

WELCOME ABOARD: AN EXPLORATION OF THE IMPACT OF
STRUCTURED SOCIALIZATION ON NEWCOMER
PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT,
ENGAGEMENT AND IDENTIFICATION

by

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DEDICATION

Para mis queridos padres, con amor.

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ABSTRACT

The following study aimed to identify whether redesigning an unstructured onboarding program to a more structured program can strengthen new employee socialization and achieve desired outcomes such as perceived organizational support, engagement and organizational identification. Online questionnaires were sent to two groups of new employees: one who experienced an unstructured onboarding program and another who experienced a structured program. Results showed that as individuals' socialization increases, their perceived organizational support, identification, and engagement increased. In addition, individuals who experienced structured onboarding reported greater socialization, perceived organizational support, identity, and engagement compared to individuals who experienced an unstructured onboarding program. This study adds to communication scholarship by demonstrating that employee socialization and specified outcomes vary between two different socialization strategies. Practical implications lie in assisting organizations with establishing effective socialization tactics based on organizational and individual needs, and also strengthening communication opportunities between newcomers and current organizational members.

Keywords: socialization, organizational communication, structured socialization, engagement, perceived organizational support, organizational identification

I. Introduction

Individuals experience many organizational transitions during the course of a career. According to the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), more than 25% of the U.S. population goes through some type of career transition each year. In Fortune 500 companies, 500,000 managers take on new roles on a yearly basis (Forbes, 2014). Despite its prevalence, the experience of entering a new workplace constitutes one of the most significant and stressful organizational transitions of an individual's career (Kramer, 2010; Louis, 1980). How the organization handles this transition—through an effective onboarding process and socialization tactics—can have significant and long-lasting effects on new employees (Allen, 2006; Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Feldman, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Unfortunately, many transitions are not successful. Half of all hourly workers leave new jobs in the first four months, and half of senior hires fail within 18 months (SHRM, 2010). Furthermore, only 30% of U.S. employees feel engaged at work (Attridge, 2009). Thus, there is a clear need to evaluate onboarding programs to retain employees and meet newcomers' needs.

One way to strengthen employee engagement is through a robust new employee orientation program, which can help new hires become “socialized” to the organization and adjust to the relational and task aspects of their jobs so they can quickly become productive and acclimated organizational members (Louis, 1980). Entering an organization is a communicative process where newcomers receive and interpret messages provided by the organization and key organizational members (e.g., hiring managers, supervisors and work unit cohorts) to adapt to their new environment in the hopes of becoming well-adjusted and productive insiders (Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein & Gardner, 1994; Dailey, 2016; Hart, 2012; Morrison, 2002; Perrot et al., 2014). Organizations may adjust this communicative

process through various methods of socializing new employees (Chao et al., 1994; Feldman, 1976; Jones, 1986; Kramer, 2010; Morrison, 1993; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979); some employ structured onboarding methods with organized context, content and social aspects (Chao et al., 1994; Feldman, 1976; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Myers & Oetzel, 2003; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), while others provide unstructured methods, with passive and informal tactics (Hart & Miller, 2005; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Newcomers often take a proactive role in the socialization process, too (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993). Importantly, the *way* in which organizations implement these socialization tactics and design onboarding messages impact newcomers' entry experiences and tenure in the organization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Hart & Miller, 2005; Louis, 1980; Stohl, 1986). As such, it is important to understand how socialization tactics, and the messages therein, provided by organizations can affect desired outcomes.

An unstructured onboarding program, with muddled communication and ineffective socialization tactics that fail to tie to organizational goals, can lead to misinterpretation of tasks, hinder interpersonal workplace relationships, diminish employee well-being, and in worse case scenarios, can negatively impact business outcomes and productivity leading to increased turnover rates (Feldman, 1976; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Morrison, 1993; Perrot, Bauer, Abonneau, Campoy, Erdogan, & Liden, 2014; Walker, 2013). A poignant example of the latter is the estimation that disengaged employees cost U.S. companies between \$250 and \$350 billion per year (Attridge, 2009). A solid, structured onboarding program, therefore, is an indicator of organizational financial performance and employee retention.

Socialization scholars have extensively researched organizational entry, with a specific focus on exploring appropriate socialization strategies to acclimate newcomers (Chao et al., 1994; Hart & Miller, 2005; Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010; Louis, 1980; Van

Maanen & Schein, 1979). Poignantly, communication scholars have risen to the challenge to provide a better understanding of the role communication plays during the employee life cycle (Dailey, 2016; Hart, 2012; Jablin, 1982). Communication plays a vital role in the construct of socialization because it is *through* communication that newcomers can learn their new roles, performance expectations and other important organizational information. Seasoned key incumbents also play an important social role during the entry period due to the numerous messages about the environment, norms and interpersonal nuances they emit to the new employees. Newcomers, in turn, translate these messages and evaluate the information against their expectations and experiences with prior employers (Dailey, 2016).

Previous research has established the significance of proactive onboarding encompassing structured socialization tactics to foster employee acclimation (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Feldman, 1976; Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). However, further socialization research is needed to encourage deeper valuations of employee perceptions of their onboarding experiences and how these experiences afforded through communication, may ultimately affect newcomer behaviors. For instance, what type of onboarding programs make employees feel more “at home,” identified with, and connected to their new employer? Can redesigning an unstructured onboarding program foster more opportunities for communication between key internal members and newcomers? Could there be a relationship between socialization and underexplored desired outcomes, like perceived organizational support?

To fill these gaps in literature, the following study seeks to discern if redesigning an unstructured onboarding program to a more comprehensive program with structured socialization tactics at a large Southern University in the United States, can positively impact variables underexplored in past scholarship, such as perceived organizational support,

engagement, and organizational identification. Further, this study hopes to determine if a new structured onboarding process carries more communication opportunities to positively influence newcomers and help them adjust during their significant transition period.

II. Review of Literature

The previous chapter provided a brief overview of the purpose of the current study. This chapter reviews relevant literature related to the communicative process of organizational socialization, the importance of the initial phases of the entry period, the differences between unstructured and structured socialization tactics and explains socialization content and tactics. The chapter also explores perceived organizational support, engagement and identification and the communication aspects inherent therein. Following the review of literature, a rationale proposes two hypotheses.

Organizational Socialization

One of the most important ways organizations can improve the effectiveness of their talent management systems is through the strategic use of organizational socialization, practically known in the Human Resources Management (HRM) world as onboarding. Scholars refer to the process of bringing new employees on board to a new organization as assimilation and socialization. According to Jablin (2001), assimilation is the process by which individuals join, participate in and leave organizations and also reflects the collaborative acceptance of newcomers into their new work setting (Myers & Oetzel, 2003). Organizational socialization, a component within assimilation, is a persuasive process by which an organization attempts to influence individuals through persuasive messages and activities to adapt and meet its needs (Jablin 2001; Kramer, 2010); a process in which newcomers learn to recognize the value of their expectations, organizational culture and required knowledge to assume their role confidently and participate as active members resulting in role clarity (Louis, 1980; Morrison, 2002; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). From a communication standpoint, a major goal of socialization is to familiarize newcomers with the organizational functions, mission, values, work expectations and internal relationships as a

whole, along with the appropriate behaviors and performance standards within specific hiring departments (Hart, 2012; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Newcomers use the information they receive to either covertly or overtly navigate their new role, negotiate adjustments to their duties and determine the best ways to interact with their supervisor and work unit cohorts (Hart, 2012).

Onboarding, therefore, is an essential communicative process that helps new hires adjust to the relational and performance aspects of their new roles quickly and smoothly (Perrot et al., 2014; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; SHRM, 2010). Hart (2012) affirms that communication is essential to organizational socialization efforts due to the extant information provided to the newcomer. It is during this process of learning that newcomers transition from organizational outsiders to become effective organizational insiders by acquiring the necessary knowledge provided by the organization to meet behavioral expectations (Chao et al., 1994; Morrison, 2002; Perrot et al., 2014). While onboarding tactics vary between organizations, the period of transition known as organizational entry (Jablin, 2001), is a common experience among new employees. Scholars describe the socialization process as a life cycle with sequential stages, including pre-entry and entry stages, which are key for onboarding success (Feldman, 1976; Kramer, 2010; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

The importance of the initial stages of the employee life cycle. Feldman's (1976) Contingency Theory on socialization provides a framework which encapsulates distinct stages of socialization (i.e., anticipatory, accommodation, and role management), the activities individuals engage in within these stages, and the desired individual and organizational outcomes. The scholar posited that following a period of observation, newcomers attempt to become active members by learning tasks, defining their roles, and

determining evaluation criteria (Feldman, 1976). The potential outcomes of socialization Feldman (1976) observed were motivation, job involvement, and job satisfaction.

By the same token, Jablin (2001) also identified distinct stages of socialization and distinguished the entry phase as key for employees to learn the organizational culture. Similarly, Kramer (2010) reinforced the most common phases identified during the employee life cycle: a) anticipatory socialization or pre-entry stage (e.g., the time between when the applicant accepts the letter of employment until the moment he or she actually arrives on the first day of employment); b) entry or encounter stage (e.g., the new member initially participates in the organization); c) metamorphosis stage (e.g., the newcomer is an active, established member and learns to manage his or her roles), followed by the; d) exit stage (e.g., an inevitable transition for all members, who either voluntarily or involuntarily leave the organization). These scholars established that both pre-entry and entry phases are vital to the successful adjustment of the newcomer to the organization (Jablin, 2001; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). It is during these stages of inception that newcomers become familiarized with norms, internal culture and task information. Newcomers also learn to test the waters of organizational interpersonal relationships and integrate with desired social circles (e.g., committees, volunteer groups, etc.) that align with their personalities (Dailey, 2016).

In essence, the life cycle begins during the interview process, where the employee forms assumptions about the organization and builds expectations. Because new employees are in an increased state of awareness due to their anticipation, they are more prone to absorb information during the early stages of employment, such as in pre-entry and entry (Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As such, the period of entry is the most appropriate time to help new employees acquire the necessary knowledge, attitudes,

and behaviors to become effective insiders (Allen, 2006; Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Feldman, 1976; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The entry phase also serves as an opportunity for newcomers to better manage uncertainty about their roles, performance, organizational norms and culture, and how to relate to other members by actively seeking information to create a comfortable level of predictability (Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Kramer, 2010; Louis, 1980). Newcomers need assistance in interpreting their workplace settings and culture. It is during this period of initial transition that new hires expect to receive and interpret organizational messages through multiple channels and various internal key players. Therefore, how efficiently these messages are communicated during socialization may affect the new incumbent's professional success and tenure (Chao et al., 1994; Hart, 2012).

Far too often, however, newcomers experience disappointment after a few days on the job due to unsatisfactory organizational entry experiences (Louis, 1980) and dissonance due to unmet expectations originally set during the pre-entry phase (e.g., interview process). Upon arrival, newcomers experience uncertainty, and in some cases even unwelcomed surprise, about their duties, procedures, norms and the general culture of the organization (Louis, 1980). Thus, it is during these initial entry phases that organizational leaders, peers, and supervisors have an opportunity to focus efforts on apropos socialization initiatives, tactics and purposeful messages to foster desired outcomes, due to buffer the unfamiliar territory most newcomers enter and meet their expectations (Louis, 1980).

Distinguishing structured vs. unstructured socialization. The earlier new hires feel welcome, are prepared for their jobs and become insiders, the sooner they can begin to successfully contribute to the organization's mission and goals (SHRM, 2010). As noted above, the onboarding process helps connect new hires with important organizational

information, which can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Organizations can use either an unstructured, individualized socialization approach or a *structured*, institutionalized socialization approach to help establish role clarity, reduce uncertainty, and foster relationships among employees in the hopes of helping them reach the metamorphosis stage (Hart & Miller, 2005; Jones, 1986; Kramer, 2010; SHRM, 2010; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

The information communicated to newcomers during socialization is critical to employee indoctrination and adjustment (Hart, 2012; Jablin, 1987; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Thus, structured socialization initiatives focus on thorough organizational efforts to acquaint and develop newcomers by introducing organized context, content and social aspects to facilitate sense making by providing the necessary relevant and timely information newcomers need (Feldman, 1976; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). According to Stohl (1986), onboarding content generally falls into two main categories: role information (e.g., messages that describe the behaviors necessary to perform a job efficiently), and cultural information (e.g. messages describing the meaning behind organizational traditions and social norms). Further, communication between newcomers and current organizational members is crucial to new employee adjustment (Hart, 2012; Jablin, 1982; Sias, 2005). Jablin (1987) and Hart (2012) emphasize the relational component of onboarding, indicating that interactions between newcomers and seasoned organizational members are dependent on socialization initiatives, which facilitates message exchange. Thus, within structured onboarding, current internal members (e.g., supervisors and work unit cohorts) play a proactive and predetermined role in helping the newcomer acclimate to the organization. Because newcomers rely on many sources for socialization information, it

is in the organization's best interest to focus on the best way to structure message content and message sources during the onboarding process (Hart, 2012).

Through the years, scholars have identified various structured socialization tactics tied to positive outcomes, such as commitment, adaptability, role clarity, perceptions of fit, and career effectiveness (Chao et al., 1994; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Kramer & Miller, 2014; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Based on Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) socialization model, structured tactics are a) collective (e.g., newcomers experience common entry activities versus isolated tactics); b) formal (e.g., specifically tailored activities and materials); c) sequential (e.g., distinct progressive steps toward becoming an active organizational member); d) fixed (e.g., a specific timeframe to acquire an active organizational role); e) serial (e.g., access to other occupants of the new incumbent's role) and; f) divested (e.g., affirmation of new hire characteristics). Structured tactics that are collective, formal, sequential, fixed and serial versus unstructured tactics (e.g., individual, informal, random, variable and disjunctive) lead to institutional processes, which in turn lead to higher levels of newcomer commitment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hart & Miller, 2005; Jones, 1986; Kramer & Miller, 2014; Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

Further exploring structured socialization, Chao et al. (1994) found that specific onboarding content was related to indicators of career effectiveness and identified the best structure that helps employees learn tasks and increase organizational awareness. Through a longitudinal study of almost 600 full-time employees, the scholars used factor analysis to identify how individuals learn their particular organizational role, and whether employee learning during socialization related to any job changes within the same organization. Chao and colleagues (1994) assessed newcomers' knowledge of certain aspects of their new organizations and identified six socialization dimensions, including a) performance

proficiency (e.g., how to perform the tasks necessary for the job); b) politics (e.g., sense of formal and informal work relationships plus organizational power structures); c) language (e.g., technical language versus organizational jargon); d) people (e.g., knowledge of coworkers' acceptance); e) organizational goals and values (e.g., an understanding of the organizational norms) and; f) history (e.g., knowledge of the organizational history and traditions) as indicators of newcomer organizational socialization. The scholars found that employees who are well socialized in their new roles, due to the exposure to the aforementioned dimensions, experience greater satisfaction, tend to be more involved in their careers and are more adaptable. Additionally, Chao et al. (1994) found that if newcomers have awareness and understanding in the six content areas, they are more socialized and therefore have quicker career advancement possibilities. In this way, the scholars contributed to a dimensional view of socialization.

Klein and Weaver (2000) surveyed employees who attended new employee orientation that contained Chao and colleagues' (1994) six content dimensions of socialization, and found that newcomers who attended orientation were more socialized on certain dimensions than new employees who did not attend orientation. The authors also delineated specific content to be included in structured orientation programs, including: a) introduction and overview; b) a multimedia welcome from the organization's president; c) a game to familiarize new employees with the organization's traditions and language; d) a multimedia presentation covering the mission, history, and structure of the organization, and; e) a discussion of the organization's basic workplace principles. The scholars affirm that providing content in these areas helps integrate newcomers by increasing understanding about the organization's culture, workplace norms and principles.

Further expanding on the aforementioned socialization studies, Myers and Oetzel (2003) established socialization as an interactive process that impacts socialization. Recognizing communicative dimensions of socialization, the scholars posited that socialization is achieved through six dimensions, including a) familiarity with others (e.g., getting to know coworkers, making friends, feeling comfortable, etc.); b) acculturation (e.g., learning and accepting the organization's culture and how to get things done); c) recognition (e.g., being recognized as valuable and feeling one's work is important to the organization); d) involvement (e.g., seeking ways to contribute to the organization); e) job competency (e.g., knowing how to do one's job and doing it well), and; f) role negotiation (e.g., trying to compromise and influence the expectations of the organization versus that of the newcomer).

An unstructured approach to onboarding, on the other hand, leaves new employees to rely largely on proactively seeking information (Morrison, 1993), because organizations do not formally provide newcomer orientation and seasoned incumbents do not play a proactive role during the onboarding process. Informal initiations, for instance, are not often recognized by top management and therefore are a passive way of bringing new hires onto a new team (Hart & Miller, 2005). Because newcomers are left to negotiate and define their individual roles themselves in an unstructured context, research demonstrates that this socialization approach gives newcomers greater opportunity for role innovation, leading to more autonomous work (Gailliard et al., 2010; Kramer, 2010; Myers & Oetzel, 2003; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Hart and Miller (2005) quantitatively researched how both structured and unstructured socialization contexts relate to message content received during socialization along with how messages mediate the impact of socialization contexts on role ambiguity and role orientation. Through a longitudinal survey, the scholars collected data

from 85 full-time new managers of a hotel corporation. The scholars found that both unstructured and structured entry contexts work in a concurrent manner, in that even though unstructured interactions are not officially sanctioned or controlled by upper management, new hires will undoubtedly encounter stories by seasoned incumbents which serve as a sensemaking resource to either promote or hinder perceptions of the organization (Chao et al., 1997; Louis, 1980).

The inclusion of organizational rhetoric through stories, for instance, is an important role communication plays in the sense-making process (Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Kramer, 2010; Stephens & Dailey, 2012). Stohl (1986) posits that newcomers are more inclined to retain work information if these messages relate to their new work setting. Memorable messages, in the form of stories, facilitate sense making and serve as a guide to appropriate and accepted behavior within the organizational environment (Stohl, 1986). Organizational narratives are useful during unstructured socialization, especially given the predominant role seasoned incumbents play in communicating organizational information to newcomers face-to-face (Chao et al., 1994; Davis, 2005; Fisher, 1984; Kramer, 2010).

Through narratives, current incumbents can provide reasons for organizational events, and even promote or inhibit engagement in the workplace (Brown, 1985). Moreover, stories assist newcomers in making sense of the organization by providing information about the norms, expectations, rules and requirements. These messages are typically provided by peers and supervisors in face-to-face encounters (Kramer, 2010). Newcomers can also try to interpret their new work environment by deciphering organizational symbols they informally observe in workplace traditions, interaction styles and mediated communications (Davis, 2005).

Hart and Miller's (2005) contribution lies in recognizing that informal interactions, stories, social activities coupled with the six dimensions established by Chao et al., (1994) indeed complement one another in the socialization process. However, unstructured socialization implies less communication between seasoned and new employees (e.g., fewer instructions, onboarding materials and opportunities for interaction), leading to role ambiguity. The lack of role clarity inherent in an unstructured approach can lead to an increase in organizational uncertainty (Perrot et al., 2014). As such, while some unstructured socialization may encourage greater autonomy and role innovation (Gailliard et al., 2010; Kramer, 2010; Myers & Oetzel, 2003; Waldeck & Myers, 2007), these efforts should be coupled with structured tactics to provide more integral activities that encourage learning tasks, approaching colleagues for guidance and acquiring organizational knowledge.

The aforementioned studies identify characteristics of a structured and unstructured socialization process (e.g., repeated exposure to the organization's language, people, history etc.) and potential outcomes of the newcomer's experience (e.g., role clarity, job competency and involvement). It stands to reason then, that the establishment of a structured onboarding program, with the content dimensions denoted above, would aid in the positive socialization and acclimation of new employees and help them become functional organizational members. Quality onboarding materials and messages during the entry period should be designed with these content dimensions and tailored to meet organizational goals.

Important outcomes of structured socialization. Several scholars have researched structured content of orientation programs to hasten integration (Chao et al., 1994; Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). These formal socialization programs provide organizations with more control over the dissemination of information (Davis, 2005). Among the outcomes structured socialization may impact,

research has demonstrated that structured tactics tie to greater role orientation, lower levels of anxiety and uncertainty (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Gailliard, Myers, & Seibold, 2010; Jones, 1986; Kramer, 2010; Perrot et al., 2014). Further, Hart (2012) found that new incumbents have a better understanding of organizational information (e.g., role expectations) when these messages are designed and transmitted purposefully and with quality.

In their meta-analysis, Perrot et al. (2014) demonstrated that structured socialization tactics tend to result in greater role clarity, which reduces new employees' organizational uncertainty. In other words, a structured socialization process positively influences role orientation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Furthermore, structured tactics can aid newcomers' search for information about the organization and provide greater opportunities to connect with other organizational members, which helps reduce anxiety during the entry process (Jones, 1986; Kramer, 2010; Perrot et al., 2014).

Structured tactics have also been found to promote interaction, positive job attitudes, and role clarity more rapidly than unstructured or individualized tactics (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Kramer, 2010; Perrot et al., 2014; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The sooner newcomers encounter interactive socialization tactics during the initial phase of their employment experience, the more likely these procedures will influence their attitudes and behaviors (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Kramer (2010), Perrot et al., (2014) and Riordan, Weatherly, Vandenberg, and Self (2001) highlighted the advantages of structured socialization tactics as a means to learn about the new organization and evaluate whether the position meets expectations or aligns with individual values. The scholars assert that the more exposed newcomers are to structured and interactive activities, the greater their opportunities to acquire necessary task information about their role, along with the history, politics, and goals. Further, employees may have a greater chance at

fostering supportive interpersonal relationships with peers and supervisors, which may also influence new employee perceptions of their work being esteemed in higher regard (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, & Sowa, 1986).

Structured onboarding also seems to better delineate seasoned incumbents' (e.g., supervisors and work unit cohorts) proactive roles regarding the onboarding of their new team member (Hart, 2012; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Jablin, 1987). In other words, newcomers have a better opportunity to acquire task and social information from various sources and channels within the organization when onboarding is purposeful. Seasoned incumbents are key information agents (Comer, 1991), and each member is likely to emphasize a specific content area dependent on their organizational hierarchy (Hart, 2012). For instance, messages received by supervisors during the entry period predominantly involve job instructions (Katz, 1980) and task related information (Hart, 2012). Coworkers, on the other hand, communicate messages focused on incorporating newcomers into the work and social groups (Sias, 2005). Peers are an important part of the onboarding process, because they are the most available source of information during the entry phase (Hart, 2012; Kramer, 2010). Sias (2005) determined that peer relationships are positively related to the quality of information received from cohorts, which positively relates to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Further, Kramer (2010) and Hart (2012) argue that providing onboarding information through different sources significantly contributes to newcomer uncertainty management. In sum, structured socialization tactics may facilitate better and more frequent access between new hires and important organizational information. Through communication, newcomers may better understand the environment by assigning meaning to organizational messages, culture, artifacts, etc. (Kramer, 2010). A general understanding of

an organization's culture is indicative of successful transition from newcomer to full member.

The information communicated to employees during the socialization process can also impact performance, job satisfaction, commitment, retention and turnover, according to Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo and Tucker (2007). Moreover, creating a structured onboarding program, with apropos tactics, can also facilitate opportunities for communicative interactions to take place. These interactions should reflect the organization's culture, language and social norms and help the new incumbent acquire knowledge about how to navigate organizational politics to reduce any initial anxiety (Chao et al., 1994; Feldman, 1979; Hart, 2012; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Kramer, 2010; Myers and Oetzel, 2003; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). In recent years, socialization studies have researched communication variables such as message content, message sources, and information seeking, indicating the valuable role communication plays in the socialization process (Hart, 2012, Morrison, 2002; Stohl, 1986; Waldeck & Myers, 2008). But despite an abundance of research that has explored and identified various outcomes of structured and unstructured socialization efforts, scholars still lack an understanding of other unexplored important outcomes. As such, further exploration is warranted to decipher other outcomes tied to structured socialization that also promote interpersonal interactions.

Underexplored Outcomes of Organizational Socialization

Perceived organizational support. Perceived organizational support is an exchange relationship between employees and their organization, which affects their attitudes and behaviors and can even influence feelings of commitment and performance (Dasgupta, Suar, & Singh, 2012; Perrot et al., 2014; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Employees experience perceived organizational support when they feel that the organization

values their contributions and cares about their wellbeing (Dasgupta et al., 2012; Perrot et al., 2014). In other words, employees will exhibit more positive behaviors toward the organization when they feel supported by it (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Antecedents of perceived organization support include perceptions of fairness, supervisor support, favorable rewards, favorable job conditions and social interaction (Hayton, Carnabuci, and Eisenberger, 2012; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Rooted in Social Exchange Theory, which explains how individuals consider the pros and cons of starting, maintaining and ending social relationships (Kramer & Miller, 2014), perceived organizational support implies that employees weigh the costs and benefits of staying or leaving the new organization by comparing other employment alternatives if they perceive negative valuation of their efforts (Thibault & Kelley, 1959). Similarly, Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) states that in order to meet socio-emotional needs and assess the benefits of increased work effort, employees form a general perception concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. If the perception is positive, employees will experience a natural impulse to help the organization reach its objectives.

Perceived organizational support differs slightly from other scholarship on the study of supportive communication, conceptualized as “verbal (and nonverbal) behaviors intended to provide or seek help” (Burlison & MacGeorge, 2002, p. 384). Rather than focusing on supportive relationships and exchanges between people, perceived organizational support denotes a relationship between an employee and his or her organization. With that said, Hayton and colleagues (2012) proposed a social embeddedness approach to perceived organizational support. Hayton et al. (2012) note that employees exchange supportive resources and perceive organizational support when they have stable and long-term social

relationships. The scholars contend that two forms of social support are expressed in organizations: instrumental support (e.g., providing resources that help employees accomplish tasks, such as advice, easy access to organizational information, navigation of organizational politics, procurement of equipment and supplies) and expressive support (e.g., messages of approval, recognition and praise which are valuable for fulfilling emotional needs). Suitably, onboarding provides an appropriate starting point for supervisors and work unit peers to communicate supportive messages relative to newcomers' arrival (e.g., "Welcome", "I am confident your skills will help us reach our departmental goals", "My door is always open if you need anything or have any questions"). These initial exchanges new employees experience can potentially increase the likelihood that he or she will request more information about organizational information and resources (Hayton et al., 2012). Further, these initial exchanges prompt social interactions, the development of trust, and responsiveness to socio-emotional needs, which can foster a positive work environment and promote employee well-being (Hayton et al., 2012).

Although an abundance of psychology and management research has explored perceived organizational support (Hayton et al., 2012; Neves & Eisenberger, 2012), few studies have studied the variable in the context of socialization or organizational communication. In one psychological study, Perrot et al. (2014) used a time-lagged design to survey apprentices on their first months of learning a trade. The scholars found that perceptions of support significantly influences the association between socialization tactics and acquiring knowledge about the position and group norms. However, perceived organizational support was negatively related to role innovation (Perrot et al., 2014).

Aside from further examining perceived organizational support from a socialization context, an opportunity exists to expand research of this construct to a communication

standpoint. During onboarding, organizations expose employees to a myriad of organizational information, which may sometimes lead to mixed messages and miscommunication if the tactics are unstructured. As described earlier, structured onboarding programs provide greater opportunity for communication between new and seasoned employees, which can potentially impact perceptions of support and subsequent behaviors (e.g., timeliness and work quality). Individuals actively interpret their new work environment by drawing from a range of sources, particularly key organizational players, such as their supervisors (Neves & Eisenberger, 2012). Communication between supervisors and new incumbents during the onboarding process is vital, because organizational members must decipher how best to interact with one another (Liden, Bauer, & Erdogan, 2004). Becoming familiarized with both newcomer and supervisor communication styles is important in order to foster a welcoming, dynamic and supportive environment (Dailey, 2016; Dasgupta et al., 2012; Men 2014). Dasgupta et al. (2012) posited that subordinates who perceive support through their managers' communication style experience communication satisfaction. Interpersonal interaction through face-to-face communication, for example, is a vital means to facilitate accurate task interpretation, foster perceptions of availability and willingness to engage with one another (Men, 2014; Reed, Goolsby, & Johnston, 2014). Thus, an employee may experience satisfaction with supervisory and peer communication through task clarification and fostering of interpersonal relationships, all of which take place during structured socialization.

Work unit peers also are potential positive supportive influences for newcomers because they provide access to resources and social acceptance, which represent forms of favorable and supportive treatment and may lead to positive views of the organization (Hayton et al., 2012). Consequently, positive perceptions of organizations can be fostered

through consistent and productive communication, and these perceptions create and maintain mutual trusting employment relationships over time (Beebe, Beebe & Redmond, 2011). Conversely, if these communication opportunities are low, it may lead to a disconnected workforce and an absence of trusting relationships (Steele & Plenty, 2014). Thus, perceived organizational support is inherently a communication variable as it denotes an exchange relationship between new employees and seasoned organizational members, where they both gain knowledge about one another, the organization's culture and outside experiences. For instance, perceptions of support from an organization or colleague can be facilitated through communication. Also, messages exchanged with newcomers allow current employees to make sense or better prepare for the new team member (Gallagher & Sias, 2009; Hart & Miller, 2005; Kramer, 2010). As such, without a structured process of communication between newcomers and current incumbents inherent in structured socialization, perceived organizational support can suffer because communication helps newcomers manage relationships, understand performance expectations, and feel supported (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Hence, the communicative opportunities that a structured onboarding program offers should positively affect perceived organizational support.

As employees seek to accomplish work related goals and satisfy relational needs (Madlock, 2008), interpersonal interactions between new employees and their immediate supervisors and peers are an essential part of onboarding. For example, Men (2014) identified interpersonal communication as a valued method of information exchange because it allows supervisors greater opportunity to engage in discussions, which provide employees a sense of empowerment and appreciation. As such, demonstrating organizational support through communication is vital to the onboarding process. Thus, it is imperative that onboarding procedures be evaluated to allow more communication opportunities

between newcomers and organizational members to cultivate and maintain workplace relationships and foster perceptions of support and engagement.

Engagement. Engagement is a positive state of well-being and enthusiasm felt by employees toward the organization, influencing their effort to exceed performance standards (Kahn, 1990; Madlock, 2008). This positive state is obtained if employees feel intellectually, emotionally, and socially connected to the organization (Soane, Truss, Alfes, Shantz, Rees, & Gatenby, 2012). Expressly, engagement is being mentally present on the task at hand, having the willingness to exude effort in completing the task, and feeling a positive connection toward the organization and its members. Accordingly, engagement encompasses intellectual, affective, and social components (Madlock, 2008; Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013).

Engagement has also been described as active employee work involvement, signifying that incumbents harbor positive emotions toward their work if the duties are perceived as meaningful and encouraging for future growth and development (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). For instance, employees who positively connect with their place of employment may become more motivated and remain with that organization to help them reach performance goals. Engaged employees are also more prone to voice their satisfaction with others (e.g., “I feel really good about my job and my contributions”) and promote the organization in a positive way (Mishra et al., 2014; SHRM, 2010). As such, levels of work engagement are highest are when employees are involved with, enthusiastic and passionate about their work (Attridge, 2009). Kahn (1990) also established that employees experience high levels of engagement when they feel positive emotions toward their work, which they find to be meaningful and manageable.

Rees et al. (2013) empirically explored the relationships between voice and engagement, trust in senior management and the employee-supervisor relationship. The

scholars found that employee perceptions of voice behavior from their supervisors or work group have a direct and indirect impact on the levels of employee engagement, which is mediated by employee trust in management. In the same way, examining the relationship between internal communication and employee engagement, Mishra et al.'s (2014) study revealed that organizational executives are recognizing the importance of internal communication for building trust and a culture of transparency with employees, which can directly impact employees' engagement toward the organization and their role. Through an exploratory study using semi-structured interviews, Mishra et al. (2014) sought to explore the role corporate public relations managers play with regard to internal communication, with a special emphasis on face-to-face interactions. The scholars affirmed that internal communication promotes employee engagement, which in turn, is demonstrative of how absorbed incumbents are in their roles.

Similar to the communicative perspective used to analyze perceived organizational support, opportunities for employees to become more engaged and perpetuate this cognitive, affective and social state can be achieved through communication within structured onboarding programs. For instance, more instances of interaction between newcomers and current work unit cohorts can help them become better acquainted and find similarities in values, work ethics and personal interests. Because research has indicated how engagement is impacted by communication between employees, it stands to reason that more structured onboarding programs would promote higher levels of newcomer engagement. In addition to strengthening perceived organizational support and employee engagement, a structured onboarding program may even encourage increased levels of organizational identification (Stephens & Dailey, 2012; Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

Organizational identification. Organizational identification is the internalization of organizational attributes and feelings of interconnectedness, which subsequently impacts attitudes and behaviors (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Prati, McMillan-Capehart, Karriker, 2009), and is the alignment of organizational and individual values (Cheney, 1983). The process of organizational identification is often understood through Sensemaking Theory (Weick, 1995), as it involves retrospectively assigning meaning to experiences and creating an identity through interpretations of common experiences (Kramer & Miller, 2014; Pratt, 2000). In essence, organizational identification reflects how well organizational members share a sense of similarity with one another and with the organization itself regarding common interests, values, and goals (Cheney, 1983). Thus, people regard themselves in terms of organizational membership (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott, 2007).

Organizational identification can also be understood via Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals have personal and social identities which overlap and are influenced and regulated by organizations (Kramer & Miller, 2014; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). As employees progress through the stages of socialization, they may encounter different organizational entities which may help develop different levels of identification with multiple groups (i.e., wellness groups, diversity committees, and academic programs) (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kramer & Miller, 2014; Scott, 2007). Scott (2007) suggests that identity and identification are communicative constructs, because it is through communication and interpersonal interactions that individuals assess their surroundings, discern and evaluate social groups and process their states of belonging. Consequently, socialization tactics may impact identification (Ashforth & Male, 1989; Bullis & Bach, 1989). As such, onboarding strategies that focus on promoting interpersonal interaction (e.g., orientation, supervisory training, mentor programs, etc.) may help in developing identification, which in turn may

influence newcomer adjustment (e.g., “The organization’s successes are my successes”) and decrease intentions to leave (Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Stephens & Dailey, 2012).

A noteworthy amount of scholarship exists exploring the relationship between onboarding and identification (Ashforth and Saks, 1996; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Stephens & Dailey, 2012). For example, through a pre-test, post-test survey design, Stephens and Dailey (2012) explored the varying degrees of organizational identification prior to and after new employee orientation, and how newcomers’ interactions with their new organization before their first day may impact their identification. The scholars established that orientation, as an organizational activity, is *key* for developing identity and that new employees, in turn, also are more prone to role negotiation and sensemaking through multiple interactions with the hiring organization and seasoned incumbents (Stephens and Dailey, 2012), contributing to a situated, fluid view of organizational identification that evolves through different aspects of employees’ entry period of the life cycle.

As Stephens and Dailey (2012) note, socialization is contextual and therefore identity fluctuates and changes over time because of the reinforcement of messages through employee interactions. To this end, Bullis and Bach (1989) used turning point analysis to study individuals’ socialization experiences over eight months. The scholars identified several turning points in newcomer experiences (e.g., receiving informal and formal recognition, jumping internal and formal hurdles, and dealing with one’s self-doubt). Each turning point was related differently to organizational identification, with “recognition” being the experience which most likely led to immediate increases in identification. Nurturing identity in a structured onboarding program, therefore, is important as it enhances newcomer adjustment and decreases intentions to leave the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1995;

Stephens & Dailey, 2012). As such, organizational identification has a behavioral supportive component: the more strongly newcomers identify with the organization, the more inclined they will be to articulate support and defend organizational practices (Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

Taken together, these studies highlight the importance of positive and welcoming messages during onboarding interactions with the organization and its current members. Importantly, communication serves as the crux of these activities (e.g., orientation, messages, and interactions), and possibly may only be found and cultivated to a greater extent in a structured onboarding process. Structured socialization tactics may facilitate better access to important organizational information, both for newcomers and current incumbents, and may even provide opportunities for leadership to be more visible. Through communication, newcomers may better understand the environment by assigning meaning to organizational messages (Kramer, 2010). Thus, a general understanding of an organization's culture is indicative of successful transition from newcomer to full member (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Potentially, a structured onboarding program may positively affect newcomers' organizational identification given the greater communicative opportunities embedded in the socialization tactics, similar to perceived organizational support and engagement.

Rationale

Thus far, research has demonstrated that if structured socialization tactics are provided consistently and in an accessible way, new employees will acquire necessary knowledge to reduce uncertainty, gain role clarity, achieve job satisfaction and commitment, and reduce intentions to quit (Feldman, 1976; Jablin & Putnam, 2001; Kramer, 2010; Saks, 2006; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). However, several gaps remain regarding the comparison

of communication afforded through unstructured versus structured socialization tactics and how these strategies affect perceived organizational support, engagement and organizational identification. At least three issues motivate the current study.

First, little to no research has compared how unstructured and structured onboarding programs within the same institution can impact perceived organizational support, engagement and organizational identification. As noted in the literature review, structured socialization tactics offer richer opportunities for interpersonal interactions through communication for newcomers to gain more organizational knowledge. Previous studies have explored socialization tactics across various organizations and disparate members (e.g., Chao et al., 1994; Hart & Miller, 2005; Perrot et al., 2014; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Prior research has also compared newcomers' socialized levels fostered through specific content between voluntary orientation attendance and non-attendance (Klein & Weaver, 2000). The current study, however, compares two samples of new employees who experience two different socialization strategies, and therefore two different initial communication experiences, in the same organization.

Second, there is little focus examining precisely how socialization tactics influence perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification. Prior research has demonstrated that structured socialization strategies are associated with less role conflict, role ambiguity, and job satisfaction; whereas unstructured strategies are associated with more stress, innovation and intention to turnover. However, we understand less about how the communicative aspects of structured vs. unstructured tactics may lead to other outcomes. By shedding light on these aspects, this study provides organizational practitioners communicative best practices to help them design successful onboarding programs that meet their needs.

Third, this study also helps bridge the gap between the exploration of onboarding through multiple disciplines, including psychology, management, and organizational communication. As discussed above, each variable has an inherent communicational aspect because it is through communication that individuals make sense of their organizational environment, perceive support, entertain feelings of engagement and identification. As such, this study hopes to supplement interdisciplinary scholarship by exploring the specific tactics and messages within unstructured and structured onboarding programs and their potential impact on predetermined outcomes.

In sum, this study approaches socialization scholarship through a communicative lens with the aim of identifying if structured tactics positively influence perceived organizational support, engagement and identification. Determining relationships between these variables is important because it can provide more opportunities for organizational training and development involving onboarding initiatives. Equipped with these research findings, organizational executives can foster newcomer perceptions of support, engagement, and identification.

In order to evaluate if redesigned onboarding programs can strengthen organizational socialization and achieve desired outcomes (i.e., perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification), I propose the following hypotheses:

H1: As individuals' socialization increases, perceived organizational support, engagement, and organizational identification will increase.

H2: Individuals who experience a structured onboarding program will report greater socialization, perceived organizational support, engagement, and organizational identification compared to individuals who experience an unstructured onboarding program.

III. Method

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the methods and procedures used to test the hypotheses posed in the previous section. In order to compare structured and unstructured socialization, data were collected in two phases. The current chapter presents information about the site of research, and differences between the unstructured and structured onboarding programs. Further, this chapter provides information regarding the procedure, participants, questionnaire distribution, how the variables were measured and how the data were analyzed according to both phases.

Site

The study takes place at a large Southern University in the United States. This emerging research institution is home to more than 37,500 students, 1,200 faculty and over 2,000 staff of varying fields and titles. During the past few years, the University has undergone tremendous growth, and as such started to look for ways to enhance its processes and procedures. One aspect under review is employee recruitment and retention, including efforts to attract and retain newcomers. Specifically, the University aimed to change the way staff employees are introduced and acclimated to their new environment by redesigning an unstructured orientation session to a structured onboarding program.

Obsolescent onboarding: An imbalanced, unstructured experience. For almost three decades, newcomers' entry experiences consisted solely of a generic welcome letter and a two-part orientation session. The only face-to-face encounters newcomers had were during the interview process with the hiring manager, and then interactions with human resources representatives on their first day and second day of orientation. The non-descript letters employees received offered congratulations on being selected for hire, invited them to attend

the first part of the orientation session on their first day, and explained what legal documents were required to bring to orientation.

The first part of orientation consisted of a half-day session, from 8:00 a.m. to noon, where a human resources representative gave a brief introduction to employees and oversaw newcomers completing insurance and parking paperwork for an hour. Next, employees were lectured on retirement options, employee assistance programs, workers' compensation and staff handbook, followed by further instructions on insurance, time and leave administration. Afterward, employees reported to their hiring department.

After thirty days of employment, new hires were invited to attend the second part of orientation, from 8:00 a.m. to noon where they received, via lecture, an overview of the policies and procedures, a map of campus and were greeted by representatives of various departments (e.g., information technology, human resources, university police, library and risk management), who provided 10 minute presentations on their respective areas and the resources and services available to employees. The session ended with an overview of campus resources and were given a University mug as a souvenir.

While orientation sessions are one of the most popular ways of creating and strengthening identification (Stephens & Dailey, 2012), as noted in previous sections, socialization tactics vary between structured and unstructured, informal and formal approaches. The University identified that the method of orientation described above was unbalanced and leaned more toward an unstructured approach due to the limited content (e.g., content solely focused on policies, insurance and norms) and limited networking opportunities between newcomer, supervisor and peer interactions. Case in point, this two-part orientation session represented the only official organizational activity to welcome new hires to their work environment. The orientation sessions also lacked the content and

dimensions explicated by Chao et al. (1994) and Klein and Weaver (2000). Hiring departments were not provided instructions nor incentives to help acclimate their new hires through other activities. Newcomers were also not provided more direction toward other resources to help guide them through work procedures, peer contacts and different locations of the University. As a consequence, newcomers had to search for this information independently, which made the second part of orientation obsolete because by that point in time, newcomers had already acquired the presented information (e.g., campus maps.) As such, the university employed a “sink or swim” strategy, where new employees were left to struggle to determine and interpret expectations, norms, workplace relationships and culture. This unstructured approach was also dysfunctional because the organizational culture is not permissive of role innovation, which is generally a positive outcome of unstructured socialization tactics. Further, this form of onboarding was not functional due to the limited interaction time between newcomers and organizational members, which decreased opportunities for acquiring information through stories. Thus, an opportunity was identified to improve the entry practices by creating a new onboarding program.

Renewed onboarding: A balanced, structured experience. The University realized that onboarding was a collaborative effort between human resources and hiring departments, as both play important roles in developing positive first impressions and perceptions of the organization and also help employees adjust to their new roles. Aligning a new strategy with structured socialization dimensions of Chao et al., (1994) and Klein and Weaver (2000), onboarding was redesigned with new content, a tour, a welcome lunch, an official new employee website, checklists for new employees and their supervisors to guide and assess information, and a resource manual to guide newcomers through the entry period (e.g., new employees’ first day, first, third, sixth and ninth month, leading up to a year). The

content of onboarding materials and channels were better defined to include messages about goals and values of the organization, language, and performance proficiency along with messages about history, people, and politics.

Before employees' first day, hiring managers are now encouraged to contact the employee by phone to provide a congratulatory and supportive "welcome to the team," message, and answer any questions regarding the forthcoming acceptance letter, what to expect on their first day, and where to find further information on the new website. In the meantime, the hiring manager ensures the workspace of the new hire (e.g., desk, chair, hardware etc.) is ready for the newcomers' first day. Supervisors are also encouraged to let the current team know who was selected for hire, provide a brief overview of the new hire's experience, day of arrival and to whom the new hire's will report.

On the first day of employment, new employees are greeted at the door of the building by two human resources representatives who hold signs welcoming the employee and help them find the orientation room. The orientation session was redesigned to include content specified by Chao et al. (1994) and Klein and Weaver (2000), including a game to help newcomers interact with each other and to familiarize them with the organization's traditions, a multimedia welcome by current employees and leadership, and a view of the organizational structure, goals and values. Further, it was also designed to provide employees with a greater opportunity to interact with each other and with the presenters. Accordingly, the new agenda begins with an introductory video by the University's President. Next, employees play a history game, where they work together to place important events of the university in chronological order on a banner. The banner serves as a storytelling artifact, where both newcomers and presenters can engage in the narrative of the University.

Following the activity, employees are shown the University website to get a firmer handle on

where to access certain information. Afterward, employees have time to fill out any pending paperwork, are informed about the campus map, the organizational perks, as well as insurance and retirement information. Finally, employees participate in another cultural activity, are informed of the time and leave administration, dining resources and are provided with University paraphernalia (e.g., t-shirts, mugs and stationery). Hiring managers are encouraged to arrive at the orientation session to greet their new hires and bring them to their new office where they can introduce the newcomer to the rest of the team.

The second part of the orientation program, which occurs the second Friday of each month, takes newcomers to the football stadium where they are provided breakfast. During this session, employees are shown another video featuring the University's most distinguished and historical alumnus, along with an overview of the strategic plan and values. Afterward, newcomers are lectured on discrimination, harassment and other policies, and provided information on available educational opportunities (e.g., academic courses and training and development workshops.) Another video is shown featuring seasoned peers from across campus who reflect on what it is like to work for the University, thereby setting more realistic expectations. Finally, all new employees are invited to participate in an hour-long bus tour through campus, as well as a boat ride on the river that flows through the University's campus. The tour focuses on messages about the history and traditions of the institution, while the boat ride explains the importance of the river to the city, and how it is an important identity of the University.

The session ends with lunch provided at the football complex. These tactics also include content specified by Chao et al. (1994) and Klein and Weaver (2000) in that it not only provides new employees with a reinforcement of the University's mission and structure but provides a dominant physical exposure to the organization's history, landmarks and

people. Further, it allows newcomers a greater opportunity to interact with one another and with seasoned organizational members.

Another aspect of the onboarding program is a new website which includes a welcome message, tools and resources (e.g., campus maps, benefits at a glance, checklists, etc.) to help employees navigate through their new surroundings. The site also includes information on the history and traditions of the university along with cultural entertainment activities, various community service opportunities and internal diversity committees. Over the past six month, the new website has been viewed approximately 880 times.

The revamped onboarding program also encourages hiring managers to provide mentorship to newcomers, either personally or by assigning a positive team member to help them during their first year of employment and share the particulars on the “in’s and out’s” of the University. Such links between newcomers, supervisors and peers in the form of buddy systems can help the newcomer receive skills training and increase opportunities in which information and perceptions can be positively exchanged (Louis, 1980).

As such, the new onboarding initiative steers away from the obsolescent two-time sensory overload, where employees were inundated with information in an unstructured manner, to a more structured socialization program, which tactics now include performance proficiency, politics, language, people, organizational goals, values and history, along with more opportunities for communication (e.g., information networks) (Bauer, 2010; Chao et al., 1994; Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000). As messages mediate the influence of socialization context for newcomer socialization (Hart & Miller, 2005), more attention was paid to organizational rhetoric during the orientation session and corresponding materials, including consolidating the University’s narrative, branding, introductory messages and the president’s message. The increased interpersonal workplace connectivity available under the

new program also allows for more incumbent stories and groups interactions to take place, which has the potential to reinforce messages about internal lingo, how best to approach certain tasks, who to turn to for help etc., which also provides clarity regarding expectations and reduces uncertainty (Hart & Miller, 2005).

Procedure

This research follows a two-part study design in order to compare unstructured onboarding outcomes with the current redesigned (structured) onboarding outcomes after implementation. A quantitative methodological approach is used to maximize the generalizability of the findings.

Accordingly, the first phase of the study involved electronically distributing a questionnaire to the purposive sample of employees who experienced the organization's unstructured onboarding program. New full-time, benefits-eligible staff hired between June 1, 2014 and June 1, 2015 were purposively surveyed. Participants were contacted through e-mail and provided an online questionnaire to measure current perceptions of their socialization, perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification.

In phase two, the same questionnaire was distributed to new full-time, benefits eligible staff who experienced the new, structured onboarding program between March 1, 2016 and September 1, 2016. (The difference in timeframes between the first and second phase was due to a delay in program implementation.) Again, participants were contacted through e-mail and provided an online questionnaire to measure current perceptions of their socialization, perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification.

Employees were made aware of the voluntary nature of their participation, as well as their rights and confidentiality protection. Incentives were not provided. Thusly,

participation signified voluntary consent, as the institutional review board (IRB) granted exemption due to the below minimal risk of the study.

Participants

Participants represented a sample of new full-time, benefits-eligible staff employees working up to one year in a large Southern University in the United States. Approximately 350 new employees join this particular University each year. An estimated 170 employees were hired during the first half of 2016.

In phase 1, 125 employees who experienced the unstructured onboarding program participated in the study, representing a 42% response rate (see Table 1). New employee participation was evenly distributed regarding their tenure, with a majority experiencing the initial (27%) and tail-end (26%) of their first year of employment. Most participants in this phase (66%, $N = 117$) were female, and 37% were between the ages of 25 and 34. Other ranges in respondents' age were as follows: 10% reported being 24 years old or younger; 18% were between 35 and 44; 25% fell between 45 and 54; and 7% reported being 55 years old or above. Respondents reported working in a variety of employment categories, including entry-level (30%), mid-level non-management (48%), first-line supervisor (7%), middle-management (10%), and upper management (2%). About 26% of respondents reported being employed in the institution for less than three months, while 23% and 22% reported being employed between four and six months and seven and nine months, respectively. Finally, 24% reported being part of the University between ten and twelve months.

Phase 2 of the study explored new incumbents who experienced the renewed and structured onboarding program. The launch of the program experienced delays, which resulted in a reduction of the new hire time frame from one year to six months.

Consequently, participants represented a sample of 169 new, full-time, benefits-eligible staff working up to six months in the University (see Table 1). Seventy-four new hires completed the questionnaire, representing a response rate of 44%. Most participants in this phase (55%, $N = 74$) were female, and 39% were between the ages of 25 and 34. Other ranges in respondents' age were as follows: 11% reported being 24 years old or younger; 12% were between 35 and 44; 23% fell between 45 and 54; and 11% reported being 55 years old or above. Respondents reported working in a variety of employment categories, including entry-level (38%), mid-level non-management (38%), first-line supervisor (10%), and middle-management (10%). Fifty-eight percent of respondents reported being employed in the institution for less than three months, while 31% reported being employed between four and six months.

Measures

The following measures and demographic information were utilized in both questionnaires distributed to participants in both phases 1 and 2. Appendix A lists all items in each measure.

Organizational socialization. Perceptions of organizational socialization were measured by the extended version of Myers and Oetzel's (2003) Organizational Assimilation Index. The modified version includes a 24-item scale reflecting the seven dimensions of socialization developed by Gailliard et al. (2010). Responses were solicited using a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Examples of sample items include "I consider my co-workers friends," "I understand the standards of this organization," and "I volunteer for duties that benefit the organization." The scale has previously reported internal reliability (alpha .94; Gailliard et al., 2010). Cronbach's alpha for the current study

was $\alpha = .90$ ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.51$) and $\alpha = .89$ ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .48$) for phases 1 and 2, respectively; see Table 2.

Perceived organizational support. Perceived organizational support was measured by the modified eight-item Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) adapted from the original 36-item instrument by Eisenberger et al. (1986). The shortened version reflects high loading items and is recommended for use by Rhoades and Eisenberger (2002) as the original scale has high reliability and the shortened version respects the two facets of perceived organizational support definition. Responses were evaluated through a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Examples of sample items include “My organization really cares about my well-being,” and “Help is available from my organization when I have a problem.” The scale has previously reported internal reliability (alpha .92; Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Cronbach’s alpha obtained for the current study was $\alpha = .91$ ($M = 3.42$, $SD = 0.62$) and $\alpha = .84$ ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .54$) for phases 1 and 2, respectively; see Table 2.

Engagement. Employee engagement was measured through the previously established 9-item Intellectual, Social, Affective (ISA) engagement scale developed by Soane et al. (2012). Responses were evaluated through a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate positive levels of absorption (e.g., “I focus hard on my work”), enthusiasm (e.g., “I feel energetic about my work”), and relational satisfaction (e.g., “I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues”). The scale previously reported high internal reliability (alpha .92). The obtained Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was $\alpha = .87$ ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.47$) and $\alpha = .92$ ($M = 4.20$, $SD = .59$) for phases 1 and 2, respectively; see Table 2.

Organizational identification. Organizational identification was assessed through the six-item scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). Responses were evaluated through a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Examples of sample items include “When I talk about this University, I usually say ‘we’ rather than ‘they,’” and “When someone criticizes the University, it feels like a personal insult.” The scale has previously reported internal reliability (alpha .82; Gailliard et al., 2010). Cronbach’s alpha for the current study was $\alpha = .87$ ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.59$) and $\alpha = .87$ ($M = 3.73$, $SD = .69$) for phases 1 and 2, respectively; see Table 2.

Demographic information. In addition to the variables under study, basic demographic information, including sex, age, employment rank, and tenure were also collected.

IV. Results

This chapter reviews the results obtained from respondents of both phases for the study's hypotheses. Correlations and *t*-tests for both samples are reported in Table 3.

Hypothesis 1 posited that as individuals' socialization increases, their perceived organizational support, engagement, and organizational identification also increase. To assess H1 for the first phase of the study, Pearson correlation tests were conducted to examine the association between socialization and the dependent variables (see Table 3). The results indicated that socialization was positively, moderately and significantly related to perceived organizational support, $r(117) = .68, p < .01$. Socialization was also positively, moderately and significantly related to engagement, $r(117) = .63, p < .01$. Finally, a positive relationship was also found between socialization and identification, $r(117) = .46, p < .01$, which indicated a fair but significant relationship. Together, these results suggest that as socialization increases, people's perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification all increase as well.

To assess H1 for the second phase of the study, additional Pearson correlation tests were conducted to evaluate the association between socialization and the dependent variables for newcomers who experienced the structured onboarding program (see Table 3). Results indicated that socialization positively related to perceived organizational support, $r(74) = .58, p < .01$, which represents a fair, but significant and positive relationship. Socialization was also positively related to engagement, $r(74) = .69, p < .01$, which represents a moderate and significant relationship. Finally, a positive relationship was found between socialization and identification, $r(74) = .60, p < .01$, which indicates a moderate but significant relationship. Together, these results affirm that as socialization increases, people's perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification increase as well. Thus, H1

was supported. In addition, Fisher's tests were conducted to look for significant differences in the strength of the associations between phase 1 and phase 2. The relationship between identification and engagement was significantly higher for phase 2 than phase 1 ($p < 0.05$).

Hypothesis 2 posed structured onboarding would create higher levels of socialization and increase perceived organizational support, identity, and engagement than unstructured onboarding. To test H2, an independent t -test was conducted to determine the differences between socialization levels of participants who experienced unstructured versus structured onboarding. Participants who received structured onboarding were significantly more socialized ($M = 3.90, SD = 0.48$) than those who experienced the unstructured program ($M = 3.76, SD = 0.51$), $t(189) = 2.72, p < 0.01$. Similarly, participants who experienced a structured onboarding program reported a significantly higher level of perceived organizational support ($M = 3.90, SD = 0.54$) than those who experienced an unstructured program ($M = 3.40, SD = 0.62$), $t(189) = 5.69, p < 0.01$. Significantly higher levels of engagement were also reported for newcomers who experienced a structured program ($M = 4.20, SD = 0.59$) versus those who went through an unstructured program ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.47$), $t(189) = 6.50, p < 0.01$. Finally, new employees who went through a structured program reported greater levels of identification ($M = 3.70, SD = 0.69$) versus those who experienced an unstructured program ($M = 3.33, SD = 0.58$), $t(189) = 4.28, p < 0.01$. As such, H2 was supported as there were noteworthy differences between socialization and dependent variables between employees who experienced unstructured and structured socialization tactics.

V. Discussion

This chapter provides interpretation and analysis of the results reported above based on both hypotheses. Later, the chapter offers implications for theory and practice, followed by the limitations of the study. Finally, insight on future directions regarding organizational socialization and communication are provided and closes with the thesis conclusion.

Summary of Results

The goal of this study was to empirically explore and compare the differences between unstructured (phase 1) and structured (phase 2) socialization tactics within the context of the communicative process of employee onboarding and its impact on underexplored outcomes: perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification. Phase 1 of the study examined the unstructured onboarding of the University, which involved minimal interaction between newcomers and seasoned organizational members, coupled with an unbalanced two-part orientation session overwhelmed with instructional information and administrative burden. Phase 2 of the study explored structured onboarding, which was a revamp of the previous method of socialization to include more opportunities for interaction between newcomers and organizational members, additional content (e.g., norms, history, organizational values and culture, tour, etc.), and a new website and checklists for both new hires and their teams.

The first hypothesis proposed that as individuals' socialization increases, perceived organizational support, engagement and identification do so, as well. The hypothesis was examined for newcomers who experienced unstructured and structured onboarding. Results of both tests indicated that a positive relationship exists between socialization and the dependent variables. In phase 1 of the study, results showed that for newcomers who

experienced unstructured socialization, a strong correlation between socialization and perceived organizational support existed, followed by a moderate correlation between socialization and engagement. The relationship between socialization and organizational identification was positive yet only fairly significant.

Newcomers who had a structured entry experience in the second phase reported a high positive correlation between socialization and engagement, followed by a moderate correlation between socialization and identification. The relationship between socialization and perceived organization support was fairly significant. Therefore, the hypothesis was supported. In comparing differences between relationships from both phases, the correlation between engagement and organizational identification was significantly stronger in phase 2 than in phase 1.

Previous research has hinted that a structured program bolsters interpersonal interaction between newcomers and their new peers. Although insignificant, the marginal decrease in perceived organizational support between the first and second sample, could be explained by the time factor as newcomers in the second phase of the study were only measured in their first six months of employment instead of a full year. This time difference could illustrate that perceived organizational support is fostered through time, and is not as immediate as engagement or identification (Hayton et al., 2012), which suggests that new employees are receptive and attentive to efforts and messages provided by their supervisors, peers and the organization during the onboarding process.

The second hypothesis posed that structured onboarding would result in higher socialization levels and therefore, increases in dependent variables. Results of the *t*-test comparison revealed that individuals who experienced a structured onboarding program reported greater socialization, perceived organizational support, engagement and

identification than the newcomers who experienced an unstructured onboarding program. These findings indicate that newcomers who experienced structured socialization tactics were significantly more socialized and reported greater perceptions of support, felt more engaged and identified to a greater extent with their new organization. As such, the hypothesis was supported. Most likely, these results indicate that revamping the communicative onboarding process to include structured socialization tactics may have granted greater opportunities for new incumbents to access organizational knowledge, ask current organizational members for guidance and become more familiarized with their new working environment.

The differences in variance of perceived organizational support between unstructured and structured onboarding was only minimally raised. Variance in engagement decreased slightly in a structured program, while the variance in identification represented the greatest increase between both onboarding programs. These results suggest that altering socialization tactics in an onboarding program from unstructured to structured significantly strengthened the relationship between engagement and identification. The specific socialization tactics (e.g., orientation content, messages within the entry period, instances of interaction with new cohorts, etc.) definitely play a role in achieving predetermined desired outcomes. Indeed, participants reported higher levels of socialization upon experiencing a structured program. Interestingly, while perceived organizational support was positively and significantly correlated to socialization in phase 1, that relationship's strength decreased in variance (although not significantly) in a structured program, while the relationship between engagement and identification significantly increased. An explanation for the slight decrease in this association is that perceived organizational support is fostered over time, as

employees need a reasonable amount in order to learn their tasks and observe exactly how their performance is being valued.

Altogether, these results reveal palpable differences in socialization and dependent variables between unstructured and structured onboarding programs. Changing the dynamics of how newcomers are welcomed aboard a new organization inevitably impacts the content, channels and roles current member have in providing information. These changes in the communicative onboarding process have significant effects on desired outcomes. The findings illustrate positive and fair to moderate correlations between socialization and perceived organizational support, engagement and identification, respectively. Thus, this study corroborates theories, such as Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) and Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and also validates previous scholarship indicating that structured socialization leads to more desired outcomes (Chao et al., 1994; Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Consequently, this study has a number of theoretical and practical implications.

Implications for Theory

The study of socialization processes continues to interest scholars from multiple disciplines (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hart & Miller, 2005; Gaillard et al., 2010; Waldeck & Myers, 2007) and has become a fundamental part of organizational communication scholarship throughout the years (Kramer & Miller, 2014). This study makes several important contributions to the organizational socialization literature and extends communication research in four ways.

First, past research has demonstrated that structured socialization is associated with developing job competency, career advancement, fostering social networks, retention, role

clarity and positive job attitudes (Chao et al., 1994; Feldman, 1981; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Kramer & Miller, 2014; Morrison, 2002; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). The study builds on this body of literature by showing additional benefits of structured socialization tactics, including perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification. Not only does this research affirm a relationship between an individual's socialization and his or her perceived organizational support, engagement and identification, but also determines the strength of relationship between these variables. The determination of such relationships is important given the many benefits of the aforementioned desired outcomes, such as communication satisfaction, trust, manage cohort relationships, expectations and retention.

So far, only minimal empirical research has explored the notion that structured socialization is positively and strongly related to either the aforementioned dependent variables, or established a strength of associations between them. For instance, scholars have recognized the importance of orientation as a way to foster identification between new hires and their organization (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Cheney, 1983; Stephens & Dailey) because it is within this process of communication that newcomers learn organizational norms, goals, task requirements, social opportunities and culture (Jablin, 2001; Myers, 2005; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). This study shows that structured onboarding accounts for a high variance related to identification, shaped by the inclusion of specific content and messages (e.g., a comprehensive overview, welcome by top leadership, games, multimedia presentation) which corroborates Chao et al.'s (1994) and Klein and Weaver's (2000) multidimensional view of socialization tactics.

Further, the findings of this study also suggest that structured socialization affords greater communicative efforts between the organization and its newcomers (e.g., more

onboarding materials provided in various channels and sources and more social activities). Also, the way onboarding information is presented seems to lead to increased levels of engagement and identification. Consequently, socialization tactics that provide purposeful and more frequent opportunities for interaction contributes to expressions of support which may revitalize engagement and identification. Thus, one contribution of this study to communication scholarship is that it offers more confirming evidence that effective socialization experiences shaped by structured tactics significantly impacts desired outcomes. Because structured tactics offer more communication (e.g., onboarding printed and mediated materials, training and social interaction), this type of onboarding leads to greater perceived organizational support, engagement and identification.

Secondly, the study answers Hart & Miller's (2005) call to explore the relationship between structured and unstructured entry contexts by comparing the outcomes of two samples of newcomers who experienced different socialization tactics in the same work environment. Although past studies have followed new employees within their first few months on a job (e.g., Chao et al., 1994; Perrot et al., 2014) and compared unstructured and structured tactics across different organizations (e.g., Hart & Miller, 2005; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), this study is one of the first to explore and compare socialization tactics in the same organization. The opportunity to compare divergent tactics within the same organization allows for more robust results when comparing socialization tactics, since there are less extraneous variables. Different organizations have distinct mission statements and various ways of "how we do things," which convey equally different messages regarding organizational norms, values and member responsibilities which are shared, sustained and passed down to newcomers by its current organizational members (Louis, 1980). These differences make comparing socialization tactics across organizations difficult. However, all

newcomers in this study joined the organization with similar expectations regarding organizational culture, work climate and performance standards, which eliminates the chance for extraneous elements that could affect socialization, perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification. Thus, comparing several samples within the same institution allows for a more poignant analysis of results and theories.

Thirdly, by indicating a relationship between socialization and perceived organizational support, this study suggests the value of Organizational Support Theory (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002) to understanding socialization processes. Currently, scholars have used Uncertainty Management Theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975), Sensemaking (Louis 1980; Weick, 1995), Social Exchange Theory (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and Social Identity Theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) to guide studies of socialization. In addition to these theoretical frameworks, Organizational Support Theory might be a useful foundation to explain many of the variables and phenomena that occur during the communicative process of socialization. Indeed, recognition (e.g., being acknowledged as a valuable member to the organization and feeling like work efforts are noted and important to the organization) is an indicator of newcomers' socialization. So far, a meta-analysis of 73 studies found that low levels of perceived organizational support predicted increased job strain and anxiousness (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Thus, exploring socialization from the perspective of perceived organizational support may provide new insight on how socialization affects member adjustment, involvement, job satisfaction and intentions to leave.

Last but not least, this study adds to scholarship by bolstering the communicative aspects of perceived organizational support, engagement, and identification in the process of onboarding, complementing socialization research from sociological, psychological and

management lenses. The findings suggest that structured socialization tactics offer newcomers a richer opportunity to gain more organizational knowledge and interpersonal interactions through communication. Findings also affirm that structured socialization tactics provide greater content and involve more key players (e.g., hiring manager, supervisor and work unit members) during the newcomer's entry period. For instance, this study reaffirms that messages during the indoctrination period serve as a key element in newcomers' adaptation to their roles, ability to learn and understand what the expectations are regarding adjustment and advancement (Chao et al., 1994; Hart & Miller, 2005; Stohl, 1986). Further, prior research has established that unstructured socialization experiences denote a degree of chaos and disorganization during role learning, which leads to an increase in uncertainty among newcomers (Hart & Miller, 2005). Whereas these variables are often studied from a cognitive perspective (e.g., Perrot et al., 2014), this study shows how more communication via structured socialization influences behaviors and perceptions of organizational support, engagement, and identification, demonstrating their communicative properties. Recognizing the communicative properties of these desired outcomes is essential in shaping new incumbents' experiences and attitudes during the transition from outsider to insider.

In sum, this study notably contributes to socialization research by recognizing that structured onboarding, including stories, social activities and messages pertaining to history, performance proficiency, politics, people, language, goals and values are more strongly correlated to engagement and identification.

Implications for Practice

An increasing trend across organizational initiatives is leadership efforts geared toward improving onboarding programs for recruitment and retention, or other organizational goals, including engagement. As noted in the introduction, employee

engagement is not an issue limited to the United States, but rather is an issue on a global scale. In a survey conducted by Towers Perrin, which surveyed over 16 countries, about 24% of employees are disengaged and only 14% are considered to be highly engaged (Attridge, 2009). Attending to this variable is important, because engaged employees feel connected to their job, find purpose in their work, and strive to push the company forward; on the other hand, actively disengaged employees tend to vocalize and actively behave in a way detrimental to the institution, which includes attrition, inevitably costing the employer time and resources (Attridge, 2009). As such, the current study provides several practical contributions to employers regarding the format for effective orientation programs and the potential effects on newcomers. These contributions range from the program design aspects, to the noteworthy denotations of identification, engagement and perceived organizational support.

The current study increases our understanding of the differences between socialization levels fostered in unstructured and structured programs and how these differences may impact important organizational outcomes. Recognizing and acknowledging these differences between socialization tactics can establish a clearer understanding of what choices organizational leaders need to make in creating an onboarding program. As such, one of the main practical contributions is the approach toward designing an onboarding program.

An unstructured format of onboarding represents a “sink-or-swim,” “learn-on-your-own” philosophy that is no longer functional nor serves in the best interest to either newcomer or hiring institution because it limits the opportunity for insiders to share their experiences and better guide the newcomer. Additionally, unstructured programs are generally not coordinated by the organization and participation by upper management is

minimal (Chao, 1997; Hart & Miller, 2005). As such, rather than perpetuate an informal and passive formula for approaching onboarding programs, the study provides empirical support to claim that new employees are more engaged and feel more identified to their new environment upon experiencing a structured onboarding program. Hiring managers and onboarding coordinators have the opportunity to make the socialization period more effective if they understand the needs of the newcomer coupled with the needs of the organization. In other words, if one of the strategic goals is to bolster employee engagement and identification, then a more comprehensive and holistic program can help organizations to this end.

Research has established that orientation alters feelings of employee identification and familiarity about the organization as a whole (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Stephens & Dailey, 2012). The finding that structured programs increases identification is notable, as extensive research has demonstrated the many benefits stemming from identified employees, including enriching newcomer adjustment, citizenship behaviors, participation in activities, cooperation with group tasks and retention (Bartel, 2001; Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Stephens & Dailey, 2012). From a communication standpoint, newcomers who identify with their organizations are more open to persuasive efforts (Williams, 2008) included within onboarding materials (e.g., website, guidelines, checklists, pamphlets, customer service). In this way, new incumbents can become better familiarized and adapted to the organization's interests. Accordingly, onboarding messages may be rhetorically crafted to ensure newcomer "buy-in", after ascertaining organizational and newcomers' needs within the transition process from outsider to insider (Pribble, 1990).

Structured onboarding provides more information that is both procedural and welcoming to the newcomer regarding different aspects of the organization. Structured

socialization does a better job of unveiling rituals, guidelines, standards and helps better navigate the in's and out's of the new environment (Kramer & Miller, 2014) by including information regarding performance proficiency and expectations, politics, organizational language (e.g., jargon), values and history. As the findings from this study suggest, organizational information provided in a dynamic and interactive way, such as in the form of games, memorable messages (e.g., stories) and other activities (e.g., tours), aid in fostering various levels of identification because stories help newcomers make sense of their environment and find common interests within organizational customs, activities or committees (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott, 2007). Stories shared by insiders, for instance, assist in sensemaking, as current employees provide a wealth of organizational information and can promote and reinforce engagement (Hart & Miller, 2005). Scholars have established that interpersonal interaction facilitates task interpretation, nurtures perceptions of availability and willingness to communicate with one another (Men, 2014; Reed et al., 2014). As findings from the current study demonstrate, the more information gained via different communication channels (e.g., multimedia, face-to-face, tours) the stronger the associations between socialization, engagement and identification.

Organizational members, including hiring managers, supervisors and work unit members can influence these perceptions by providing meaningful and accessible information to newcomers. Accordingly, managers may be able to fuel strong and productive relationships more effectively by creating conditions that support a welcoming work environment, resulting in new employee perceptions that the organization values them (Reed et al., 2014). Mentor systems, for instance, in which insiders serve as a guides for newcomers, can be very beneficial in transmitting interpretations of the organizations and departmental functionalities. As such, internal communication professionals can play an active role in the

onboarding process by equipping hiring managers, supervisors and peers with effective face-to-face communication skills training to help achieve structured socialization tactics and desired socialization outcomes. Consequently, interpersonal relationships between peers, supervisors and other organizational members are an important part of the initial stages of the socialization process. Through these relationships, individuals acquire knowledge and resources for completing their jobs and develop social bonds that affect their desire to maintain their membership. Further, stories provided by organizational members supply newcomers with helpful information to perform and behave in organizationally sanctioned ways (Davis, 2005) and successfully integrate into their new work environment.

Practitioners tasked with evaluating the organizational landscape and tying long term goals (e.g., increased engagement) to onboarding strategies should also keep in mind that the more included seasoned employees are in the process of bringing newcomers effectively onboard their new work units, the more inclined they may be to provide information and increase both seasoned and newcomers' willingness to communicate. As such, the more inclusive the structured socialization process is of different key players (e.g., newcomer, hiring manager and peers), the better the chance of gaining knowledge of each other's perspective and needs. Having gone through the ropes, established incumbents may know what particular task information is needed for performance efficacy and what social information is desired to meet interpersonal needs and feelings of inclusion. As peers play an important social role for newcomers (Kramer & Miller, 2014) these initial interactions may foster perceived organizational support. Thus, HR practitioners and onboarding designers should invite these key players (e.g., hiring manager, supervisor and unit members) to be actively involved in the new hires' initial stages of the work life cycle.

One way of inviting the established current incumbents into a more structured onboarding process is to have the designers provide them with the established narrative of the University, similar checklists and instructions that are provided to newcomers to aid transparency in orientation content so that each department can begin at the same starting point and subsequently tailor organizational information particular to their goals and departmental needs. The inclusion of instructions and checklists are crucial to employee indoctrination and adjustment (Jablin, 2001, Hart & Miller, 2005; Saks & Ashforth, 1997). The content in these checklists include a range of information, such as: what employees need to know before their first day of employment (e.g., driving directions, office location, point of contact); what documents (e.g., social security number, forms of identification, banking information, etc.) to bring to the first session of orientation; what newcomers need to do and what they should know by their first day (e.g., login information, purchase of parking permits), week (e.g., familiarity with peers, understanding of duties and responsibilities, etc.), month (e.g., understanding of work expectations and social conduct, enrollment in health coverage and other benefits plans, etc.), three months (e.g., organizational and departmental structure, mission and goals, workplace etc.), and six months (e.g., performance review with supervisor) leading up to their first year of employment.

Further, organizational leaders can also share the content of what is to be covered in orientation with supervisors and work units so that they are better prepared to answer newcomers' questions. Aligning organizational messages and content in this way creates a space to discuss the orientation materials and share mutual experiences in a more structured manner. As members with insider knowledge, seasoned team members generally are aware of the time it takes to adjust to a new organization (Gallagher & Sias, 2009) and may empathize with the needs of the newcomer. Through a structured onboarding process,

communication between hiring managers, onboarding coordinators and peers can help the employee gain more accessibility to the organizational knowledge he or she requires to move through the different phases of socialization successfully.

In sum, the results of this study offer several tactical routes that organizational practitioners, including internal communication and organizational development designers, can take to enhance socialization techniques within onboarding programs. When designing structured programs, practitioners should a) consider what the strategic goals are for the institution (e.g., increase engagement), b) share the content with key players (e.g., supervisors and work unit members, c) provide training to supervisors on how to communicate effectively with their newcomer to inspire a supportive, trusting and mutually cooperative relationship.

Limitations

This study was not exempt from a few common limitations of organizational research. Four budding limitations are noted regarding the research process and findings. First, the research was subject to the trial and error of the development and implementation of the newly restructured onboarding program. In other words, the amount of control over the decisions of the design of the revamped program and adherence to implementation deadlines were not in the control of the researcher, which constrained the selection and arrangement of certain logistics of the tactics themselves (e.g., inclusivity of other departments in the orientation and implementation of mentor systems for all departments).

Secondly, the timeframes of data collection for both phases were not equivalent. Ideally, the aim of this study was to collect data from participants during their first year of employment, as evidenced in phase 1. However, due to a delay in implementation of the new structured program and final coordination between the ultimate participating departments,

phase 2 of the study only collected data from newcomers employed during their first six months, which resulted in a smaller pool of participants. As such, the results of the second survey may be inflated due to the recency effect (Ebbinghaus, 1913; Miller & Campbell, 1959) and social desirability effects (Ganster, Hennessey & Luthans, 1983) based on self-report biases. On the other hand, even though the pool was reduced, there was a higher participation rate compared to phase 1, which may be an indicator of workplace engagement.

Thirdly, the renewed onboarding program at the University had definite improvements and additions to become a more comprehensive way of socializing newcomers (e.g., the orientation sessions were restructured to include specific content and dimensions of Chao et al. (1994) and Klein and Weaver (2000), a new website, a tour and an invitation to managers and work teams to be more proactive in the onboarding of their newcomer). However, there is not a mechanism in place to check if supervisors and teams are actually providing more communication opportunities to newcomers for task and social information exchange. The results allege that newcomers and key players are following recommendations to communicate throughout the entry phase. For instance, supervisors are encouraged to arrive at the orientation session to greet their new hires, but it is not *mandatory*. Also, mentorship opportunities are not required for every department. In other words, to determine if indeed more communicative opportunities are afforded to newcomers during the revamped onboarding program, a control mechanism needs to be developed to measure for this improvement.

Lastly, the fair to moderate range of correlations found in both phase 1 and 2 among the socialization outcomes may restrict their discriminant validity. Consequently, further comparative studies are necessary to validate and further explore correlations and associations between the variables.

Future Directions

This study builds on previous socialization research by comparing two orientation approaches and also finds the existence of moderate correlations and notable variances between variables, which opens the door to several other avenues for researchers to expand on these results. The future directions discussed here include a) extending the focus of newcomer experiences to current key organizational players, b) using a qualitative design to decipher the types of messages exchanged during onboarding, c) including onboarding experiences of underrepresented work units and d) exploring the associations between these variables longitudinally.

First, future studies should broaden the scope through which socialization is analyzed by investigating the impacts of organizational entry on *current* incumbents. Additional studies should explore different dyad or triad relationships between onboarding key players in order to understand onboarding as an organization-wide phenomenon, not simply an event that affects the newcomer. For instance, Prati et al. (2009) address the need for future research to highlight how leadership provides support to newcomers during socialization. Gallagher and Sias (2009), on the other hand, established that both newcomers and seasoned employees experience uncertainty. Accordingly, it would be interesting to compare onboarding experiences from different group perspectives other than newcomers. The importance of understanding how different organizational players communicate during the onboarding process is vital toward the understanding of both newcomer and current employee adjustment. For example, how does structured socialization foster and strengthen feelings of support, engagement and identification in newcomers and seasoned employees, including supervisors and work unit peers? Do differences exist between these variables among the key players who experience structured versus unstructured socialization tactics?

Another focus could be to assess how unstructured and structured programs differ in their impact on seasoned employees' uncertainty reduction (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) and the different tactics key players use to decrease uncertainty. In other words, scholars should study the effects of unstructured versus structured onboarding on different employee relationships regarding their uncertainty and sensemaking tactics to identify if these key players differ in employing information-seeking tactics, immediacy or willingness to communicate. Analyzing different methods of uncertainty reduction within the types of onboarding program can help organizers anticipate questions and put together comprehensive orientations.

Taking these ideas a step further, future scholarship can also explore how structured onboarding affects willingness to communicate and trust among newcomers, supervisors and work unit members versus in unstructured programs. Trust, which can be built over time, can increase new employees' efforts to perform more efficiently on the job, and in some cases, can lead to career enhancement (Chao et al., 1994; Mishra et al., 2014). Mishra and colleagues (2014) found that employees enjoy working in an environment where they like and trust the people they work with. As such, a potential research questions can interpret if organizational members involved in onboarding differ in their willingness to communicate and levels of trust upon experiencing a structured onboarding programs versus an unstructured program. Additionally, as socialization focuses on organizational influences to the newcomer, it would behoove researchers to explore newcomer attempts to influence the organization. As such, individualization (Jablin, 1984) may be another variable necessary to include in future research in this area. For example, will newcomers experiencing a structured program be more inclined to change an aspect of their job to better suit their

needs? Gaining understanding of onboarding effects from different perspectives may provide further practical and theoretical insights on work group relationships and dynamics.

Second, future research should also supplement an empirical analysis with a qualitative research design to further explore the relationships between variables and decipher the types of messages exchanged between unstructured or structured onboarding programs. Inclusion of a qualitative perspective would allow for a broader perspective of communicative behaviors in relation to socialization and perceived organizational support, for instance. Although the present study empirically explored relationships between these variables, perhaps complementing what we now know with a qualitative lens can expand on new employee perspectives or experiences regarding a structured onboarding design. For example, interviewing participants about their interaction with the organization and how this may influence their perceived organizational support, identification and engagement would help gain a better understanding of the socialization processes and outcomes. Moreover, it is conceivable that a qualitative perspective can identify the types of stories and messages that increase support and build rapport along with the social realities that are constructed as a consequence. Social realities (e.g., work environments) constructed in social interaction likely vary between unstructured and structured onboarding programs. Because organizational members create social realities in their conversations with one another, it would be interesting to examine how newcomers socially construct their new environment and social network in structured onboarding programs.

Thirdly, using qualitative methods to study structured vs. unstructured socialization should also examine diverse samples of work units (e.g., work units that speak Spanish, or other languages) to better grasp how their experiences and perceptions are similar or dissimilar to the anglo speaking groups. As language plays an important role in socialization,

it would be interesting to explore how socialized levels and desired outcomes are affected if the dominant language of the organization differs from that of the dominant language of certain work units. A quantitative and qualitative study can help decipher what the messages are between these different work units, as these areas have unique communication dynamics (e.g., those who work in an “open door” environment, where open dialogue and frequent face-to-face communication is encouraged, may have higher levels of identification). Obtaining a better understanding of the role communication plays in structured onboarding may pinpoint the types of persuasive messages that are created and shared between onboarding key players in different work units, which can also shape organizational realities (Kramer & Miller, 2014).

Allen (1995) argues that socialization for underrepresented members differs considerably from depictions found in traditional socialization models. Thus, widening the scope of socialization research to include the experiences of underrepresented work units (e.g., those of a primarily divergent culture than the dominant culture) can help avoid institutional bias that marginalizes the voices and experiences of traditionally underrepresented groups (Allen, 2004; Gailliard et al., 2010). Going even further, as engagement is a global issue (Attridge, 2009), future research can cross-validate the findings of the current study by replicating the study in organizations within different cultural settings. Insights from different countries can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how socialization influences these desired outcomes on an international scale.

Lastly, a research gap still exists to study socialization longitudinally to assess how socialization levels, messages and desired outcomes fluctuate over time between newcomers, supervisors and work unit members. Research has established that as socialization is a process that involves multiple stages, levels of socialization will inherently fluctuate over

time, as will engagement, identification and perceived organizational support (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Prati et al., 2009; Stephens & Dailey, 2010). Further, according to Jablin (2001) and Hart and Miller (2005), socialization scholarship has yet to discern if messages received during entry change between the other socialization stages. Thusly, measuring the impacts of structured vs. unstructured socialization over time would provide a more comprehensive view of how these desired outcomes oscillate during different methods of onboarding, and when perceptions of support, engagement and identification change.

In sum, various paths of research can build on this current study. As noted in the above paragraphs, a focus on deciphering appropriate socialization tactics within organizations and specific work groups can advance scholarship in the fields of communication and organizational management and have practical contributions for newcomers and their hiring institutions. Given the ubiquitous nature of onboarding and achieving desired outcomes, a vast agenda exists for future organizational communication scholarship regarding socialization.

Conclusion

Socialization is a global and pervasive aspect of organizational communication behavior. The current study builds on previous scholarship that explicates how structured socialization tactics lead to more desired outcomes. The current findings provide empirical evidence that socialization has a positive and moderate correlation to engagement and identification, and a positive yet fair correlation with perceived organizational support for employees that experienced a structured onboarding program. Results also indicate noteworthy associations between engagement and identification. Thus, this comparative study contributes to socialization scholars and practitioners by exposing the differences

between unstructured and structured socialization tactics within one organization. This research also contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating the crucial role of communication during onboarding, as differences in socialization tactics positively and significantly impacted newcomer experiences in terms of engagement, identification and perceived organizational support.

Efforts to design effective onboarding programs in an attempt to build engagement, identification and perceived organizational support through socialization can provide benefits for newcomers and seasoned employees. In a world where communication is key, it is imperative to equip organizational practitioners and leadership with the appropriate research to help steer them in the right direction to achieve their goals and gain newcomer buy-in. Consequently, this study sheds light on the importance of purposefully designing an effective onboarding process, which has a significant impact on employee engagement, identification and perceived organizational support in an ever-changing, fast-paced competitive world.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	<i>Phase 1</i>	<i>Phase 2</i>
	<i>N = 117</i>	<i>N = 74</i>
	<i>%</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Female	66%	59%
Male	34%	41%
Age range		
24 years old or younger	11%	11%
Between 25 – 34 years old	38%	40%
Between 35 – 44 years old	19%	13%
Between 45 – 54 years old	26%	24%
55 years old or older	7%	11%
Position hierarchy		
Entry-level	31%	40%
Mid-level, non-management	50%	40%
First-line supervisor	7%	10%
Middle management	10%	10%
Upper management	2%	0%
Longevity		
Between 0 - 3 months	27%	61%
Between 4 – 6 months	24%	33%
Between 7 – 9 months	23%	3%
Between 10 – 12 months	26%	3%

Table 2: Phase 1 and 2 Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach's Alpha by Measures

Measures	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α
<i>Phase 1</i>				
Organizational Assimilation Index (OAI)	117	3.76	0.51	.90
Perceived Organizational Support Scale (SPOS)	117	3.42	0.62	.91
Engagement Scale (ES)	117	3.75	0.47	.87
Organizational Identification Scale (OID)	117	3.33	0.59	.87
<i>Phase 2</i>				
Organizational Assimilation Index (OAI)	74	3.90	0.48	.89
Perceived Organizational Support Scale (SPOS)	74	3.93	0.54	.84
Engagement Scale (ES)	74	4.20	0.59	.92
Organizational Identification Scale (OID)	74	3.73	0.69	.87

Table 3: Phase 1 and 2 Variable Correlations

	1	2	3	4
<i>Phase 1</i>				
1. Socialization				
2 Perceived Organizational Support	.68			
3. Engagement	.63	.49		
4. Organizational Identification	.46	.48	.24 ^a	
<i>Phase 2</i>				
1. Socialization				
2 Perceived Organizational Support	.58			
3. Engagement	.69	.52		
4. Organizational Identification	.60	.41	.52 ^a	

Note: All correlations are significant at the .01 level (2-tailed). Superscript letters suggest a significant difference between correlation coefficients at $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed).

APPENDIX SECTION

APPENDIX A: MEASURES

ORGANIZATIONAL ASSIMILATION INDEX (OAI)

Gailliard et al. (2010)

Familiarity with coworkers

- 1) I consider my coworkers friends
- 2) I feel comfortable talking to my coworkers
- 3) I feel like I know my coworkers pretty well

Familiarity with supervisors

- 4) I feel like I know my supervisor pretty well
- 5) My supervisor sometimes discusses problems with me
- 6) My supervisor and I talk together often

Acculturation

- 7) I understand the standards of the organization
- 8) I think I have a good idea about how this organization operates
- 9) I know the values of my organization
- 10) I do not mind being asked to perform my work according to the organization's standards

Recognition

- 11) My supervisor recognizes when I do a good job
- 12) My supervisor listens to my ideas
- 13) I think my supervisor values my opinions
- 14) I think my supervisor recognizes my value to the organization

Involvement

- 15) I talk to my coworkers about how much I like it here
- 16) I volunteer for duties that benefit the organization
- 17) I talk about how much I enjoy my work

Job competency

- 18) I can do others' jobs, if I am needed

19) I have figured out efficient ways to do my work

20) I think I'm an expert at what I do

21) I often show others how to perform our work

Role negotiation

22) I have helped to change the duties of my position

23) I have changed some aspects of my position

24) I do this job a bit differently than my predecessor did

PERCEIVED ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT SCALE (SPOS)

Rhoades et al. (2001)

1) My organization really cares about my well-being.

2) My organization strongly considers my goals and values.

3) My organization shows little concern for me (R).

4) My organization cares about my opinions.

5) My organization is willing to help me if I need a special favor.

6) Help is available from my organization when I have a problem.

7) My organization would forgive an honest mistake on my part.

8) If given the opportunity, my organization would take advantage of me (R).

ENGAGEMENT SCALE (ES)

Soane et al. (2012)

Intellectual

1) I focus hard on my work.

2) I concentrate on my work.

3) I pay a lot of attention to my work.

Social

4) I share the same work values as my colleagues.

- 5) I share the same work goals as my colleagues.
- 6) I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues.

Affective

- 7) I feel positive about my work.
- 8) I feel energetic in my work.
- 9) I am enthusiastic in my work.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION SCALE (OIS)

Mael and Ashforth (1992)

- 1) When someone criticizes (name of school), it feels like a personal insult.
- 2) I am very interested in what others think about (name of school).
- 3) When I talk about this school, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'.
- 4) This school's successes are my successes.
- 5) When someone praises this school, it feels like a personal compliment.
- 6) If a story in the media criticized the school, I would feel embarrassed.

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