

An Interactionist Perspective on Newcomer Socialization Rates

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A symbolic interactionist perspective on the genesis of meaning and identity is used as a general theoretical framework to explain the specifics of newcomer socialization processes in organizations. This framework suggests that interactions with insiders in the setting may be an important, but largely overlooked, influence on the rate at which newcomers negotiate the first (encounter) stage of the socialization process. The role of interactions between newcomers and insiders is emphasized as the primary vehicle through which initial socialization occurs. A model of the interactionist perspective is presented and directions for future research are discussed.

Socialization and adjustment to work have been examined from a variety of theoretical perspectives, including role taking (Graen, Orris, & Johnson, 1973), the effects of met and unmet expectations (Kotter, 1973; Wanous, 1980), socialization practices and policies in which organizations engage (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), and stages of the socialization process (Katz, 1980; Schein, 1971). Research on socialization has focused primarily on situational factors such as group norms, job characteristics, socialization strategies, and first-year job challenge. This work has emphasized long-range outcomes of the process such as commitment (Buchanan, 1974; Steers, 1977), satisfaction (Feldman, 1976; Katz, 1978a), and performance (Berlew & Hall, 1966; Wanous, 1977). The approach taken here, however, examines factors that contribute to the rate at which newcomers move through the initial, encounter stage of the socialization process.

This paper provides a framework for understanding the important interactions that may contribute to rapid socialization of newcomers in the workplace. The focus here is on the rate at which newcomers adjust and are socialized, because a relatively quick adjustment or "settling in" pe-

riod is desirable from both an individual and an organizational point of view. For individuals, a rapid socialization period means a quicker reduction of the anxiety associated with lack of situational identity (Wanous, 1980). For the organization, this reduction in anxiety also is desirable because it means that individuals can begin to focus sooner on job performance (Katz, 1980).

The present approach is interactionist in two ways. First, symbolic interactionism is suggested as the process through which newcomers are socialized. That is, symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Mead, 1934) is the process of verbal and social interaction through which meaning and identity arise. Also, these interactions are the process through which newcomers come to understand organizational realities and establish situational identities.

Second, a more traditional person-by-situation interactionist framework also is discussed, because aspects of persons (such as needs, cognitive style, etc.) and aspects of situations (characteristics of incumbents, types of technology) may combine in such a way as to facilitate the symbolic interactions that increase the rate of

newcomer socialization. Thus, symbolic interactions, as well as the person-by-situation interactions that may facilitate symbolic exchanges are both discussed here in a dual-interactionist approach.

This approach to newcomer socialization offers at least the following additions to the literature on this topic. First, the symbolic interactionist framework links the contemporary topic of newcomer socialization to its philosophical forbears concerning the genesis of meaning and identity. This link may provide some conceptual coherence for the socialization literature, and it also may be a means for selecting relevant variables for future research from a long list of potentially important variables.

Second, the present paper's focus on the rate of newcomer socialization expands the theoretical and empirical questions addressed by this literature thus far. The vast majority of work in the area of newcomer socialization focuses on the ultimate outcomes of the process and on situational determinants of these outcomes, but the rate at which newcomers adjust and are socialized is an important, and largely overlooked, outcome variable in the socialization literature. The present paper seeks to fill this gap found in earlier work on socialization.

✓ The perspective discussed here also suggests that new and different units of analysis are appropriate for research on newcomer socialization. Specifically, characteristics of the insiders as well as the interactions themselves need to be investigated if research from an interactionist perspective is to proceed.

Finally, this article provides future researchers with a means to determine when the encounter stage of socialization has ended. The interactionist perspective implies that self-perceived adjustment measures are only one indicator of the transition between the initial socialization stage and subsequent stages.

Symbolic Interactionism

The primary tasks that newcomers accomplish during the encounter stage of the socialization

process are (a) establishing a situational identity (Katz, 1980; Wanous, 1980), and (b) making sense of (attaching meaning to) organizational events, practices, and procedures (Louis, 1980). It is the central thesis of this paper that these tasks are accomplished more rapidly if newcomers engage in numerous symbolic interactions with others in the setting. These interactions, in turn, are themselves facilitated if both newcomers and insiders proact on each other by seeking out interactions. Symbolic interactionism, as discussed below, is a philosophical school of thought that deals with the genesis of identity and meaning in general. It is discussed here as the process through which newcomers establish *situational* identities and come to understand the meaning of *organizational* realities in particular. In addition, symbolic interactions also facilitate other aspects of the initial encounter stage including role negotiation and the adjustment of the newcomer to the primary work group (Feldman, 1976).

Blumer (1969) is credited with coining the phrase "symbolic interactionism" as the name for a branch of philosophy that is concerned with the genesis and development of meaning and identity. For Mead, Blumer, and other members of this school of thought, meaning arises in the relationship between an act, the response to that act by a second person, and the result of that act-react interaction. Verbal and symbolic interactions between people are the major avenues through which meaning and significance come to be associated with events, practices, and procedures. This approach does not place the meaning of an event within the event itself, but neither does it place meaning purely within the individual. Rather, meaning arises out of interactions between people, and individuals transform their own perceptions of events in response to the interactions they have with others in a setting. According to this view, reality and meaning are social constructions, and individuals are not strictly separable from their environments. ✓ Because individuals contribute to the meaning that arises in a setting, individuals and situations mutually determine each other.

The symbolic interactionist perspective on the genesis of meaning also applies to the concept of identity, which is the meaning that an individual attaches to the self. This perspective stresses the importance of group membership as a determinant of identity, in that identity is a reflection of the attitudes of others toward the focal person. Identity formation is considered complete when the individual adopts the attitudes of others toward the self.

Any form of interpersonal interaction can be considered a symbolic interaction if the interaction creates a common meaning or understanding between the two parties. Thus, a simple exchange of greetings can be a symbolic interaction if, for example, both people understand the exchange to mean "we are on speaking terms with each other." However, every interpersonal interaction is not necessarily a symbolic one if the two parties do not share an understanding of what the interaction signifies.

The symbolic interactionist perspective is similar to Salancik and Pfeffer's (1978) thesis that perceptions of task characteristics and other job-related attitudes are influenced socially. In their view, "finding meaning in behavior and in a job environment is an information processing activity, and the information processed is frequently verbal" (p. 225). The present approach includes perceptions of self, as reflected in social selves and identity confirmation, as well as socially constructed attitudes toward the task and task environment. As discussed below, this perspective on meaning and identity development is considered an appropriate and general metaphor for understanding the particulars of newcomer socialization processes in organizations.

Overview of the Newcomer Socialization Literature

Much of the literature on newcomer socialization has focused on either (a) the stages that newcomers go through on their way to becoming insiders, or (b) the psychic processes that account for the changes that newcomers undergo. For example, several stage models (Buchanan,

1974; Feldman, 1976; Katz, 1980; Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975; Schein, 1983; Van Maanen, 1976; Wanous, 1980), while not parallel in numbers or names of stages, indicate that the newcomer socialization experience is a progression of at least three stages. The first stage involves the period prior to the newcomer's entry into the organization plus the actual first encounter with organizational life. During this period, a newcomer is likely to be concerned with building or confirming a situational identity and with deciphering situational norms and contingencies. This process is facilitated by high levels of interpersonal contact between supervisors and new employees (Katz & Tushman, 1983). The second stage is characterized by a decrease in newcomers' anxieties and an increased focus on making an impact on the group or organization (Katz, 1978a, 1978b, 1980; Schein, 1983). During this period, newcomers' energies also are focused more on job performance. The last general stage of socialization, which was termed "adjustment" by Katz (1980), is concerned with outcomes such as commitment and satisfaction and various modes of adaptation to organizational norms. For example, Schein (1971) and Van Maanen and Schein (1979) suggested that newcomers become either more or less conforming to pivotal and peripheral standards of behavior in response to varying socialization tactics that different organizations employ.

In contrast to stage models, process models of newcomer socialization attempt to account for the "hows and whys" of the changes that newcomers experience in their progression from one stage to another. For example, Louis (1980) stressed the importance of access to explanatory information as facilitative of the sense-making process. In her view, surprises are a normal part of the encounter stage, and newcomers become socialized as a function of their ability to explain surprising events and to predict future occurrences in the workplace.

In a somewhat different vein, Schein (1971) depicted newcomer transformations in Lewinian terms, those of unfreezing, changing, and re-

freezing. He suggested that newcomers are unfrozen due to reality shock and upending experiences (embarrassment, failure). Newcomers change aspects of their social selves in order to comply with the norms of the setting. These new selves are then refrozen through reinforcement or other cues that indicate acceptance and approval.

Symbolic Interactionism and Newcomer Socialization

Clearly, there are significant parallels between newcomer socialization processes and symbolic interactionist approaches to the genesis of meaning and identity. Identity confirmation and sensemaking in the workplace are specific instances of the social construction of reality. Newcomers change aspects of their social selves and come to attach meaning to aspects of organizational life through the interpersonal exchanges they engage in with others in the setting.

In addition to establishing a situational identity and general sensemaking, Feldman (1976, 1983) suggested that the initial encounter phase of socialization also encompasses dimensions such as acquiring appropriate role behaviors, adjusting to the work group's norms and values, and developing work skills and abilities. According to Feldman, these aspects of early socialization are facilitated through such mechanisms as discrete initiation events, group (as opposed to individual) socialization processes, on-the-job training, and timely feedback or performance evaluation. The symbolic interactionist perspective suggests that these mechanisms require interaction between newcomers and agents of socialization. Initiation rites, group socialization, training, and performance feedback are specific forms of symbolic interaction whereby newcomers make sense of and come to understand their role in the work group, as well as their own capabilities and precise role requirements. To the extent that these dimensions of the encounter stage of socialization occur more rapidly as a result of frequent interaction, the entire socialization process is speeded up (Katz, 1980; Schein, 1983).

How Differential Rates of Socialization Arise

What is lacking in the newcomer socialization literature, however, is an emphasis on the rate at which newcomers adjust (see Katz, 1980, for an exception). The present paper focuses on this issue and offers predictions regarding the conditions under which varying rates of socialization could occur. Specifically, symbolic interactions occur more frequently and socialization rates are accelerated when both newcomers and insiders proact on each other and seek out interactions. Proaction is defined as any behavior that involves actively seeking out interaction opportunities (Mitchell, 1980). It includes behaviors such as asking questions, stopping by other people's offices or work areas to talk, initiating social opportunities such as lunch engagements, asking for feedback, and participating in discretionary social activities. It is presumed that individuals differ in the extent to which they proact, and these differences result in differing levels of interaction frequency. Differing levels of proaction (high, low) are themselves influenced by various individual and situational variables that will be discussed in a subsequent section.

Figure 1 depicts the conditions under which various rates of socialization (slow, intermediate, rapid) could occur based upon the degree of proaction by newcomers and insiders. For example, Cell #2 represents a condition characterized by highly proactive newcomers and insiders, a situation that gives rise to frequent interaction and rapid socialization. From the present perspective, Cell #2 represents the ideal situation for both newcomers and organizations. Due to the high frequency of interactions, anxiety levels may be reduced more quickly and newcomers may become productive employees sooner rather than later. Time periods are expressed relatively (sooner, faster, slower, etc.) because neither the previous socialization literature nor the present approach allows for predicting an absolute time period (such as three months, or three years). Future empirical research from the present in-

Insider Proaction	high	1. Intermediate Rate	2. Rapid Rate
	low	3. Slow Rate	4. Intermediate Rate
		low	high

Figure 1. Socialization rates as a function of proaction by newcomers and insiders.

interactionist perspective, however, should confirm (or deny) the relative rates of socialization suggested by Figure 1.

In contrast to Cell #2, Cell #3 represents a condition that is characterized by low levels of proaction on the part of newcomers and insiders. Here, interactions are infrequent and socialization rates are the slowest. Newcomers in this situation are isolated from insiders and, consequently, may remain anxious for longer periods. This isolation and infrequent interaction may produce feelings of alienation in newcomers. Where groups of newcomers enter an organization en masse, distinctive subgroups may form if newcomers have more interaction with each other than with veteran employees.

Cells #1 and 4 represent conditions where intermediate rates of socialization are expected to occur, because only one party to the interactions (either newcomer or insider) is highly proactive. In these cells, interaction probably occurs more frequently than in Cell #3 (low/low), but less frequently than in Cell #2 (high/high). Thus, intermediate rates of socialization are predicted to arise from intermediate levels of interaction. Frustration may characterize newcomers (insiders)

in Cells #1 and 4 as they meet with little response from nonproactive insiders (newcomers). When repeated attempts at interaction by one party are not reciprocated by the other party, such attempts may decrease in frequency. Formerly proactive newcomers may stop proacting after a time because of their feelings of frustration. This situation is similar to the one in Cell #3 where neither newcomers nor insiders are very proactive. Thus, the conditions in Cells #1 and 4 may not be very stable. Instead, conditions where only one party is proactive may tend to evolve into conditions where neither party is proactive.

Person-by-Situation Interactionism

If the rate of newcomer progression through the encounter stage is a function of proaction and interaction frequency on the part of newcomers and insiders, then variables that affect the level of proaction will play a critical role in the early socialization process. To identify these variables, it may be helpful to differentiate the newcomer from the situation. A purely symbolic interactionist perspective allows for no differentiation of persons from situations. However, this differentiation is undertaken here as a categoriz-

ing device. Using a person-by-situation categorization scheme helps to ensure that relevant variables from both "sides" of the interaction are represented. In this categorization, insiders are treated as part of the newcomer's "situation."

Figure 2 graphically illustrates the personal and situational variables that may contribute to proaction and interaction in the workplace. Figure 2 indicates that frequent interactions between newcomers and insiders facilitate establishing situational identity, sense-making, and other dimensions of the encounter stage. The rate at which newcomers move through this stage is shown in Figure 2 to be a function of interaction frequency. This figure is not meant to suggest that interaction frequency is the *only* determinant of socialization rates. Job complexity or the type of profession a newcomer is entering, for example, also might affect how quickly the encounter stage is negotiated. The point of view expressed here is that frequent interactions can reduce the *maximum* amount of time necessary for initial socialization. This reduction in time, however, cannot go below some minimum imposed by complex job requirements or other constraining factors.

Individual Difference Variables

As shown in Figure 2, three individual difference variables (field dependence, tolerance for ambiguity, and needs for affiliation) are suggested here as representative of a larger class of variables that characterize proactive newcomers who seek out interactions with others in the workplace. It is believed that the three discussed here are some of the most powerful contributors to proactive behavior on the part of newcomers because they provide both the motivation and the ability to seek out interactions with others.

Field dependence (Witkin & Goodenough, 1977) provides newcomers with both the motivation (reliance upon the field as a referent) and the ability (interpersonal skills) to initiate the interactions that facilitate the adaptation of newcomers. By definition, field dependent people tend to rely upon the context in which behavior

occurs in order to attach meaning to behavior. Field dependent individuals also tend to have the requisite interpersonal skills that facilitate such interactions. Thus, it could be expected that field dependent newcomers would approach others in the workplace in an effort to understand the context of that workplace and their own place in that context (Mitchell, 1980).

A second individual difference variable that may promote proaction is tolerance of ambiguity (Budner, 1962; Frenkel-Brunswick, 1949). The situations that newcomers find themselves in frequently are ambiguous regarding their novelty, complexity, and seemingly contradictory nature. Newcomers characterized as intolerant of ambiguity may "jump to conclusions," conclusions that are premature and do not represent an accurate reflection of a shared, mutually determined reality. Thus, intolerance for ambiguity may inhibit the socialization process. These inhibiting effects occur when the individual reaches closure on the meaning of events *before* closure is warranted. In interactionist terms, such an individual may rely too heavily on the attitudes and values held by one or two significant others, rather than coming to appreciate and influence the meanings of the whole group of which the individual is a member.

A third individual difference variable, proposed here as a potentially significant influence on proaction initiated by newcomers, is need for affiliation (McClelland, 1961) or relatedness needs (Alderfer, 1969). Newcomers with high, unmet relatedness needs would be motivated to seek out interpersonal interactions in the workplace that might gratify these needs. Also, purely social interactions which might meet needs for affiliation (e.g., having lunch with co-workers, going on coffee breaks with others, informal "chit-chat" about weekend activities, etc.) can serve as a social context for the exchange of information that might aid newcomers in establishing situational identities.

The foregoing discussion has highlighted some of the personal characteristics of newcomers that may facilitate the occurrence of proaction, and

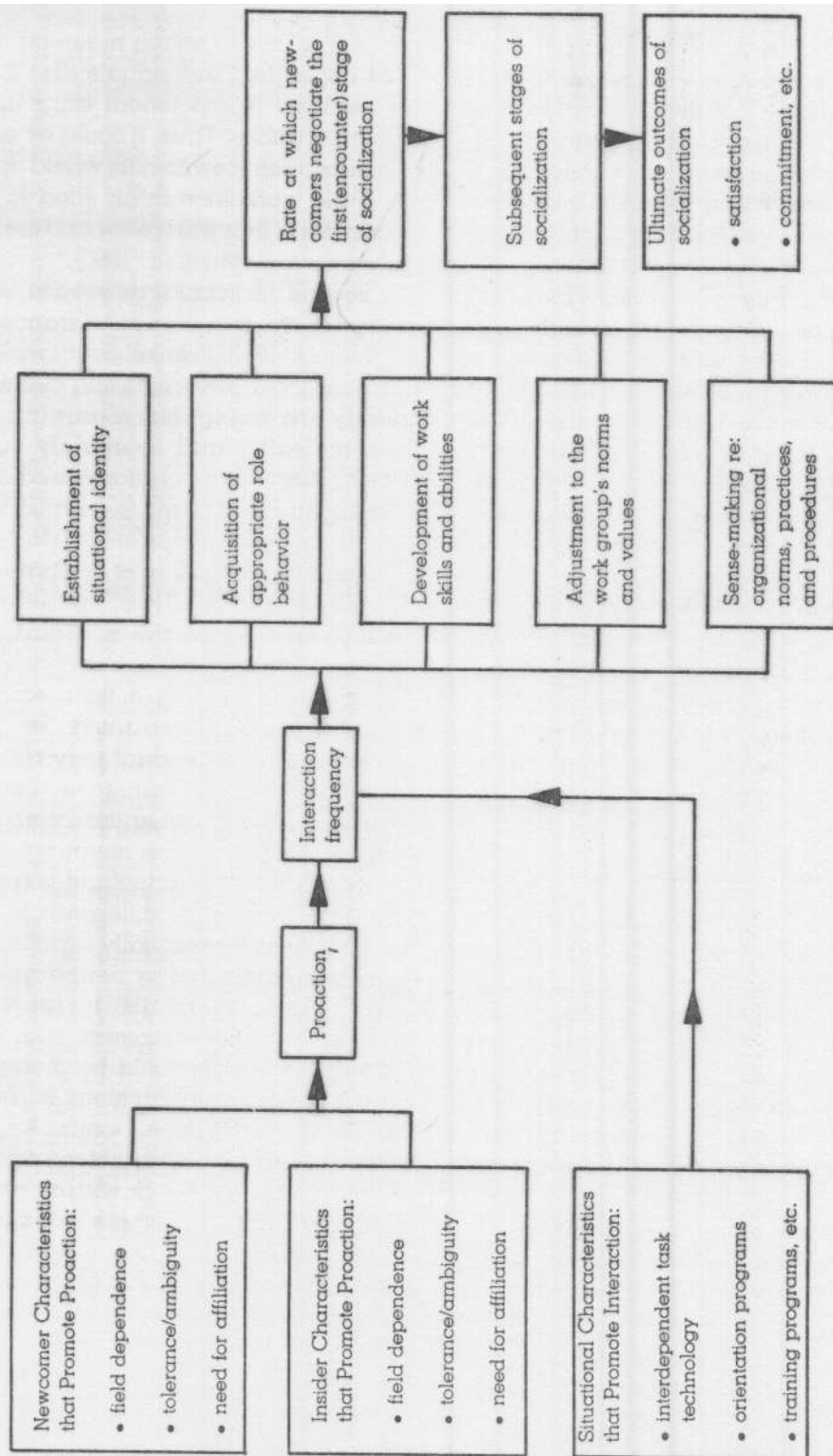


Figure 2. Interactionist perspective on newcomer socialization.

therefore interactions in the workplace. However, even the most proactive newcomers can be frustrated in their attempts at interactions by a work situation that is not responsive. Accordingly, some aspects of situations that may facilitate proaction are discussed below. Here, the emphasis is on insiders as elements of the newcomers' situation, because the significance of insiders as agents of socialization has not received much attention in prior research. The selection of situational variables to be discussed is guided by the variables' potential to promote proaction or interaction.

Situational Variables

From the perspective of newcomers, other people in the work setting are elements of the situation. Specifically, co-workers, supervisors, subordinates, clients, and/or customers act as agents of socialization through which newcomers learn their appropriate work roles, engage in sense-making activities, and establish situational identity. Insiders in the setting form the "other half" of any interaction with newcomers and, as such, potentially are significant contributors to the rate at which newcomers adjust. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the same individual difference variables that may propel newcomers into proaction and interaction operate in a similar fashion for insiders. Insiders who are, for example, field dependent and tolerant of ambiguity and who have high needs for affiliation are most likely to approach newcomers and to engage in interactions with them. From a research perspective, then, individual difference variables are not only important as they exist in newcomers, but also as they are present among insiders.

Other aspects of the setting, in addition to proactive insiders, also may facilitate interaction between newcomers and insiders. For example, highly interdependent forms of task technology force interactions between newcomers and insiders, even in the absence of strong tendencies to proact. Similarly, formal orientation programs, on-the-job training, early performance evalua-

tion, and/or formally prescribed mentoring or coaching relationships necessitate interaction between newcomers and insiders. Thus, Figure 2 indicates three classes of variables that facilitate interaction in the workplace: (a) variables that result in proaction among newcomers, (b) variables that result in proaction among insiders, and (c) organizational practices and procedures that necessitate interaction.

The discussion above on individual and situational variables that may characterize proactive newcomers and insiders serves to flesh out the research agenda suggested by Figure 1. While Figure 1 focuses on the conditions that give rise to differential socialization rates, Figure 2 depicts the variables that may give rise to these conditions. Thus, the present approach provides researchers with an appropriate set of individual and situational variables to be investigated. Since individual difference variables largely have been ignored in previous research, increased attention to personal characteristics of newcomers and insiders seems warranted.

Directions for Future Research

The dual interactionist perspective presented here provides a coherent conceptual framework to guide future research. Specifically, one area that future research on socialization rates should address is identifying and assessing individual difference variables which may result in proaction among insiders and newcomers. Figure 1 depicts the proaction levels under which various rates of socialization could occur, and it also represents testable hypotheses. In particular, the present perspective emphasizes individual differences among *insiders* as important, but neglected, determinants of the rate at which newcomers adjust.

Similarly, the interactionist approach also suggests that the frequency of interactions themselves is an appropriate unit of analysis for research on newcomer socialization. While previous research has emphasized situational factors, the present perspective indicates that *interaction frequency* is the primary mechanism

through which newcomers are transformed into insiders. Therefore, research that asks newcomers to indicate the frequency with which they had interactions with superiors, subordinates, co-workers, and/or clients should be conducted. Over time, these frequencies could be correlated with a measure of adjustment. This type of research would acknowledge the importance of interactions and would assess the contribution of interaction frequency to socialization rates.

In addition, researchers using an interactionist perspective would be able to delineate the end of the initial socialization period using indices other than self-perceptions of adjustment. That is, the present perspective suggests that the encounter phase is complete when (a) anxiety resulting from a lack of situational identity is reduced, and (b) the meanings that newcomers attach to aspects of organizational life are similar to the meanings that insiders express. Therefore, evidence of lower anxiety levels and shared meanings indicates that newcomers have made the transition from the encounter stage to a subsequent stage. Without a framework such as the one suggested here, previous research has, for the most part, described the hallmarks of transition in vague terms. This has contributed to an inability to validate empirically stage models of

the socialization process. The present perspective provides one potential solution to this problem.

Conclusions

An interactionist perspective on newcomer socialization rates provides researchers with a means to select relevant variables for future research and suggests that new units of analysis may be appropriate. Also, this perspective implies that organizations may be able to increase the rate of initial socialization by instituting procedures that require interactions between newcomers and insiders. Formal orientation and training programs, as well as "buddy systems," frequent performance evaluations, and informal social activities can provide the necessity for interactions that may speed up initial socialization.

Finally, the present perspective emphasizes an older philosophical tradition embodied in the work of symbolic interactionists. This emphasis may serve to quiet some critics' claims that organizational behaviorists do little more than put old wine into new bottles. Rather, the present approach attempts to put the new wine of socialization research back into the old bottles of symbolic interactionism.

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The author thanks Robert L. Heneman, Janina C. Latack, Elaine D. Pulakos, Marcia P. Miceli, Benjamin Schneider, and John P. Wanous for helpful comments on earlier drafts.