FITTING IN: NEWCOMER ADAPTATION IN A CORPORATE RESEARCH SETTING[1]

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study of a corporate research department expands our understanding of the difficulties encountered by new employees in learning the cultural rules of the workplace. Particular attention is focused on the process by which newcomers become affiliated with their initial projects. The results suggest that newcomers tend to identify with other employees on the basis of job classification, gender, age, and tenure in the department. Such information is useful in sensitizing all individuals in a given organizational setting to the culturally relevant learning which newcomers must acquire and in providing criteria for the re-evaluation of existing newcomer orientation programs.

INTRODUCTION

Newcomers in a particular culture or society are faced with the dual problems of recognizing and learning the appropriate "rules" of behavior of that culture, and then conforming their behavior accordingly. The socialization process is complicated and continuous. Individuals must constantly modify or adjust their behavior as social participants in their new environment. Traditionally, discussion of this process was confined to childhood and hence, contingent on age. Over the last several decades, social scientists have focused more on adult socialization, particularly in terms of affiliation with new groups and organizations.

This study is an example of an applied research project on adult socialization which was conducted for a research department at the General Motors Research Laboratories. It focuses attention on the structure and participants of a particular work culture as viewed by newcomers to that environment. The author developed an interest in newcomer socialization because she was a newly hired employee in this department. This study was intended to explore the issue for this unit of the corporation and make some recommendations to improve newcomer adaptation. Thus the primary audience for the study was the author's management at her work site.

As an ethnography, this study expands our understanding of the adult socialization process by focusing attention on the work culture and the ways in which new employees adapt to it. Newcomers are products of their past life experiences and as such bring different ideas and practices with them to their new

environment. They identify with other employees on the basis of job classification, gender, age, and tenure in the department, suggesting that their adaptive strategies differ. The socialization process has important implications for the acquisition of cultural knowledge in an occupational context, future job performance of employees, and orientation programs. Such information is useful in 1) sensitizing all individuals in a given organizational setting to the culturally-relevant learning which newcomers must acquire; and 2) providing criteria for the re-evaluation of existing newcomer orientation programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The process of learning the rules of behavior in a particular culture has a long established tradition in the social sciences. The early research in the study of socialization was directed at feeding and weaning, child rearing practices, initiation cermonies, and the relationship between personality and culture.[2] One of the principal areas of interest in these studies was the means by which children learn to participate in their cultural setting--how they acquire attitudes, skills, and social roles.

Research in adult socialization has focused on entry into new residential and occupational contexts. The acculturation literature identifies how migrants adjust in their new locations. Social networks have been singled out as providing important assistance with regard to housing, purchasing goods, and finding a job [Trager 1984; Rosenthal-Urey 1984; Wells 1976; Butterworth 1972; Cornelius 1971]. Other studies have shown the importance of social networks in the development of family enterprises [Lomnitz & Perez-Lizaur 1986; Model 1985; Long 1979]. Studies in the area of organizational socialization have focused on the personality characteristics of newcomers, the role demands placed upon them, and the personal changes involved in learning new values and norms [Brim 1966; Becker 1964]. For example, it is well documented that the "breaking in" period is typically stressful [Van Maanen 1976, 1972; Schein 1968]. Newcomers usually remain "on the edge" with regard to the affairs of an organization because they are either not yet deemed trustworthy, or their abilities, motives, and values are being tested. They have not become "insider(s) with all the rights and privileges that go with such a position" [Van Maanen & Schein 1979:222].

One growing area of research is the relationship between various socialization practices including formal on-site orientation sessions, daily interactions with peers while working, a buddy relationship with a more senior co-worker, and a relationship with the first supervisor. Their findings indicated that job satisfaction was correlated with eight of these items but that daily interactions with peers while working was the most important factor "in helping newcomers to feel effective: [p. 863]. Similarly, Pearson [1982]

argued that perhaps the most significant element of success in an organization was for newcomers to develop on-the-job relationships. Van Maanen and Schein [1979] created a continuum of newcomer responses to organizational socialization from acceptance of the work role as traditionally practiced by the role occupants, to redefinition of the entire work role. These authors then linked these behavioral responses to particular types of socialization methods (such as formal vs. informal and collective vs. individual). As such, a newcomer who completely redefined the mission or goals of his/her role most likely participated in a socialization process which was both informal and individualized.

Yet there is little evidence in the literature of how newcomers manage the socialization process [Schein 1985]. It is unclear what options are open to newcomers as they learn the various elements related to their new work culture, their job tasks, and their roles in the organization. Lacking is an analysis of the strategies that new employees use to access various kinds of cultural knowledge ranging from appropriate office conduct to the forms of social stratification within their ogranization. On what basis do newcomers affiliate with other employees in the organization or maintain professional ties with their scientific colleagues and former place of employment or training? Do newcomer adaptation strategies differ by gender, age, and other socio-demographic characteristics? An empirical study could best document the outcomes of alternative socialization practices across particular types of people, organizations, and occupations [Van Maanen & Schein 1979]; as well as focus on the relationship between the newcomers' former place of employment or training and the new work environment.

DATA AND METHODS

Research for this project was conducted over a seven month period during 1985 and 1986. Since the researcher was also a member of the department during the data gathering and analysis stages, it was possible to both observe and participate in the workplace culture. Much of the data were collected by way of conversations, attendance at meetings, and observation of employee interactions. Informal interviews focused on employees' own experiences as newcomers as well as their perceptions of recent newcomers' adjustment. In this paper an individual was considered a newcomer during the first six months of employment; this was the period preceding the employee's first evaluation. While approximately one-half of the department members were interviewed, informal conversations or discussions on this topic occurred with most department employees. There did not appear to be any major differences between short-term and long-term employees concerning their orientation experiences. Printed materials including publications, manuals, and other documents from the corporation pertaining to new

comers, supplemented the field data.[3]

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Field work for this project was conducted in the Societal Analysis Department at the General Motors Research Laboratories, Warren, Michigan. This department was one of 19 technical/scientific departments in the Laboratories and one of the few research departments in the U.S.-based industrial research laboratory employing a complement of social scientists. Other departments in the Research Laboratories included Mathematics, Instrumentation, Computer Science, Polymers, Fuels and Lubricants, and Engineering Mechanics, among others. Employees in the Research Laboratories numbered approximately 1,600 and were located in several adjoining buildings in a one square mile corporate research and development park called the General Motors Technical Center.

The Societal Analysis Department was formed in September 1973 from a project area or "activity" within the Mathematics Department at the Research Laboratories. In 1971, a researcher from the Physics Department was asked to serve as project head for an interdisciplinary team of three scientists. This team received official approval for their work following the completion of a six month project on air quality issues. More individuals were hired to conduct research on "societal" issues such that within two years the group was granted department status. At that time, membership in the department numbered 12, including eight researchers, a systems analyst, a programmer, a secretary, and the department head. According to department management, the misssion of the department has been to conduct research leading to "improved methods for quantifying and explaining issues occurring at the interface of the corporation and society." In this mandate the term "society" referred to any social group with a "stake" in the corporation's activities: customers, employees, and shareholders, among others.

In its 16 years of existence, membership in this social science branch of the corporation increased 625%, from four employees in 1971 to 29 employees in 1986. This 16 year period was marked by fluctuations. Recessionary periods in the mid-1970s and early 1980s resulted in a slowing trend in employee hiring. Nevertheless, the department netted an average of two new employees per year once department attrition was taken into account. The research disciplines represented in the department in 1986 included economics, operations research, engineering, sociology, psychology, applied mathematics computer science, physics, biology, and recently, anthropology. According to the department head, the "societal issues addressed by the department require a combination of methodological and theoretical approaches"--hence the interdisciplinary nature of the department.

THE SETTING

The 29 individuals in Societal Analysis were housed in adjacent offices of muted grey tones along the two main corridors of one research building. Rooms in the department were used for administrative purposes, conferences and seminars, computer programming, word processing, and individual work areas. Administrative matters for Societal Analysis were carried out in the department office. Two secretaries worked in this office which had word processors, a copying machine, typewriter, file cabinets, and other office furniture. The department office connected directly with the office of the department head and was adjacent to that of the assistant department head. The conference room was filled with tables, chairs, a blackboard, and an overhead projector; it was used primarily for various types of seminars and meetings. The terminal room consisted of various computer terminals, printers, and shelves of computer manuals. Both the department office and terminal room, along with the coffee room and an area containing a supply cabinet and employee mailboxes, were centers of social interaction.

The majority of the rooms in the department were occupied by individual researchers, programmers, and department management. Standard furnishings in these offices included a desk, credenza, file cabinets, bookshelves, and chair for each occupant. Although those offices along the building's edge had large windows providing natural sunlight, much of the lighting was artificial. The upper portion of all office walls from 3.5 feet above the floor to the ceiling were windows. While this type of architectural design may have lent itself to the development of a sense of community within the department, noise carried easily through the offices forcing some individuals to keep their office doors shut at times. Other employees sought privacy by papering the glass walls or covering them with posters, although this practice was discouraged by management at the Research Laboratories. Each of these offices was usually share by two individuals although group leaders and managers had their own offices.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Employees in the Societal Analysis Department were distinguished according to the principal job they performed. There were four broad job classifications including clerical/administrative, programming, research, and management jobs. The clerical/administrative staff consisted of two female secretaries who were responsible for handling department correspondence, files and travel, operating office equipment, maintaining the department calendar, and carrying out any additional administrative functions for department management. The programming staff consisted of four individuals, one male and two female programmers, and a male group leader; they provided computer support to department

members. The 21 researchers, four of whom were female, were involved in a variety of long-term research topics. Finally, the department head and assistant department head, both males, guided research projects, managed the budget, and acted in a supervisory capacity for all department members.

These job classifications corresponded to the department's group structure. Groups were differentiated by the type of scientific discipline or project areas of the members and the presence or absence of an advanced degree. Group members tended to receive some direction for their projects or duties from the group leaders, although two of the six groups only had acting group leaders. Group leaders had little formal authority and received no additional compensation for their work. Their primary function was to provide technical leadership and guidance. Their duties also included the preparation of editorial reviews on research reports and the fulfillment of certain administrative matters on behalf of group members. Contact between members and leaders was generally informal and somewhat sporadic, as conditions warranted. The group structures were also fluid in that it was not uncommon for an individual from one group to be affiliated with a member or members of another group on joint projects.

The four programming personnel had training in computer science and related fields. They received requests from researchers but exercised some freedom in ranking such requests, subject to management approval. In at least one case, a long-term project was initiated by a programmer independent of a researcher. The researchers, by contrast, were separated into five groups based on a combination of discipline and research interests: socioeconomic studies, technical trend analyses, social trend analyses, behavioral analyses and decision support systems. The secretarial staff, two very senior researchers (long-term, high performance, independent researchers), and department management were not assigned to any group. However, because the duties and functions of the secretarial staff, for example, were similar, they were generally perceived by other department members as a unit.

An employee's formal rank within the department corresponded primarily with his/her job classification. Although job classification was reflected in salary differentials, other forms of stratification within the department were evident as well. First, there was a ranking order within the job classification schema. Employees were formally distinguished by the corporation on the basis of their grade or level. Among the programming staff, the subclassifications in increasing order of rank included programmer and senior systems analyst. Among the research staff in this department, the subclassifications in increasing order of rank included senior research scientist (or engineer), staff research scientist (or engineer) and

senior staff research scientist (or engineer). Such distinctions in rand, particularly with regard to promotions, were not usually annouced publicly, although this practice varied widely with the departments of the Research Laboratories. Such information circulated both through informal conversations and through the publication of the department's organizational chart.

Second, as mentioned earlier, group leaders and department management had their own offices. Having one's own office was highly valued and as such was an indicator of one's status withyin the department. Third, the executive parking area functioned in a similar manner. Fourth, job classification appeared to be related to where and with whom department members ate lunch. The department head and assistant department head ate with research executives in an executive dining room. Researchers and programmers tended to eat in their own offices or in the Research Laboratories' cafeteria with those in their own job classification. The clerical/administrative staff generally chose to each elsewhere--in some cases off-site--and without other department members; because the secretaries usually covered for each other during their lunch breaks, they did not have the same flexibility as other department members in eating together. In general, two individuals with the same job classification from the same department were more likely to eat lunch together than two individuals of different job classifications from the same department, or two individuals of the same job classification from different departments within the Research Laboratories.

One other outward sign of stratification among department members was form of dress. While no formal dress code existed and indeed the Vice President of the Research Laborator4ies promoted a casual form of dress, distinctions by job classification and gender were evident. Managers almost invariably wore a suite and tie each day. The two secretaries usually wore dresses or skirts and blouses. The programming staff dressed and most casually although the range of what they perceived as appropriate varied from jeans to suits. Finally, researchers tended to dress somewhat more formally than programmers. Gender differences in dress were most evident among the researchers. Suits were the most frequent form of dress among the females. The perceived that they had more limited dress options open to them than their male counterparts. The suite seemed to be a means of setting these women apart from other females in the department, as well as a means of symbolizing their status to males within the Research Laboratories.

CHARACTERISTICS OF NEWCOMERS

The remaining text is limited to a discussion of the researcher and programming staffs because the initial field work was conducted primarily with them. Newcomers in these groups were young, ranging in

age from 23-38 years at the time they were hired. They were fairly recent entrants to the labor force; in 72% of the cases, these jobs at the Research Laboratories were their first full-time positions following the receipt of their academic degrees. Until 1984 there were never more than two female researchers or programmers in the department. The number of female researchers and programmers increased to four in 1984, five in 1985, and finally to six in 1986; of the 15 newcomers hired in the last three years, 40% were women.

Newcomers differed from each other mainly in the amount and type of education they had and their prior work experience. New programmers were hired with a bachelors degree. They generally pursued masters degrees in statistics, computer science, or mathematics within two years after their arrival at Societal Analysis. Some gained work experience in other companies before accepting a job with General Motors. Researchers, by contrast, tended to be new Ph.D.'s or Ph.D. candidates from a variety of disciplines in the social sciences, natural sciences, and engineering. Researchers had prior full-time work experience in either academics or industry in only one third of the cases. Unlike the programmers, most researchers tended to be from out-of-state, a factor which further affected their overall adjustment in the Detroit area.

LEARNING THE CULTURAL RULES

Newcomers' adjustment problems came to the attention of this researcher shortly after her arrival in the department. Not only was she experiencing difficulty in carving out a niche for herself in the department, but as department members shared their own adjustment experiences with her, it became clear that they had also encountered difficulties. In general, newcomers spoke of their initial period in the department as a period of apprehension, confusion, and ambiguity. Many of the comments centered around the perceived lack of structure with regard to individual task responsibilities and questions about the criteria used in evaluating performance. None of these perceptions appeared to be uncommon in view of the literature on newcomers cited previously.

In the first few weeks this perceived lack of structure was compunded by a wealth of written communication from various parts of the corporation (such as Personnel, the Research Library, and the Technical Information Department), and the necessity of attending to various administrative matters immediately (such as having a photo ID taken, filling out numerous forms, and getting a corporate physical examination). Although none of the above had a direct bearing on the newcomers' actual performance within the department or exposure to department norms and practices, it did serve as a cushion or buffer for the newcomers in terms of a time-filler.

Once these administrative matters were attended to, newcomers faced the more difficult task incolved in learning their role in the department. Newcomers arrived

at Societal Analysis not only with very little knowledge of office protocol or behavior, but also with a pre-established set of conceptions about proper behavior for their own lives. Learning the cultural rules of the workplace was accomplished to some degree either directly through face-to-face interaction or indirectly through written material such as handbooks and annual reports. Similarly, aspects of the socialization process were both formal, such as a luncheon organized specifically for a newcomer, or informal whereby information was gathered in passing conversations. Not only may these means by which learning occurred have differed from those in the newcomers' previous place of employment or training, but the previously acquired cultural rules may have been quite different as well.

Many of the newcomers came from academic environments where the learning process related to information gathering was a gradual one over a period of several years. In such settings there tended to be some continuity with regard to class offerings, advising, and campus activities. And part of an individual's world view stemmed from the training they received in a particular scientific discipline. The cultural practices of the business/research environment at the Research Laboratories appeared to be quite different from those in university settings. Upon arrival at Societal Analysis, newcomers had to seek as much information as possible about department normative behavior so as to "fit into" the organization as quickly as possible. Seemingly mundane questions such as how to fill out time sheets, how many sick days were allowed, and if it was appropriate to take morning and afternoon breaks, became a significant learning component of newcomer socialization.

Newcomers tended to voice their frustrations about obtaining information generally: where to get it, from whom, and how to assess its importance and relevance in the context of the Research Laboratories' culture. There was no organized method for disseminating the culturally-relevant information that newcomers needed. The following examples illustrate the types of conflicts experienced by newcomers during the initial socialization process.

The first example concerned a newcomer who was unsure of the extent of the secretaries' responsibilities. He was told that the department secretaries were available for any typing tasks, including reports, and had observed the secretaries typing on numerous occasions. However, this newcomer also noticed that many researchers typed their own work using word processing equipment. In addition, from the newcomer's own past experience as a graduate student, secretaries did not type student work unless it was co-authored with a professor or the student paid the secretary for the work.

This conflict was heightened in the mind of the newcomer when time constraints prohibited her from learning the word processing system in time to submit her first report. She

opted to ask one of the secretaries to help her out, explaining the time schedule problem. The secretary agreed and began the task. However, because of the guilt feelings she was experiencing, the newcomer stopped by the secretary's office far too frequently to see if the report was legible or if additional information was needed. The secretary finally asked to be left alone, sensing that her work was being scrutinized excessively; this was not the intention of the newcomer. Only after both individuals talked about this situation at a later time were their roles clarified.

Other situations affected newcomers generally. A case in point concerned the appropriate way to approach both department and Research Laboratories' management about work-related questions and issues. Newcomers tended to be advised relatively quickly on this matter by other department members. While it was considered acceptable to drop by the assistant department head's office informally, it was preferable to leave a short note in the department head's mailbox indicating the reason for talking to him. According to the department head, no such practice was initiated by him. One researcher stated that the note was not intended to establish distance, but rather to make things work more efficiently. In either case, department management usually interacted directly with the newcomers rather than through their group leaders.

This style of management based on personal contact did not extend beyond the department on a regular basis. One potential situation which was problematic for some newcomers concerned communication with upper-level management of the Laboratories. In instances when approval for research related requests or endorsement of outside research publications was necessary, the department head acted as a mediator between department members and executives of the Laboratories. Some newcomers who were researchers from an academic environment initially experienced some difficulty in adjusting to the publication review process. When a paper was being prepared for outside publication, certain laboratories' executives were part of the review process. According to department and Research Laboratories' management, this was customary and necessary in an industrial research laboratory in order to protect the company's interests: proprietary information, standards of quality of research publications, and "public posture." The researchers typically received comments from these executives through the department head. However, this type of situation is infrequently found in academics where individuals interact either verbally or in writing with their colleagues and journal editors. Some newcomers pointed out that having a mediator in the publication review process was inefficient because any questions or comments posed by the executives had to be made clear first to the department head, and then the researchers, with revisions

submitted back to the executives.

POTENTIAL OR PERCEIVED CON-STRAINTS ON PROJECT SELECTION

It is now important to turn to an identification of some of the potential or perceived constraints on the behavior of both the researchers and the programmers on one particular aspect of the adjustment process--project selection. Although no comparable data were collected from other research and development work sites, newcomers in such work environments may have encountered similar circumstances. Generally speaking, some individuals were hired for their expertise in a certain area of specialization, but the majority were hired because they were identified by the department recruiters as the best overall talent available within their disciplines. Each newcomer arrived at the Societal Analysis Department with a particular set of skills or training. At the outset, the perception of these skills may have been viewed as either specialized and limited, or alternatively, as broad and encompassing. the newcomer's background and discipline may have predisposed him/her to select topic areas and methodologies of a specific nature. Suggestions may have been offered to the newcomer based on knowledge of that individual's background. In the case of a new discipline in the department, there could be reticence on the part of other department members to make suggestions or offer guidance

on initial projects; this reticence was observed in the case of anthropology.

A second constraint related to what may have been a lack of structure or imposition of specific assignments by either department management or the group leaders on newcomers. Although meetings with department management were scheduled to discuss research matters generally, the problem focus and range of possible topics were not well-developed at these preliminary meetings. The initial tension experienced by all newcomers appeared to be similar. Programmers mentioned the difficulties involved in learning the operating system and hardware. They also experienced difficulties in making their talents known in the department, that is, in approaching the researchers. By contrast, researchers frequently cited the problems inherent in settling on a particular research agenda. They reported that they were unsure how to proceed and/or that the initial reading on potential topics was not directed or focused on specific research questions. For both programmers and researchers the tension was exacerbated because there were no obvious established patterns of behavior to follow. Furthermore, it often appeared to the newcomers that all other department members knew how to select or become affiliated with a project since they always appeared to be engaged in at least one.

Researchers faced other constraints in selecting an initial project. These constraints occurred primarily among those newcomers who opted

not to attach themselves to an ongoing project but rather who chose their own project. While department management judged the initial value of a proposal on such criteria as being of interest to the researcher and of benefit to General Motors, other factors could come into play.

Some newcomers reported that particular networks within the corporation were not accessible to them, thus hindering their data collection efforts. Convincing management to fund a project was an important consideration for those projects requiring expensive data sets and equipment. Many newcomers were concerned about failing, in part because they were not immediately provided with information on how their work would be evaluated. And while newcomers may have recognized that their research should contribute to corporate goals, they reported that initially they were unsure of what those specific goals or research interests were. Consequently, it was often difficult for them to judge the potential worth of a project to General Motors or management's interest in it. Similarly, newcomers reported that they recognized that one aim of the Research Laboratories was to publish in-house reports, but that they were unable to determine the value attached to the number of such reports, their length, their focus (theoretical vs. empirical), a priority ranking of potential readers (scientists, corporate executives, or the general public) and the methodologies involved, among others. And, some of these limitations were not explicit, making the selection of an initial project more problematic.

The predominant ideology of the Research Laboratories was to generate research projects "from the bottom up," such that researchers developed their own projects. However, there were instances where researchers 1)had to take on a project that was not of their choosing, or 2)were discouraged from working on a particular project. Consequently, researchers attempted to safeguard the freedom to design and conduct their own research projects. Newcomers were told by other researchers to assume that it was acceptable to work on any project as long as they were interested in it and the result would benefit General Motors in some way. Indeed, some newcomers were told not to ask permission from department management to work on a project, but rather to seek guidance from management when necessary.

The period prior to official management approval of any new project, including those of newcomers, provided an opportunity to explore potential topics and examine the feasibility of the research design and methods of data collection and analysis. A special projects account was established, in part as an incentive to develop research interests. According to one researcher, department members could take more risks in developing and conducting a research project than may have been comfortable for department management. Long-term researchers seemed to have responded in this way because of the unique perspective and

training they brought to projects in the past, the independence they acquired from making contacts with various departments, staffs, and divisions of the corporation, and the long tradition of success they had experienced with project development.

GENERAL MOTORS' ROLE IN THE SOCIALIZATION PROCESS

The initial socialization period was a time when both the newcomer and department members had an opportunity to learn more about each other as individuals and as colleagues. As such, this period was an extension of the hiring process which typically began between two months to one year before the newcomer arrived. Acquaintances made on the interview and/or house hunting trips were renewed. Shortly after arriving each newcomer met with his/her group leader and/or department management. Some potential research topics were usually discussed and suggestions offered for learning about past and current projects. In addition, care was usually taken to see that any problems that the newcomer was experiencing were resolved as soon as possible. In some cases, it was expected that the newcomer would acquaint him/herself with department members and their research topics by dropping by their offices and talking with them informally; this management suggestion varied by group.

Formal group strucuture in the department seemed to play a role in newcomer adjustment. Often group members perceived a vested interest in both the recruitment and socialization process. Some spent much time and effort in exploring research topics as well as in providing newcomers with such practical knowledge as the location of the cafeteria or the way to secure a computer account. However, in those groups with no permanent head, newcomers tended not to feel as free to ask department management those questions concerning office protocol.

Other department members were also quite helpful in orienting newcomers. The latter typically met with other department members either in scheduled meetings or informally in the hallways and at lunch. Officemates facilitated interaction between newcomers and others in the work environment. Much of the information newcomers acquired stemmed from their peer group. And, the secretaries were valuable sources of information to whom newcomers could turn for everyything from office supplies to interdepartmental communication. The majority of these interactions occurred during the workday; there were few organized departmental social functions outside of work.

Recognition of the newcomers' interests by department members took several forms. Potentially relevant publications were noted and placed in the newcomers' mailboxes. Informal discussions on topics of mutual interest between the newcomers and department members frequently occurred. Occasionally, meetings with individuals from other departments and staffs in the corporation were arranged. In this way the newcomers benefitted from the individual

networks established by department members in the course of their tenure at General Motors. At times newcomers were also invited to work on a particular project already in progress. Their expertise may have been needed in the areas of programming, methodological issues, or familiarity with the existing theoretical and empirical literature. In general, these exchanges were valuable ways for newcomers to begin interacting with department members and other individuals in the corporation as colleagues, and to provide their knowledge and skills regarding current research issues.

The adjustment of newcomers has been an ongoing concern for individual department members and department and Research Laboratories' management. In general, while departmental methods and structuring of the socialization process were quite informal, those at the level of the Research Laboratories were much more formal. A photo of each newcomer was usually taken and reproduced in the Research Laboratories' semi-monthly publication. A tour of the Laboratories was organized by the Technical Information Department along with audio-visual presentations and a question-and-answer session with the Vice President of the Laboratories. Newcomers were usually enrolled in an 11-week technical writing class with 10-20 other individuals (mostly newcomers) from the various departments in the Laboratories. In many cases enrollment in the class

occurred shortly after the newcomers began to work at the Research Laboratories. And, newcomers were provided with printed information related to Research Library materials, background on the computer systems, guides to Laboratories' facilities, employee conduct, health and other benefits, and various other miscellaneous information.

ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES FOR NEWCOMERS

With regard to accessing various types of information, newcomers tended to identify first with others of the same job classification. Just as more long-term researchers were called upon to fill in the gaps for new researchers, programmers did likewise. However, within job classifications, preferences were established based on gender, age, and tenure in the department. Newly hired female researchers tended to seek out other female researchers in order to clarify concerns; males acted in a similar manner. By contrast, when the first female programmers was hired, she opted to seek information from a male programmer who was an agemate rather than an older programmer. The relationship between job classification and information gathering, controlling for gender, age, and tenure in the department was still unclear. To some extent newcomers of a particular job classification associated primarily with other newcomers in that same job classification. Yet, it was not possible to determine which of the three variables was more important when learning the cultural rules of the workplace,

or whether the type of information sought had an effect on those that the newcomers singled out for information.

An examination of other questions focusing on the ways in which newcomers responded to the structure of their new work environment would provide further data on newcomer adaptive strategies.

1. Is there any continuity in the type of work carried out by the newcomer prior to his/her arrival at General Motors and the initial projects in which the newcomer is involved? Are newcomers more likely than long-term employees to maintain ties within their discipline through such means as attendance at professional meetings or co-authored publications?

2. Are newcomers more likely to work on joint research projects or on projects of their own? Are there any apparent differences in this patterning over time? Is there variation by gender?

3. To what extent do pre-established friendships with General Motors Research Laboratories' employees exist, that is, prior to the arrival of the newcomers? What role do such frindships play in newcomer adjustment?

4. What are the perceived responsibilities of individual department members or groups towards orienting newcomers? What factors account for the variation in these perceptions? What types of opportunites are available for newcomers in Societal Analysis to meet employees from other departments, and in particular, other newcomers?

IMPLICATIONS FOR NEWCOMERS SOCIALIZATION

Since past research has shown that developing on-the-job relationships and working with peers affect both newcomer job satisfaction and the productivity of an organization [Louis et. al., 1983; Pearson 1982], it is important to plan for the period of transition that newcomers undergo. Current orientation programs at the level of either the department or the Research Laboratories could be embellished to provide newcomers with some of the culturally-relevant information that is crucial to their adjustment. A few suggestions come to mind which together or singly might add to existing efforts.

When newcomers enter an unfamiliar work setting, they may feel overwhelmed by the amount of information they must assimilate in order to function in that environment. An analogy that individuals from one culture make upon moving to another is that they feel like children who do not know how to act or who behave inappropriately. Yet, newcomers to the Research Laboratories are among the most highly trained individuals in their fields, bringing new knowledge and skills with them. At the group level in the department it might be possible to ask newcomers to speak briefly and informally on a topic in which they are well versed. Other group members might then share some of their

own interests. This exercise has at least two potential functions: 1)as individuals, newcomers have the opportunity to "be experts" by sharing what they know about a particular subject; and 2)all group members including newcomers have the opportunity to become better acquainted and informed about each other's talents.

Second, it might be possible to pair newcomers with department members of about the same age and job classification who would spend some extra time with them over the first few weeks. This idea of a "buddy" system could also be expanded to include an individual from one other department within the Research Laboratories. In this way newcomers would be exposed to different work environments, expand their network of contacts, and gather more information about the culture of the Research Laboratories. This method of newcomer socialization was cited earlier.

Third, the fact that hiring occurs on a fairly continuous basis is advantageous for the Research Laboratories. The potential for the formation of friendships--newcomers with newcomers or newcomers with long-term employees--is there. Such networks might be facilitated through organized programs or events, whether work-related or social, which would bring entering cohorts of newcomers into contact with each other.

Finally, the printed orientation materials provided to newcomers should be continued. Such information elaborates some of the general polocies and procedures with which employees should become familiar. However, the limitations of this printed material with regard to informing new employees about the corporate culture of the Research Laboratories should be recognized. Much of what new employees need to know is either not included in these publications or may be best and most efficiently learned informally from other employees. Consequently, these materials should be seen as a supplement to and not a replacement for the informal networks existing at work. Efforts to orient new employees should concentrate on accessing or creating these informal networks.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Examination of the socialization process of newcomers serves as a means of identifying the features of the work environment which, as Applebaum states, "promote certain behaviors and attidues and suppress others" [1984:4]. While the general cultural dimensions of newcomer adjustment described here may be generalizable to other work settings, the specifics are more limited to this particular type of research department. The results of this ethnographic study suggest that newcomers' transition to this corporate research setting is complex and may last several months. Not only do cultural patterns differ from the newcomers' former place of employment or training, but the actual cultural practices at the new work site sometimes differ considerably from the stated practices. Consequently, learning and adjusting to new

cultural rules require skill and perseverance.

Newcomers tend to identify with other newcomers and more long-term employees on the basis of job classification.Within job classification it is less clear of what extent preferences for friendships and accessing information are predicated on other variables such as gender, age, and tenure in the department. These results corroborate the findings from earlier studies that the peer group plays a significant role as a socialization agent in the work environment. The focus of newcomer orientation should be directed toward creating and enhancing informal networks among employees. Similarly, the results suggest that newcomers should not be treated as a monolithic group because of their divergent backgrounds, interests, and work roles. Orientation practices should recognize that there are individual differences in adaptive strategies.

The findings from this study bring to mind some directions for future research. First, because the strategies employed by newcomers in the Societal Analysis Department represent a response to a particular type of socio-cultural environment, they probably differ greatly from newcomers' strategies in other departments at General Motors. It would be interesting to explore the differences in newcomer adaptive strategies across research, engineering, manufacturing, service, and other units in the corporation. Second, it is equally plausible to suggest that such adaptive strategies have changed over time in response to the department's changing role within the corporation. Another study might focus on newcomer socialization strategies and practices, and how they have evolved as the corporate ideology and culture have changed. Such studies would be useful not only in the advancement of concepts and hypotheses related to the anthropology of work, but also in the more practical applications within the corporation such as quality of work life and research productivity.

FOOTNOTES

[1]I appreciate the willingness of the members of the Societal Analysis Department to share their adjustment experiences and views of the newcomer socialization process with me. The discussion I had with Shirley Worth from the Technical Information Department was useful in helping me to make some recommendations for future orientation programs. May thanks also to those who read earlier drafts of the paper and responded with comments' particularly Ken Barb, Carroll DeWeese, Hallie Kintnes, Jeff Hartley, Rob Kleinbaum and Wally Albers.

[2]Cf. Mead [1973 (1928)]; Whiting et al. [1966]; Cohen [1961]; Herskovits & Herskovits [1958]; Benedit [1950, 1949]; Leighton & Kluckhohn [1947]; Gesell and Ilg [1943].

[3]The following is a list of the written materials given to new employees hired for work at the Research Laboratories during the fall of 1985: Filinger, Joann. "Procedures Manual for Users: Report Processing Center," GMR-368, January, 1982; "General Motors Research Laboratories Organization"; "The General Motors Research Laboratories... In Brief," May 1983; "Guidelines for Employee Conduct," 1983; Mazzatenta, Ernest. "Reporting Your Research: A Handbook for the Researcher-Writer," GMR-3429, September 1980; "We the People of the General Motors Research Laboratories, 1984," June; Worth, Shirley A. "The Answer Book: A Concise Guide to GMR Facilities and Services," January, 1983.

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