning the tasks and procedures of their jobs. Communication was also a means to develop relationships with others. For example:

> Because I think in the past, the communication was barely there. They would just present once a month and say – this is what we found here. Make it go into production. Whereas I'm always trying to push information into them, get feedback, and take their criticism and trying to work around it. So far, I think it's been a success.

> Always communicate with everyone. Because I mean if somebody – things will come at the last minute and it will delay that timing for you, for ... And if it delays the timing,

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Table 1. Emerging themes based on categorizing newcomers' coded statements.

Sampling of open codes from newcomers' texts	Thematic category
– Learning about co-workers personal side	Relationship building
– Earning the respect of co-workers	
– Trying to keep on the good side of co-workers	
– Being respectful of others time and experience	
– Socializing with co-workers	
– Learning that some people work behind your back	
– Getting to know my manager	
– Hearing things 'through the grapevine'	Communicating
– Keeping co-workers informed	
– Exchanging information in group meetings	
– Learning the language/jargon (including acronyms)	
– Resolving conflicting ideas/information with others	
– Notify others in advance	
– Learning how to present and persuade others	
– Learning about the culture and climate in the group	Understanding work context
– Learning the organization's and group's priorities	
– Learning that change is slow and ruts are deep	
– Recognizing organizational barriers to productivity	
– Realizing that upper management is somewhat disconnected from my work	
– Learning how to avoid problems	Understanding work tasks and procedures
– Finding 'work-arounds' to get the job done	
– Learning what approvals are needed	
– Learning that often there is not enough time to follow up	
– Learning differing views on deadlines	
– Taking personal responsibility	

> then it comes back on you. So you've got to make sure that you're talking to everyone and that everyone is on the same page as you. And always have a list of things to look for.
>
> And other people that, you know, you've got to be very careful of how you talk to some people because, you know, you say one thing that makes it sound like they messed up the programme or it's completely their fault, even if it really is. We've just got to be buddy-buddy about things. We say – it's really no one's fault, we can all work this out. He says – around here, you just can't pass any blame, can't blame anything, you've just got to make sure it gets done and keep everyone happy. It's the nature of the business in his mind, there's just some very sensitive people.

Newcomers' talk of communicating with others in the workplace was intermingled with relational messages – explicitly and implicitly as shown in the preceding quotes and in Table 1. It was common throughout the texts to find that the quality of communication and relationships was mutually constituted. For example, a commonly reported development in the newcomers' experiences was learning who to contact for information. This learning also included relational knowledge regarding who was approachable or helpful and who was not – 'You just pick that up over time, who it's easier to talk to than others'. The following examples indicate the differences between high- and low-quality communications and the corresponding relational status. In this first example, the newcomer was in a very welcoming group (high-quality relationships): 'So the person across from me went to [*same school as me*], so we got to talking about [*school*] and all that kind of stuff, and everyone's just real friendly and willing to help me'. Another newcomer reported similarly positive experiences: 'And you know, when we have lunch outings or we have group outings, we're always interacting, talking to each other'. Other examples follow indicating the connection between the quality of relationships and communication between newcomers and co-workers.

> I've been here a year and I don't feel completely comfortable with everybody I work with, because I think you have a lot of engineers that are very into their work and they kind of shut the world off around them. And so some of these engineers are not that ... They're approachable, but you kind of get the feeling like – don't bother me. You can go ask them questions and stuff like that, but then their cell phone rings or something comes up and then it's kind of like – I have to take this call or I have to do something else. There's this feeling of: ask questions, but don't take too much of my time.
>
> [My informal mentor] would sit down with me. He'd be like – sit down, let me school you on some stuff. Let's get you used to the tools and learn the tools that you need. If you're good with the tools, the rest of the stuff will come. Don't worry about it.

Another thematic category emerging from the data analysis focused on the efforts of newcomers to learn the context of their work. The coded statements that formed this thematic category focused around a general theme describing how the newcomer learned the organizational setting within which they worked. Newcomers reported specific efforts to understand the culture and climate of the work group, the group's and organization's priorities for how work was done and which work was valued, and organizational and group constraints affecting their work. Some examples of statements by newcomers related to this category follow. One newcomer commented on the inertia co-workers exhibited toward change: 'That people, it's easy to do, get set in their ways. Why you need to do it that way? Well, because that's the way we've

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always done it. And that's just the way people are'. Other examples of newcomers' perceptions of the context and culture are:

> It's a constant interesting learning experience because I noticed groups function differently. Some groups are more political than others, they want to kind of protect their ... They don't want to be the one that's scolded for saying – hey, we missed this timeline and it's because you guys didn't provide this. All right? There's other groups that aren't as political and a little more cooperative.

> I was just like – oh my God, what was that about? All these people yelling at each other. They're like – oh, that's just how the group meetings are. ... We ended up going to lunch later with some of the other younger people in our group and he was like – the reason it's like that is because we cleaned shop. Like people got fired and all this kind of stuff. And he explained to me what had happened. And so then he was like – so the people who have been here, they want to make – they want to keep their jobs.

As can be seen in the previous statements, newcomers' impressions of working for this organization are heavily influenced by the context of their work groups. Furthermore, the context of the work group was heavily influenced by the quality of the interpersonal relations in the work groups.

The fourth major thematic category that emerged from the data analysis was closely related to the contextual category previously described. The main difference was that this group of statements focused more locally on the newcomer's job tasks and procedures. This category included statements from the newcomers describing their efforts to learn how to get their jobs done, avoid errors, follow procedures, and take responsibility for their work. For example: 'And they would just slowly teach me – if you do this, if you do this, if you do this, the test is going to run more efficiently, it's going to break down less, you're going to have less problems'. Another perception reported was: 'So it's kind of disappointing that it takes so much paperwork to get something done, whereas if you had a little bit more freedom you could get it done a little bit faster and a little bit more efficiently'. And another, 'But the other thing is that I've learned, when we have huge issues, that we really need to have a collective agreement between both programmes'. A final example is:

> And I've learned that by going to the meetings, having them yell at me and tell me – challenge your supplier and challenge me to review all of their information before even coming to them with any request for changes. So I think – I mean they still have questions, but I think for the most part when I do give presentations that it's a little bit less hectic and they respond more silently.

Interviews with the managers corroborated many of the relational themes reported by newcomers and provided some additional insights. For example, one of the managers interviewed said:

> I like to assign them someone to work with. And often, it's someone that they're going to be taking over part of their job. I think having something well defined and having the right support group there when they have questions about how to do something those are the keys to being successful. ... I think the places where it's worked out the best is when there is a good match with this other more senior person that they're either helping or taking over part of their job. There's been some occasions where I've brought in new people that are kind of supposed to do a new role that we know we need to do but isn't well defined. And they don't really have anybody to work with either, and that has not really worked that well with brand new people.

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While managers provided more insights on the context and process of the work, they also emphasized the importance of developing good relationships between the newcomer and others in the work group. Relationship building, communicating, learning the context of the work, and learning the tasks and procedures of jobs were primary objectives for newcomers to master in this organization. And the importance of relationships permeated their experiences throughout their learning.

Limitations of the study

Although this qualitative case study of newly hired engineers provides fresh insights into *how* newcomers learn on the job, there are definite limitations as well. First, this study focused on one organization, and the ability to generalize the findings from this organization to other organizations is speculative. In spite of this limitation, the focus on one organization helped reduce extraneous factors in the environment that could confound the data. Rather than the goal of generalizing the findings, the goal was to provide an authentic, in-depth exploration and explanation of the socialization process as experienced by a rather homogenous group of new hires (engineers) in a large organizational setting.

Second, the data came from retrospective interviews with participants. While the interviewer asked participants to recount their experiences of learning occurring over the previous 6 to 12 months, it is likely that important data was missed or distorted by memory or retrospective biases, as well as the difficulty participants might have interpreting and describing complex intangible concepts. Interview techniques exist that researchers believe help minimize the problems with retrospective bias, and this study employed these techniques, such as focusing on specific examples rather than reflections upon the past, asking for elaboration, and focusing on experiences within the past year (Merton, Fiske, and Kendall 1990; Weiss 1994).

Triangulation of the data was another means the study used to increase the qualitative validity of the findings of this study. The newly hired engineers represented one perspective of the socialization process in this organization, and additional information came from a cross-functional team of executives and researchers in the organization and from the managers of the work groups directly involved with the socialization process. Not only did these additional sources corroborate many of the findings derived from the data gathered from newcomers, they elaborated on the data – providing additional perspectives about the context and organizational intentions related to the socialization process in the organization. Also, various groups of scholars and practitioners reviewed the analysis process and findings as they emerged, offering additional observations and insights.

Discussion

It became apparent that there was a wide range of socialization experiences for newcomers in this organization – from good to bad. Newcomers did not have similar experiences as if they joined a monolithic organization, but had a variety of experiences grounded in the subcultures of various work groups. Generally, the foci of the newcomers' experiences supported the literature – primarily concerned with learning how to integrate into the organization and get their work done effectively. The surprising finding in this study was the dominating influence of relationships on newcomers' socialization. Newcomers emphasized the importance of getting to know

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their co-workers and managers as a primary task to becoming a member of the organization.

In addition, newcomers implied that the quality of relationships within the group affected what they learned and how they learned to do their work (tasks and procedures), as well as what they learned about the context of their work in the organization. And while the literature views learning as the common thread throughout the socialization process, this study found that the quality of the relational structure in the individual work groups seemed to mediate the outcomes of this learning process. For example, a couple of the newcomers remarked about the cultural context of their groups having an aggressive nature – 'going to meetings and having them yell at me', while others developed perceptions of the context of their work as more collaborative and supportive – 'and they would just slowly teach me'.

It also became apparent that whether or not newcomers could develop high-quality relationships depended not only on the efforts and social skills of the newcomer but on the willingness of others in the work group to form those relationships with the newcomer. As one newcomer reported, his mentor 'scooped me under his wing'. Other newcomers encountered less supportive conditions with their coworkers as in this example – 'No one explained the system [*to me*], how it worked'. In this study, socialization primarily appeared as a reciprocal process of building relationships between the newcomer and members of the work group.

Billett (2004) described interpersonal relations in workplace learning as co-participation, which signified the reciprocal nature of the relationship between the learner and the social context of learning. Similarly, Wenger (1998) defined learning as the transformation of knowing in practice and described the importance of mutual engagement, negotiation of meaning with others, and shared repertoires with the community. Kram (1985), Wenger (1998), and Brown and Duguid (1991) described the learning process in the workplace from similar perspectives influenced by a network, configuration, or structure of social relationships in the work group. These views lend further support to emphasizing relationships as an important mediator of organizational socialization.

From a relational view, the dimensions of inclusion, control, and affection (Villard and Whipple, 1976) characterized the socialization experiences reported by newcomers in this study. The ability of individual newcomers to integrate into their various work groups depended as much on the openness of their co-workers to include them into the group as it did on the efforts of newcomers to socialize. Groups varied in their level of openness (inclusion), autonomy (control), and liking (affection) toward newcomers and this variance appeared to mediate newcomers' ability to integrate, learn, and perform.

While the literature on socialization recognizes the newcomer's responsibility for learning to interact effectively with others in the organization, there is little mention of the effect of the others as mediators of newcomer learning and membership. There were several participants who reported that, despite their best efforts to relate to the group, they were treated continually as outsiders. They were not afforded membership in their work groups.

Wenger (1998) was explicit about the mutuality of engagement in a community of practice and its affect on learning. In many ways, the work group represents a local community of practice for engineers in this study. Work groups varied in their history, experiences and dispositions of the members, and in their practices toward work. Newcomers assigned to work groups that made efforts to include them in non-

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work activities (inclusion), interact and get to know them in positive ways (affection), and provided a meaningful assignment with responsibility (control) early on indicated higher levels of satisfaction and job performance, as well as positive attitudes toward the organization. In contrast, newcomers assigned to less relationally oriented work groups recounted their struggles to obtain access to critical information and procedures, lack of camaraderie with co-workers, and indicated a negative perception of the organization. As Villard and Whipple (1976) stated, individuals experiencing low levels of inclusion, control, and affection tend to feel isolated, exploited, and underappreciated. These negative themes ran throughout many of the experiences reported by newcomers in work groups characterized by low-quality relationships. While it might seem obvious that there is interdependency between the individual and others in the group, the tendency for organizations to focus narrowly on the capabilities of the newcomer to learn to fit in and learn the content of the work belies the importance of the group's responsibility to mutually constitute productive socialization experiences for newcomers.

High-quality relationships include high levels of trust, liking, autonomy, interaction, and responsibility (Gerstner and Day 1997; Graen and Uhl-Bien 1995). They also include mutual responsibility for tasks and outcomes, mutual acknowledgement of each other's position, and mutual understanding (including opportunities to question and confront). Comparing these attributes to the dimensions of relationships described by Schutz's (1966) FIRO-B model, one generally can relate the dimension of inclusion with the levels of mutual interaction, participation, and engagement; the dimension of control with the degrees of shared responsibility, mutual respect and understanding; and the dimension of affection with levels of liking, trust, and camaraderie. The level of support afforded newcomers by co-workers affects newcomers' feelings of personal accomplishment, belonging, and commitment to the organization. Becoming a full member of the work group requires the deliberate effort of co-workers in the group to reach out to newcomers and include them into the relational structure or social system of the group.

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Implications for human resource development

As a process for developing the expertise and performance of organizations and individuals, socialization is an important HRD process. As shown by this study and supported in some of the literature on learning and interpersonal relations, the relational dynamics of the work group strongly influence the development of knowledge, expertise, and engagement by newcomers in the organization (Schwandt, Ayvaz, and Gorman 2006). Blantern and Anderson-Wallace (1995) described patterns of engagement as the context that takes on meaning and moderates many of the characteristics often attributed to individuals. They claimed that greater change is possible by focusing on the context or patterns of engagement (i.e. relationship structures) rather than on the individuals embedded in the patterns. This changes many of the current views and practices of organizational socialization. The research on person-organization fit and training in organizations, as well as practices focused on improving recruitment and a 'sink-or-swim' probationary period for new hires tend to overlook the important effects of the relational structures in the existing work groups.

Traditional views of socialization and HRD tend to underestimate the influence of the dynamic social and relational processes among members of the work group. Considering that newcomers in this study reported primarily informal socialization

processes, the important question for HRD, at least in this organization, is how well the various socialization processes employed by the work groups helped newcomers become productive, integrated members of the organization. As indicated by the data in this study, forming higher-quality relationships had positive effects on the learning and integration of newcomers into the work groups and thus the organization – although this strategy was not consistently applied among the work groups.

The implications of this study for a strategic perspective on HRD go beyond the process of socialization and suggest that HRD professionals identify and include in their models of organizational learning, performance, and change the relational structures and processes among members of work groups that form the context within which individual learning and performance operate in organizations. Schwandt, Ayvaz, and Gorman (2006) argued that the creation and utilization of knowledge depends on the specific structure of relationships and values found in the group. The collective nature of organizational work suggests that HRD professionals attend to the collective social dynamics (especially the relational dynamics) among members of the work group – not just the characteristics of individual members entering and working in organizations.

Socialization is an important HRD strategy for organizations looking to increase the capacity of their workforce, improve their competitive advantage, and develop future capabilities by bringing new talent into the organization. Recognizing that this talent develops under the strong influences of different relationship structures at the work group level suggests that HRD processes in organizations attend to and foster positive relational group processes within which newcomers become members of the organization.

Furthermore, Garavan, Gunnigle, and Morley (2000) claimed that a constructivist perspective expands the horizons of HRD beyond an individualistic and instrumental approach to learning and recognizes the important effects of the social construction of knowledge on the development of human resources in organizational settings. As described in the previous section, the social factors driving the socialization process examined in this study took a prominent role and demonstrated qualities better explained by a constructivist perspective.

More and more, scholars are expanding the functional orientation of HRD to include social perspectives and principles as described by social constructivists (Garavan, Gunnigle, and Morley 2000). The findings of this study indicate that current views of the socialization process may too narrowly conceptualize it functionally as an individual learning process, effectively relegating relationship building to one of several domains the newcomer must master. The interpersonal domain in current socialization models tends to exist as an object of learning, rather than as a driver of the learning process. Changing the status of the social domain from object to driver recognizes the importance of social interaction and relational processes to the mutual construction of knowledge by the newcomers and members of their work groups.

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