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PREVIEW

**AT-RISK YOUTHS' ORGANIZATIONAL ENTRY EXPERIENCES:
A TAXONOMIC ANALYSIS**

by

Mary Ann Danielson

A DISSERTATION

**Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**Major: Communication Studies and Theater Arts
(Communication Studies)**

Under the Supervision of Professor Vincent Di Salvo

Lincoln, Nebraska

December, 1997

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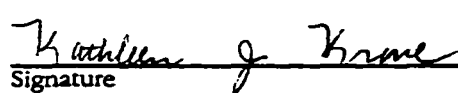
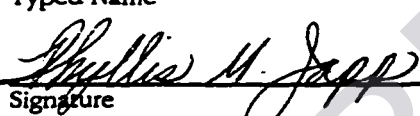

At-Risk Youths' Organizational Entry Experiences:

A Taxonomic Analysis

BY

Mary Ann Danielson

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**AT-RISK YOUTHS' ORGANIZATIONAL ENTRY EXPERIENCES:
A TAXONOMIC ANALYSIS**

Mary Ann Danielson, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 1997

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Through an emic examination of youths' experiences, this study purports to explicate the nature of the newcomer at-risk youths' experience during organizational socialization. Suspending *a priori* assumptions concerning the nature of the newcomer experience, this study explored prior experiences that formed workplace perceptions, the phenomena that comprised the organizational experiences, and reactions to organizational entry incidents.

Utilizing a longitudinal design, data was collected from the at-risk youth narrators via biographical questionnaires, observations, and a series of three active interviews. The narrators' organizational stories formed the basis for both the taxonomic analysis and the narratives that contextualized the analysis. Overall, 442 incidents were grouped and organized into three taxonomies, consisting of 11 categories, 29 subcategories, and numerous sub-subcategories.

Results of the analysis concluded that despite the narrators' diverse life experiences, their socialization experiences shared common features. Specifically, the nature of organizational entry experiences are characterized by policies and procedures, the variable nature of work, workplace relationships/interactions, and temporality of employment.

Their sources for organizational perceptions included prior employment, their social circle, various organizational sources, and the media. Affective, behavioral, and cognitive reactions followed organizational entry incidents.

A number of conclusions emerged from the analysis; taken as a whole, they clearly and uniquely illustrate the complex, interconnected, communicative activity known as organizational socialization. These conclusions both support the current socialization literature while modifying and extending current models and findings. Challenges and implications abound as future research should continue to explore the negative aspects of socialization and the power of the narratives as illustrated in this current study.

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**In memory of Dr. Elton S. Carter
(1919-1997)**

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Chapter One
Introduction
Employment (Organizational Entry) Experiences of At-Risk Youth

The process is so ubiquitous and we go through it so often during our total career that it is all too easy to overlook it. Yet it is a process which can make or break a career, and which can make or break organizational systems of manpower planning. (Schein, 1968, p. 2)

The process that Schein (1968) is describing is the socialization process.

Organizational assimilation or socialization¹ is the process by which an individual becomes integrated into the reality or culture of the organization (Jablin, 1982). The socialization process is important in that "the speed and effectiveness of socialization determine employee loyalty, commitment, productivity, and turnover. The basic stability and effectiveness of organizations therefore depends upon their ability to socialize new members" (Schein, 1968, p. 2).

Despite the widespread impact of organizational socialization, research in the socialization area didn't really begin in earnest until the late 1970s. Building from the seminal work of Van Maanen and Schein (1979), organizational scholars have developed their research along four key themes: the nature or characteristics of socialization, the stages of socialization, socialization content (which includes both role-related and cultural learning), and socialization practices (Louis, 1980).

¹Although occasionally used interchangeably, the terms assimilation and socialization refer to interrelated but distinct concepts. Assimilation serves as a theoretical framework for study and consists of two interdependent processes: socialization and individualization. Socialization refers to the processes and strategies that organizations use to integrate newcomers into the organization, while individualization refers to the processes and strategies that individuals use in influencing the organizational culture. Although socialization efforts have garnered more publicity, it is the interdependent processes of socialization and individualization that together explain organizational assimilation. For the purposes of this paper, as the focus is on organizational entry where organizational forces are particularly strong, socialization will refer to the process of organizational inclusion and assimilation will refer to the theoretical framework that explains the interdependent processes.

Regardless of the specific theme, the processual nature of assimilation inherently involves communication; at a minimum, information seeking (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993, 1995; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992) and relationship building (e.g., Leader-Member Exchange, Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; peer mentoring, Kram & Isabella, 1985). That is, individuals utilize their communication skills in order to seek additional information from multiple sources and to develop and maintain relationships with leaders, peers, and mentors (Louis, 1990).

Socialization scholars have historically targeted (business school) college graduates (Ashford & Black, 1993; Morrison, 1993), graduate students (Bauer & Green, 1994), and graduate teaching assistants (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Tomkins & Cheney, 1985) in their study of organizational assimilation. Studies involving college graduates and graduate students offer many insights as to how communication has been used to seek information (Morrison, 1993, 1995; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992), build and maintain relationships (Lee & Jablin, 1995), and facilitate socialization (Cunconan, Halone, & Lane, 1995).

Communication patterns of college graduates may not be reflective of all workers, however, as many others have not had the opportunity to develop information seeking skills through college courses and develop working relationships with club members, other students, and faculty members. While not all college graduates successfully acquire information seeking skills or develop working relationships, the college curriculum does provide additional opportunities for skills development (e.g., oral and written communication, technical competence); opportunities not offered to all.

Socialization scholars, to date, seem to have forgotten that over 50% of American High School graduates do not attend college. They become mechanics, beauticians, bank tellers, and grocery clerks. With approximately 20 million young people between the ages of 16 and 24 not planning on going on to college, and with their futures determining to a great extent how well the American family, economy, and democracy function (The

forgotten half, 1988; Whitman, 1989), perhaps the time has come for socialization scholars to study non-baccalaureate youth or what the William T. Grant Foundation (The forgotten half, 1988) has labelled "The Forgotten Half" (i.e., youth who drift into the labor market without (any) specific training or higher education). The "forgotten half" are high school graduates, also referred to as young adults or non-baccalaureate youth, who vary in their work-related skills.

Employment Patterns

The need to study these non-baccalaureate youth is especially acute as traditional patterns of employment no longer apply in today's rapidly changing job market. "Time, technology, and international competition have changed the prospects of American workers. To be without high skills and educational credentials means a succession of intermittent-often part-time-jobs, routinized work, and low wages" (Making good jobs, 1995, p. 2). The changing nature of work and the changing faces of workers impact employees and employers alike. The problem appears to be two-fold: the absence of real jobs for young people and their lack of preparation for and appreciation of work itself (Morgan, 1994; Zemsky, 1994); themes that have embodied federal policies for assisting jobless youth since 1975 (Powers, 1994).

Youth employment patterns.

Employees, especially young, non-baccalaureate youth, face a rapidly changing, increasingly demanding workplace. Historically, high school graduates could find well-paying jobs in manufacturing, agriculture, and transportation. However, today "they [high school graduates] find these positions disappearing by the millions" (The future, 1988, p. 5). Rosenthal, chief of the Division of Occupational Outlook for the office of Employment Projections, estimates that manufacturing alone will lose 1.3 million jobs between 1994 and 2005 (Kleiman, 1996, p. G-1). According to Howe, former United States Commissioner of Education, "opportunities for young workers are limited largely to

low paying jobs without career opportunities in this secondary labor market where they tend to miss out on health insurance and other fringe benefits and to receive inadequate earnings to start a family or even to live independently" (The future, 1988, p. 5). This is especially true for young adults; the National Center on the Educational Quality of the Workforce (EQW) believe that 16 to 26 year olds "are bearing disproportionately the costs associated with economic change. The young, particularly those who do not proceed directly to college, discover that there is no room at the inn-or in the factory, office, or government bureau" (Making good jobs, 1995, p. 2).

Most young adults are finding employment in the fast growing retail and service industries. The retail trade industry provides by far the largest proportion of jobs for young workers and remains one of the fastest growing segment of the labor market; almost one-third of the total jobs created during the 1980s were in retail trade and the service sector (Bingaman, 1988). Future projections estimate that service and retail trade positions will increase by 16.2 million over the next 10 years (Rosenthal, in Kleiman, 1996, p. G-1).

Additionally, students fill a disproportionately large share of the jobs in the hospitality industry. More than 60% of the youths employed in the hospitality sector are enrolled in school while working; specifically, more than one out of three are enrolled high school students and one out of four is attending college (Hospitality industry, 1995). In highlighting employment changes over the past twenty years, Baxter (1992) notes that young workers are more likely to be service workers or laborers than are their older counterparts.

Employers' needs and requirements.

While young workers may complain of limited employment opportunities, employers detail the challenge of finding qualified workers. "Today, the lament of employers everywhere is that graduates of the nation's schools are not equipped for work: they simply are not good enough in terms of the skills and discipline they bring to the

workplace" (Zemsky & Cappelli, 1992, p. 4). The greater concerns were that young people lack communication skills; they are neither numerate nor literate; they can't make change; they don't understand the importance of providing customer service; they lack people skills and do not deal pleasantly with customers; they lack self-control, discipline, and a work ethic (Morgan, 1994, p. 3; Zemsky, 1994, p. 5). In general, the new skill requirements for the proficient worker "are not occupation-specific but are broader and more general, mainly involving interpersonal and problem-solving capabilities" (On connecting, 1995, p. 4). The EQW results, reflecting a national survey of over 4,000 employers, indicated that American employers were using applicant attitude, communication skills, and amount and type of previous work experience as selection criteria (The other shoe, 1995).

Similar conclusions were reached by Curtis, Winsor, and Stephens (1989, 1995) who document employers' desire for interpersonal skill, oral and written communication skills, and technical competence. (cf. Di Salvo, 1980; Di Salvo, Dunning, & Homan, 1982, for a more detailed historical account of employers' requests for employee skills.) The results of their two studies conclude that the skills "most valued in the contemporary job-entry market are communication skills. The skills of listening, oral communication (both interpersonal and public), written communication, and the trait of enthusiasm are indicated to be the most important" (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1995, p. 10).

To the extent that organizational socialization is a communication process, a process that determines to a large extent organizational success or failure, employees' lack of communication skills could adversely affect their employment opportunities and economic well-being. Those individuals who face true difficulty in the current employment market are those with insufficient education, training, and/or skills. This is particularly problematic for nonbaccalaureate youth who are disadvantaged in that they lack basic, educational, communicative, or employment skills.

The issue becomes more complex as the level of skill required for many jobs is climbing rapidly, leaving unskilled young workers out in the cold (Bernstein, 1993), destined for unemployment (Topel, 1993). According to a survey by Price Waterhouse, 75% of 316 top New York executives say most new entry level jobs will require specialized training beyond high school or a college degree in the next four years. Fewer than 50% of all jobs require such training now (in Bernstein, 1993, p. 107). Additionally, a national survey of employers, conducted by the EQW, concluded that "a deskilling of work has not occurred. . . only 5% of establishments indicated any reduction in the skill requirements of their jobs, while 56% reported increasing skill requirements" (On connecting, 1995, p. 4).

This is not to say that training does not occur. In fact, "the establishment that makes no training investment in at least some of its workers is a true rarity: 97% provide informal (on-the-job) training, and 81% provide formal training. Indeed, over half (57%) of the establishments reported an increase in formal training over the last three years" (On connecting, 1995, p. 4). While dollar estimates vary and may not be very reliable, Penn State University (Leadership, 1996) describes the executive training industry as a \$15 billion dollar a year industry, and the United States Congress (1990, in What's working, 1995) estimates that American companies annually spend \$40 to \$50 billion dollars on formal training. Unfortunately, the majority of training has been limited to behavioral and managerial instruction rather than upgrading technical competencies or product knowledge (Zemsky & Cappelli, 1992, p. 2). While funding for management and leadership training is increasing (72% of United States companies, with 100 or more employees, sent managers to leadership training in 1995 [Leadership, 1996, p. 100]), employees' access to job-related skills training is decreasing. The result is a scrambling by mature as well as first-time workers to find, and finance, the training they need to advance within one profession or switch to another (Zemsky & Oedel, 1995, p.3).

At-risk populations.

This additional training to remain or become employable is a particular necessity for those youth who are at-risk². Within the "Forgotten Half," there exists pockets of individuals who must struggle against great odds to become educated, employed, and self-sufficient. These youth include: those in foster care or who have run away from home, those with disabilities, rural youth, and the "truly disadvantaged," who live in pockets of poverty in our central cities. These youth pass out of an educational system more interested in graduation rates than literacy rates. These youth often find themselves in correctional facilities and/or treatment centers. These youth self-identify as "lacking the necessary skills to gain and maintain employment " (Success Prep, 1994); they are in multiple senses, at-risk. The Clinton Administration with their goal of "empowering all American workers with the skills they need to prosper in today's challenging economy" face a daunting task as many workers lack the basic skills needed to prosper in today's economy (What's working, 1995, p. i).

Socializing Employees

While employment routes and job skill expectations have changed, the need for workplace socialization has not, especially for today's youth. According to Helgesen, Changes in the makeup of our society, and in the nature of work itself, have made the assimilation of people from wildly various backgrounds into a common culture

² Various scholars use different terms to represent hard-to-employ, unemployed, or unemployable populations. The "hard to employ" or "hard-core unemployed" of the 1970s have diversified in 1990s employment lingo. According to Powers (1994), Jencks (1989) labels out-of-school/out-of-work individuals "idle;" Welch (1990) describes these individuals as "inactive;" and Tienda and Stier (1991) use the term "shiftless" to describe those who are not working and are unwilling to work for various reasons. Powers (1994) opts to use the terms "inactive" or "idle" interchangeably while arguing that the preferred terms might be "disengaged" or "disconnected." This author chooses to use the term "at-risk" as those youth who self-identify as lacking the necessary skills to gain and maintain employment place themselves at-risk of economic failure and social disenfranchisement while risking the economic and social well being of our organizations and our nation.

a major concern for many organizations. Assimilation was once a task left to the public schools; today, it increasingly occurs in the workplace. (1995, p. 93)

The future success of any company is largely dependent upon its ability to attract and retain good employees (Jones, 1984); yet as many as 50-60% of all new hires leave their jobs within the first seven months (Leibowitz, Scholssberg, & Shore, 1991). Organizations must find ways to recruit and retain workers. Kabachnick asserts that "the rate at which employees come and go could be reduced significantly if more employers evaluated prospective workers for their ability to 'fit into' an organization" (in Tucker, 1996, p. 1-M). In other words, closer examination of the organizational entry experience of newcomers could illuminate the process and suggest strategies by which to improve the socialization process. This information could be especially relevant for at-risk youth who tend to fill high turnover, service-oriented positions.

Conclusion

To summarize, assimilation is inherently a communication issue (Bullis, 1993, p. 10); an issue that can impact whether employees gain employment and whether employers are able to attract and retain quality employees. Unfortunately, many at-risk youth lack (basic, organizational) communication skills. While surveys of employers (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989, 1995; First findings, 1994) document the necessity for interpersonal, oral, and written communication skills, these communication skills, according to employment training programs' self-evaluations (Laabs, 1994; Success Prep, 1994), are often the ones most lacking in at-risk youth.

As these at-risk youths may have inadequate communication skills (e.g., impression management, interviewing, nonverbal communication, conflict resolution), their process of socialization may be affected, but in an indeterminate manner. One could speculate that poor communication skills lead to an inability to seek information and build work relationships which prompts a premature departure (i.e., turnover). On the other hand,

poor communication skills or lack of prior work experiences may not provide youth with many expectations; therefore, they more readily accept the organizational practices espoused through organizational presentations or by interviewers, teachers, friends, other employees, and the media as accurately characterizing what "work is all about" (i.e., more easily socialized while never developing individualized roles).

The answers are not clear because despite the fact that half of the population enters the job market directly from high school, socialization scholars have chosen to ignore the process by which these individuals experience socialization. Additionally, very few socialization studies have adopted an insider's perspective or meaning-centered approach in their research. Therefore, it is through an emic examination of youth's experiences that I attempt to answer the overarching question, "What is the nature of the newcomer at-risk youths' experience during organizational socialization?" Suspending *a priori* assumptions concerning the nature of the newcomer experience, this study will explore previous experiences that form workplace perceptions, the phenomena that comprise the organizational experiences, and reactions to organizational entry incidents.

The research question and related items will be answered after a review of current socialization theories, methods, and studies. Specifically, chapter two will review the range of theories, models, perspectives, and methodological approaches, while noting the lack of study of at-risk youth especially from an emic perspective. It is argued that at-risk youth need to be studied within an assimilation framework while recognizing both the need for an ethnomethodological approach and a longitudinal design. Chapter three describes the participation by the various narrators, outlines the goals and nature of the program from which the volunteer narrators were sought, and delineates the methods of analysis employed. Chapter four profiles the narrators and summarizes the results via three taxonomies. Chapter five offers a discussion, draws conclusions, delineates limitations, and proposes areas for future research.

Chapter Two Review of Literature

Although the process by which one is acculturated or socialized into a particular organization traces its historical roots to the 1940s (Halone, 1996, p. 6), research didn't begin in earnest until the late 1970s. Organizational socialization has been studied via communication, management, psychological, and sociological perspectives. This variety of scholars have utilized a multiplicity of theoretical and methodological bases and approaches while studying numerous populations. A review of the socialization theories, research methods, and study populations reveals a lack of socialization studies involving at-risk youth, especially from an interpretive stance. This chapter will review the range of theories, models, perspectives, and methodological approaches, noting the lack of study of at-risk youth especially from an emic, ethnomethodological perspective, while addressing the current deficiency of longitudinal, interpretive socialization studies featuring at-risk youth.

Organizational Socialization Theories

As neither an assimilation theory of at-risk youth nor 'one' grand theory of organizational assimilation exist, scholars have borrowed from various theoretical groundings. The theories provide grounding for studies that range in emphasis from a socialization to individualization perspective.

While representing a variety of theoretical vantage points, "most socialization research is rooted in uncertainty reduction theory and information processing theories" (Bullis, 1993, p. 15). Uncertainty reduction theory (Bailey, 1995; Cunconan, Halone, & Lane, 1995; Kramer, 1989, 1993b; Migerney, Rubin, & Gorden, 1994; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993; Teboul, 1994) and learning theory (Ashford & Black,

1993; Bauer & Green, 1994; Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992; Teboul, 1993) are utilized to explain the process and methods by which information is provided, accessed, or suppressed so as to reduce uncertainty about the rules of the organization and the job. "Socialization, from this view, could be reconstructed as a process of suppressing a variety of 'others'" (Bullis, 1993, p. 15). In other words, organizations strive to reduce uncertainty by sharing information so as to create a unified vision of the organization, to include (in)appropriate attitudes and behaviors. Individualization is not encouraged or developed.

As a unified view of organizations is generally not, if ever, achieved, other theories are utilized to explain the discrepancies (Kramer, 1995) or violations of expectations (Myers, 1994). Despite organizational attempts to unify organizational experiences, organizational newcomers experience various forms of "surprise" (Louis, 1980). These "surprises" may be explained as discrepancies or violations of expectations. Both discrepancy and expectancy violation theories acknowledge that individuals do not enter organizations as blank slates or "*tabula rasa*." As organizational newcomers have experienced some degree of primary and secondary socialization, they bring with them expectations as to what work or the organization may be like. When organizational realities do not match expectations, discrepancies and violations of expectations occur.

Focus on the individuals' perspectives is further reflected in symbolic interactionism (Brown, 1985; Forward & Scheerhorn, 1993; Jones, 1983a; Reichers, 1987; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Waung, 1995), social constructionist (Smith & Turner, 1995), and feminist (e.g., postmodernist-feminist [Fine, 1991; Fine, Johnson, & Ryan, 1990] or feminist standpoint [Bullis, 1993, 1994; Sloan, 1995]) theories. Feminist scholars advocate the adopting of the "others'" perspectives, oftentimes emphasizing individualization over socialization (Bullis, 1993; Fine, Johnson & Ryan, 1990; Sloan, 1995). Drawing upon the work of numerous scholars (e.g., Louis, 1980,

1990; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Reichers, 1987; Stohl, 1986), Bullis (1993) encourages communication scholars to explore individuals' perspectives, accounts, and strategies as they individualize their roles and climates. The focus on the individual perspective is especially important as the "cultures of gender and race give unique perspectives on the organizing experience" (Fine, Johnson, & Ryan, 1990, p. 317).

Socialization scholars have adopted a variety of theoretical foundations, theories which range in emphasis from a socialization (e.g., Uncertainty Reduction Theory) to an individualization orientation (e.g., Feminist Standpoint Theory). Other socialization scholars, such as Jones (1983a) and Bullis (1993), advocate an interactionist perspective where interaction between the socialization and individualization processes are explored. Social exchange theories (Cox, 1997; Jones, 1983b; Kramer, 1989, 1993a) and role theory as exemplified in Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) socialization research (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Fairhurst, 1993; Fairhurst & Chandler, 1989; Kramer, 1994; Major, Kozlowski, Chao, & Gardner, 1995) illustrate variations of the interactionist perspective in socialization research.

While multiple theories are available upon which to ground socialization research, their applicability and generalizability may be limited as they were developed using specific, professional populations (e.g., business graduates, graduate students, teaching assistants). To date, socialization theories' applicability to at-risk youth populations remains untested; questions remain concerning the applicability of socialization theories to the process and methods of socialization experienced by the at-risk youth.

Organizational Socialization Models

In addition to theories, socialization scholars have relied upon models to explain the process(es) of socialization. In essence, as scholars could not predict or explain socialization behaviors, they attempted to describe socialization activities via models; models tested using similar, professional populations (e.g., graduate teaching assistants,