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## **Organizational socialization**

Deneen M. Hatmaker, Associate Professor  
Department of Public Policy  
University of Connecticut  
1800 Asylum Avenue  
West Hartford, CT 06117  
deneen.hatmaker@uconn.edu

Stéphane Moyson, Assistant Professor  
Institut de Sciences Politiques Louvain-Europe  
Université catholique de Louvain  
Chaussée de Binche, 151 box M1.01.01  
7000 Mons, Belgium  
stephane.moyson@uclouvain.be

Nadine Raaphorst, Researcher  
Department of Public Administration and Sociology  
Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
Postbus 1738  
3000 DR Rotterdam, The Netherlands  
raaphorst@fsw.eur.nl

## **Synonyms**

Onboarding, socialization, professional socialization, socialization tactics

## **Definition**

Organizational socialization is the process by which newcomers become effective organizational members.

## **Introduction**

Public sector organizations are largely assessed by their effectiveness, and to a large extent their effectiveness relies on their most important asset – employees. As such, how to transition new employees into effective organizational members who are likely to serve the organization for a long time is a key concern for public sector managers. They may expend a great deal of effort and resources to bring new employees onboard through activities such as orientation, training, mentoring, buddy systems, and on-the-job training. These activities comprise formal organizational socialization tactics – the means by which an organization

inculcates newcomers with the organizational culture and transforms them into full-fledged, effective organizational members (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). A great deal of literature in the general organizations and management literature has focused on organizational socialization. In public administration, most research on organizational socialization is relatively recent, although it is a growing area.

Public sector organizations face unique challenges that make socialization especially important and that influence how they onboard newcomers. First, changing environmental factors, such as budget cuts and public administration reforms, require public employees to respond rapidly and effectively to changing, multiple and sometimes conflicting demands. Second, public agencies face unique challenges in recruiting and motivating employees. They are typically more constrained than private sector organizations in using monetary incentives to attract new agents and foster their motivation. Their often negative bureaucratic image can also make it more difficult to attract and recruit qualified job candidates. Third, public-sector employees are often attracted to public organizations because of their interest in policy-making, their compassion for others, or their desire to serve the public interest. But the reality of public service may make it difficult for them to maintain those inspirations over time and as their tenure increases they may actually become less idealistic (Kjeldsen, 2014). Hence, socialization is especially important for public sector organizations because it transmits organizational values and culture among newcomers, fosters their organizational commitment, communicates expected behaviors and instills skills needed to become productive organizational members (Romzek, 1990; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

Organizational socialization, or onboarding, is the process by which newcomers become full-fledged, productive organizational members (Louis, 1980; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). When newcomers join an organization and assume a new role, they experience entry shock or surprise as they make sense of their new roles, responsibilities and organizational norms

(Ashforth, 2001; Louis, 1980). They absorb as much organizational and task-related information as possible while at the same time simply learning how to fit in. New employees also must determine “who is who” within the organization in terms of roles, power, influence and access to resources. As a result, they must sort through a great deal of information, signals, and expectations in order to become functional employees who fit in well. As such, one key function of socialization is uncertainty reduction for new employees (Bauer et al., 2007). Organizational socialization efforts are also geared toward instilling organizational values, norms, and culture and transferring knowledge and information needed to perform effectively (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1998; Louis, 1980; Romzek, 1990; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). This process involves activities for new employees where they are “given broad responsibilities and autonomy, entrusted with “privileged” information, included in informal networks, encouraged to represent the organization, and sought out for advice and counsel by others” (Louis, 1980, p. 231). Organizational socialization is a learning process – newcomers must become proficient in and understand the norms, expectations, roles and responsibilities that define their organizational membership (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007).

Organizational socialization tactics are generally categorized as ‘institutionalized’ or ‘individualized’ (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). With institutionalized socialization, organizations invite newcomers to think and behave according to pre-established roles, thus encouraging them to follow very structured processes. In sharp contrast, organizations relying on individualized socialization integrate newcomers more by default than by design and invite them to be innovative and to actively design their own role in their new organization. Van Maanen and Schein (1979, pp. 232–247) further developed a typology of six dichotomous socialization tactics that have been the basis of a great deal of organizational socialization research:

- *Collective vs. individual*: Whether newcomers are placed into groups and given common experiences or socialized individually.
- *Formal vs. informal*: Whether newcomers are segregated from organizational members and given experiences specifically for newcomers.
- *Sequential vs. random*: The degree to which newcomers must follow a specific set of steps leading to the final role.
- *Fixed vs. variable*: The degree to which steps in the process are linked to a specific timetable.
- *Serial vs. disjunctive*: Whether experienced members serve as role models for newcomers who will adopt similar roles.
- *Investiture vs. divestiture*: The degree to which the socialization process confirms or disconfirms the newcomer's preexisting identity (Saks and Ashforth 1997a; 1997b, 49).

Although a great deal of research has focused its attention on the organization's efforts to onboard new employees, newcomers are not necessarily passive participants in the socialization process. They may engage in their own proactive efforts to access organizational information and job knowledge, to obtain performance feedback and to connect with experienced organizational members (Morrison, 1993; Saks & Ashforth, 1997a, 1997b). Newcomers themselves also influence how and whether they absorb and internalize new information about their work and the organization (Ashforth, Sluss & Harrison, 2007). Through their proactivity, newcomers seek to further reduce the uncertainties related to their new responsibilities by accessing people and information that may not be available through the channels provided by formal socialization tactics (Ashford & Black, 1996). New employees seek information about how well they are performing, the nature of their relationships with other organizational members, and what is actually expected of them (Bauer, et. al., 2007). Levels of proactivity among new employees can vary based on individual differences and contextual factors such as the organizational culture or managerial support (Crant, 2000).

Several factors can affect how well newcomers obtain and make sense of new knowledge, the organizational culture, and norms and expectations. Socialization antecedents include factors at the individual and organizational level (Bauer, et. al., 2007; Fang, Duffy & Shaw, 2011; Hatmaker, 2015). At the individual level, identity, personality traits, proactivity, relationship-building, and pre-existing identity, knowledge, values and beliefs influence the socialization process and ultimately its outcomes. Organizational culture and structure and the type of socialization tactics employed can also affect how well newcomers become adjusted to their new role and organization.

Organizational socialization has been associated with a variety of key organizational outcomes that are important for public sector organizations. These outcomes can be viewed as relatively proximal outcomes associated primarily with newcomer adjustment and distal outcomes that affect both the newcomer and the organization. Newcomer adjustment includes role clarity, self-efficacy, increased organizational knowledge, task mastery, a sense of belonging and identification (Bauer, et. al, 2007; Fang, Duffy, & Shaw, 2011). Longer term outcomes include career success factors such as performance, satisfaction, advancement, job growth, organizational commitment, intentions to remain and turnover. (Bauer et al., 2007; Fang, Duffy & Shaw, 2011). One outcome that may be of particular concern to public sector managers and organizations is how well newcomers develop a public service identity as a result of the formal and information socialization activities (Hatmaker, 2015).

### **Public administration research on organizational socialization**

Three main streams of public administration research on organizational socialization may be distinguished. First, fit studies examine whether selection, onboarding, training, mentoring or promotion practices, as well as job and organizational characteristics, allow newcomers to become productive members of organizations as expressed by their levels of loyalty and commitment, their intentions to stay/quit, their job satisfaction, their competence,

their social integration, as well as the perceptions on, or contribution to, their roles and goals within the organization (for recent examples, see Bright, 2010; Dougherty & Van Gelder, 2015; Jaskyte, 2005; Jaskyte & Lee, 2009; Peng, Pandey & Pandey, 2015). The main message that results from this literature is that organizational participation does not mechanically lead to higher person-organization fit: such a fit depends on a diversity of organizational antecedents (e.g., socialization tactics) and individual antecedents (e.g., proactive behaviors).

Second, some research looks at the effect of organizational participation on the level of public service motivation (Perry, 1996) of newcomers (even if this research does not specifically refer to the concept of organizational socialization). This research shows that pre-entry levels of public service motivation tend to decrease after organizational entry. At the same time, some studies demonstrate the unequal influence of organizational socialization processes on the different dimensions of public service motivation (e.g., Davis, 2011; Perry, 1997). Decreases in public service motivation are theoretically attributed to post-entry discrepancies (or ‘reality shocks’: Kjeldsen, 2014; Kjeldsen & Jacobsen, 2013) between reality and newcomers’ pre-entry expectations towards their supervisor, co-workers and clients. Such decreases are reduced by some socialization antecedents, such as the importance attached by newcomers’ colleagues to public values (Vandenabeele, 2011) or ‘high commitment human resources practices’ (Gould-Williams et al., 2014). Hence, organizations making special efforts to foster levels of public service motivation among their employees are able to temper the effects of discrepancies between newcomers’ expectations and reality.

Third, several studies look at the constructivist process inducing ‘Eurocrats’ such as European officials and State representatives into the norms and rules of supranational institutions (Checkel, 2005). Eurocrats, this literature notices, learn about each other’s beliefs and interests through their interactions. This process of ‘supranational socialization’ influences Eurocrats’ preferences on policies and in politics with an ultimate impact on supranational

decisions and integration (for example Beyers, 2010; Murdoch & Geys, 2012; Suvarierol et al., 2013). Overall, this literature suggests that the importance of supranational socialization should not be exaggerated, especially when compared to more structural factors such as the Eurocrats' national affiliation of origin Quaglia, De Francesco, & Radaelli (2008) suggest that Eurocrats are multifaceted, becoming European in values but remaining attached to their national interests of origin.

The last category of studies is more heterogeneous. For example, Oberfield (2014) examines the effect of informal socialization influences (e.g., interactions with other newcomers and with veteran organizational members) and formal socialization tactics (e.g., training) on police officers' rule-following attitudes, use of force, as well as 'service-oriented motivations' (e.g., 'keeping order in the streets') and 'self-interested motivations' (e.g., 'getting a respected job'). He finds that, despite those influences, pre-entry attitudes and motivations are likely to remain the strongest predictors of post-entry attitudes and motivations after some months or years of service. Van Kleef (2016) has also pinpointed the decisive influence of pre-entry norms, values and attitudes of newcomers on their organizational socialization. Several other studies relate differences in organizational socialization processes with differences in public spending preferences of members from different organizations (Dolan, 2002), in the perceptions of corruption of the elite and the public (Jackson and Smith, 1996), or in the respective interests of elected officials and civil servants (Collins, 1985).

Theoretically speaking, public administration studies use socialization effects to understand employees' perceptions, attitudes and behaviors in two ways. A first category of studies contrasts socialization effects with other effects explaining homogeneity such as selection effects – public employees from the same organization being more homogenous in their attitudes and behaviors, not because the organization has transformed them, but because they were already similar when entering the organization. A second category of studies

compares socialization effects with theories accounting for heterogeneity in organizational members' attitudes and behaviors. Typical of this category are European socialization scholars, who examine cases in which organizational socialization could overcome differences among Eurocrats resulting from diverging national interests. This is also typical of scholars comparing the homogenizing effect of organizational socialization and the effect of 'representative bureaucracy', accounting for heterogeneity through the tendency of bureaucrats from different origins to 'press for the interests and desires of those whom he is presumed to represent' (e.g., an ethnic minority or men/women: Bradbury & Kellough, 2001, p. 158; Dolan, 2002; Wilkins & Williams, 2008, 2009).

### **Agenda for future research**

Despite the extant research on organizational socialization within the general organizations and management literature and the nascent research within public sector scholarship, there remain several avenues for future research. Public administration research could give more attention to informal socialization processes. Most studies remain focused on formal practices or patterns of organizational socialization, such as organizational tactics, trainings, mentoring, etc. Future research efforts could also be concentrated on informal socialization practices in addition to the formal tactics. This entails looking at employees' informal conversations during lunch or coffee breaks, and analyzing the stories they tell each other. Doing so requires the use of more inductive and interpretive approaches, such as narrative inquiry, ethnography, and participant observation.

More research could also examine the process of socialization rather than focusing on outcomes. Doing so means going beyond quantitative data to collect qualitative data that can reveal the underlying dynamics of the socialization process. To analyze socialization as a process, longitudinal data is also required. Although there is some use of longitudinal data in socialization studies, an increase in the examination of socialization tactics and employee



behaviors over time is needed. Future studies could examine the processes allowing newcomers to become similar to existing organizational members, as well as those that foster their creativity and divergence from the organizational norm. To the extent that new employees bring new perspectives and ways of doing things into an organization, future research may wish to examine a perhaps unintended part of the socialization process - how newcomers may change the organization at the same time they are learning and adopting organizational ways of thinking and acting.

More comparative research is needed to specifically assess the differences and similarities of socialization in different contexts. Socialization research is scattered across disciplines, and subfields such as PSM, street-level bureaucracy, and European socialization. These fields draw on similar theories, but are fairly isolated from each other. Comparing different contexts could further contribute to the development of socialization theories.

Public administration research could expand its focus on socialization antecedents that may be specific to the public sector at both the organizational and individual level. Public sector organizational culture, structure and goals may differently influence socialization than those of the private sector. For example, to the extent that public sector may be more routinized and rule-based, offering employees less discretion, its structure and processes may uniquely influence socialization and specific outcomes, such as employee innovation.

Future studies could also expand our understanding of newcomer proactivity and relationship building. In particular, the examination of newcomer social networks and how they change over time could lend more insight into informal socialization processes and their effects on socialization outcomes (Fang, Duffy, & Shaw, 2011; Hatmaker, 2015). Individual proactivity can influence to whom newcomers connect, and these connections can offer important organizational knowledge, job information, social capital and other resources. Access

to key organizational insiders may affect how quickly and the extent to which they become full-fledged organizational members. Peer-to-peer relationships can influence new employees develop a sense of belonging within the organization.

## **Conclusion**

A better understanding of organizational socialization processes taking place in public organizations is more important than ever. In such organizations, employees face increasing pressure to deal reach ambitious objectives with limited means. An understanding of how public managers can make their newcomers effective but at the same time innovative, motivated and committed to the organization can be crucial to long-term organizational performance and survival.

## **Cross References**

Public service motivation, organizational turnover, organizational change.

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