EXPLORING MIDCAREER WOMEN’S GRADUATE SCHOOL TRANSITION:

DEPARTMENT SOCIALIZATION TACTICS AND PERCEIVED FIT

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by

Julie B. Mitchell

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Thesis written by

Julie B. Mitchell

B.S., University of Evansville, 1981

M.A., Kent State University, 2010

Approved by

______________________________
Robyn E. Parker, Ph.D., Advisor

______________________________
Donald L. Bubenzer, Ph.D., Director, School of Communication Studies

______________________________
Stanley T. Wearden, Ph.D., Dean, College of Communication and Information
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis Origins in Personal Experience</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Context and Rationale</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization and Proactive Newcomer Communication Research Gaps</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated Socialization:</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Need to Understand Context and Newcomer Differences</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Significance of Socialization Practices in Graduate Education</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialization From the Midcareer Transition Woman’s Perspective</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary and Assumptions</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Socialization Communication Processes</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jablin’s Perspective and Stage Model</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticisms of Traditional Research Approaches</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary Research Foci:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive Newcomers and Socialization in Context</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Organizations Socialize Newcomers</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Socialization Processes: Tactics and Messages</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Socialization Messages</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Newcomers Interpret and Respond to Socialization Messages</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive Newcomer Communication in Context</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Research Context: Graduate Student Socialization</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary and Research Focus</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Newcomer: Midcareer Transition Women Graduate Students</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Summary and Research Questions</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Approach</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment and Description of Participants</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 1 - Sample Description</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection: The Interviewing Procedure</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis and Interpretation</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Reduction and Theoretical Sensitivity</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Coding Process</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clustering Data Into Categories</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic Analysis and Generation of Meaning</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility of Findings and Member Checking</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### III. RESULTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of Themes</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretations of Socialization Messages</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Fit</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad fit and lack of insider support</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling at home - finding relational fit and insider faculty support</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Losses: Another Layer of Complexity</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Themes Related to Interpretations of Socialization Messages</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses to Socialization Messages</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive Stress Reactions</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal Success Strategies</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Themes Related to Socialization Message Responses</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proactive Communication Themes</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Proactive Communication</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sink or Swim Survival Communication</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Findings</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### IV. DISCUSSION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Organizational Socialization Processes</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Fit and Socialization Tactics</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good Fit, Investiture and Faculty Support</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Losses and Pre-entry Divestiture</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad Fit, Divestiture and Sink or Swim Proactivity</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice in Traditional Graduate Departments</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Department-wide Socialization Practices</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Graduate Faculty</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations and Future Research</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### APPENDICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Interview Schedule</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Definitions and Parameters For Data Reduction and Analysis</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Codebook Defining Final Themes</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### REFERENCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

iv
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Thesis Origins in Personal Experience

I changed my life at age 45 when I gave up my consulting practice, sold my home and moved near a state university to begin graduate study. I loved college teaching and was eager to earn credentials that would allow me to pursue a new career as a full-time professor. I knew my transition to graduate school would not be easy but I found the adjustment to be more challenging than I expected. Not only was I surprised about how things were done in my graduate department but also it was obvious that my age, life stage and experiences distinguished me from most graduate students in my program. In addition, I was constantly aware of what I had left behind while I was learning about my new role. Although some aspects of graduate school suited me well from the start, it was very difficult for me to lose my former professional identity and status.

Mixed emotions, confusing messages and awkward encounters characterized my first semester in graduate school. I was unprepared for the academic department culture in which I was a teaching assistant and a nontraditional student. It felt like the department was unprepared for me too. Orientation activities, information and policies seemed targeted to students half my age. I initially thought of faculty, staff and administrators as peers and wanted to connect with them because demographically they were similar to me. However, graduate students were my official peer group and I was encouraged to socialize with them. My feelings and interactions with others in the department were complicated. I loved my coursework and what I was learning. I was pleased to be recognized as more experienced than other new teaching assistants when I was given the
responsibility to teach two courses on my own. Yet my professional experience seemed irrelevant in contexts other than interactions with undergraduates I was teaching. To sum it up, I wasn’t sure where I fit and the first semester was disorienting.

In some respects I understood that my experiences were typical of adapting to any new environment. This perception was affirmed when I learned about organizational socialization theory that first semester. Yet I noticed the socialization literature did not accurately represent my graduate school adjustment process. For example, I planned a temporary relationship with the organization I had joined. My graduate program was a necessary step toward an anticipated career shift and I was not a full-time employee with the intention to remain. Nor had I followed the usual path to graduate work.

My age, career background, life stage plus what I had given up immediately before graduate school made me different from most members of my cohort. I discovered that literature on graduate student socialization also did not fit my experiences because it failed to consider how the adjustment process was different for older, experienced students. Thus, this exploratory study was born with a personal goal in mind: I wanted to find out whether women in similar circumstances shared my experiences, such as feeling out of place among the graduate student cohort and being unsure about where they stood with faculty or administrators closer to their ages.

Purpose

This thesis was grounded in lived experience. The purpose was to explore the organizational socialization experiences of twenty midcareer transition women during their first semesters of fulltime graduate education in traditional academic departments. An interpretive phenomenological interviewing approach was designed to elicit an in
depth understanding of participants’ adjustment to organizations where they did not fit the norm (Van Manen, 1990; 2002).

Research on socialization-communication processes provided a theoretical framework for the study (Jablin, 2001). The intent was to address inter-related communication and higher education research gaps and to inform knowledge by focusing on an under-studied localized socialization context (Ashforth, Sluss & Harrison, 2007; Golde, 2005; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Specifically, this thesis answered calls for more research about the organizational adjustment process from the perspective of unique newcomers who did not fit established models or assumptions about socialization (Allen, 1996; Ballard & Gossett, 2007; Clair, 1999). Thus I focused solely on the perceptions of newcomers and intentionally did not address the other half of the socialization process, i.e., the perspectives of the socializing organization and its members.

This thesis also responded to higher education calls to address the socialization of nontraditional older graduate students. Higher education research emphasizes the need to learn more about older students’ experiences and their adjustment into academic departments through interviewing them (Brus, 2006; Polson, 2003). Finally, this thesis was designed with practical purposes too. I hoped findings would stimulate further research, inform graduate education socialization practices and be of interest to midcareer transition women considering traditional fulltime graduate study as a step toward an anticipated new career.

Theoretical Context and Rationale

For decades, research has addressed the socialization process that occurs when someone begins an affiliation with a new organization. The organization-individual
relationship has been examined from a wide range of perspectives (Ashforth et al., 2007; Bullis & Stout, 2000; Hess, 1993; Jones, 1986; Moreland, Levine, & McMinn, 2001; Smith & Turner, 1995; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). Communication literature about message exchanges between the newcomer and the organization emphasizes that socialization is a dynamic, communicative process (Jablin, 1987, 2001). During this interactive process organizations use various tactics or socialization messages to orient newcomers. Simultaneously, newcomers receive this information, interpret or try to make sense of it, then react and respond (Jablin, 1982; Jones, 1986; Louis, 1980; Reichers, 1987).

Traditional socialization models conceptualize the process as a series of stages people pass through in chronological order related to their age or career stage. This linear process is presumed to result in assimilation, full organizational membership or engagement, and a sense of belonging with the organization (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Jablin, 1987). The organizational entry, encounter or adjustment stage of socialization is critical to determining the trajectory of the individual-organization relationship (Jablin, 2001). It is assumed that during this stage the newcomer learns as much as possible in order to fit into the organization (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Cooper-Thomas, van Vianen & Anderson, 2004; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). It is a time of anxiety, shock and surprise for most newcomers (Louis, 1980). They must make sense of their new role, discover how things are done, learn what is considered appropriate behavior, find their places in the organization and how they are perceived or valued there.

This adjustment stage has important implications for both newcomers and organizations. The quality of early socialization experiences influences how well the
newcomer adapts and perceives good fit; if the adjustment is positive and successful, the newcomer may feel welcomed, take on organizational values and feel proud to be part of the organization (Chapman, 2008; Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Lundberg & Young, 1997). On the other hand, a poor or ineffective adjustment is associated with newcomer perceptions of bad fit, including negative feelings about the organization and an early exit (Golde, 2005; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005). Our knowledge is incomplete regarding specific types of socialization experiences most likely to be associated with good or bad fit from the perspective of newcomers.

Some research indicates that particular socialization strategies used by organizations impact newcomers’ perceptions of poor fit and the choice to leave and also may influence newcomers’ patterns of proactive communication during adjustment (e.g., Ashforth et al., 2007; Korte, 2009). However, the research on socialization tactics or strategies and their apparent relationship to newcomer adjustment and proactive communication is inconsistent. This variance in research findings mirrors the complexity and lack of coherence in socialization research overall (Turner, 1999). Recent literature reflects an increasing awareness of how different organizational contexts and/or unique types of newcomers result in findings that challenge or contradict earlier research conducted in different contexts.

Socialization and Proactive Newcomer Communication Research Gaps

In the last decade there has been an increased focus on learning more about the variance in proactive socialization behavior by newcomers, including their proactive communication (Ashforth et al. 2007; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Jablin, 2001). Newcomers are not merely passive recipients of information but take an active role while adapting to
organizations (Ashford & Black, 1996; Jones, 1986; Moreland et al., 2001). Years of research highlight communication (information seeking, specifically) as the primary means newcomers use to reduce uncertainty in unfamiliar or ambiguous situations (e.g., Mignerey, Rubin & Gorden, 1995; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Teboul, 1995; Weick, 1995). However, research is inconclusive and incomplete regarding circumstances under which newcomers ask more (or fewer) questions to clear up confusion (Ashforth et al. 2007). We also need to learn more about how newcomers behave as active agents in their own socialization process through engaging in other forms of proactive communication beyond information seeking (Jablin, 1987; 2001).

Scholars across disciplines have underscored various organization and individual factors that influence the quality and quantity of proactive communication during adjustment, including demographic or personality differences among newcomers (e.g., Finkelstein, Kulas, & Dages, 2003; Scott & Myers, 2005; Tidwell & Sias, 2005). The rationale for this work is that some newcomers are more proactive than others or may be proactive in distinct ways. We need to understand why or how variations in proactive newcomer behavior occur.

Until the last decade, most socialization research has focused on the organization’s socialization tactics and goals, which privileges the organization over the individual (Bullis, 1999; Clair, 1999; Turner, 1999). More recent research is based on the need to understand the process from both perspectives, affirming the reciprocal nature of socialization and the fact that no two organizations or individuals are the same (Jablin, 2001). It is important for organizations to consider their socialization practices in terms of the increasingly diverse newcomers they may wish to attract and retain. It is equally
important for individuals to consider how well they may fit a work group or culture before they make the decision to join an organization. Because poor fit is costly for both organizations and individuals, contemporary research highlights the need to understand how various organizational contexts, their socialization practices, and different types of newcomers may or may not fit (Ashforth et al., 2007; Cable & Parsons, 2001).

*Situated Socialization: The Need to Understand Context and Newcomer Differences*

Hundreds of studies since the late 1950s have enhanced our understanding of how the socialization process unfolds for most people starting relationships with most organizations (Ashforth et al. 2007; Jablin, 2001). However, for years scholars have argued that atypical socialization circumstances and diversity among newcomers are not adequately addressed nor understood through traditional research approaches (Allen, 1996; Bullis, 1993; Clair, 1999; Turner, 1999). Models, theories and measures associated with socialization (also called assimilation by some communication scholars) are generally based on assumptions of uniformity among both organizations and the individuals that join them. For example, traditional research tends to assume that organizations socialize all new fulltime paid employees in similar ways and that newcomers are demographically similar to members of their cohort (i.e., other newcomers). Newcomers are typically framed as young and starting a career or first job where they are expected to remain for an extended period and make a contribution (Jablin, 2001). These models do not fit many contemporary organizational socialization contexts.

In reality, many people who begin affiliations with organizations and are socialized into them do not fit the profile of the paid, full-time employee. Their individual
life circumstances, experiences, organizational context or adjustment process may diverge substantially from what socialization models suggest (Bullis & Stout, 2000; Forward, 1999; Gibson & Papa, 2002). Variations in career paths and employment patterns — including the phenomena of seasoned professionals changing careers at midlife — require that we expand and improve our understanding of socialization through applied research in under-studied contexts (Ballard & Gossett, 2007; Ibarra, 2003; Keyton, Bisel, & Ozley, 2009; Smith & Turner, 1995; Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

One such context is the focus of this thesis: traditional academic departments socializing nontraditional midcareer women graduate students.

*The Significance of Socialization Practices in Graduate Education*

Recent calls emphasizing the need to address organizational socialization from “localized” contexts are based on recognition that newcomers are socialized *through interpersonal interactions and events in their immediate work groups or departments* rather than by the larger organization as a whole (Ashford et al., 2007; Jablin, 2001). For example, in graduate education the academic department, rather than the university as a whole, is the localized context primarily responsible for socializing graduate students (Gardner, 2010; Golde, 2005). The adjustment process is presumed to be difficult for new graduate students and challenges are alleviated through social (interpersonal) interactions within the local community of fellow graduate students who help one another to adjust (Austin, 2002; Weidman, Twale & Stein, 2001).

When new graduate students experience an inadequate socialization process they may leave before completing the degree program. This growing problem of attrition or completion of graduate programs is considered a crisis in higher education (Brus, 2006;
Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemier-Topf, Ross, & Turrentine, 2006). Thus graduate student socialization has been identified as an urgent area for further study (Austin, 2002; Golde, 2005; Polson 2003). Graduate students are more likely to leave if they do not receive consistent relational support from peers and faculty in their academic departments and this support is especially salient during socialization (Gardner, 2010; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000; Nesheim et al., 2006).

Some research has found that institutions value older, experienced students because they tend to perform better than younger students despite having greater responsibilities and multiple roles (e.g., Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). However, the growing numbers of nontraditional or demographically different graduate students and their socialization experiences are rarely addressed (Brus, 2006; Polson, 2003). This thesis responds to this gap in higher education research through exploring how midcareer transition women graduate students interpret and respond to messages—or communication—during their socialization into academic departments.

**Socialization From the Midcareer Transition Woman’s Perspective**

In addition to contextualizing research in specific environments such as traditional academic departments, scholars have called for greater understanding of how distinct types of newcomers experience socialization when they have demographic characteristics different from the norm. We need to understand more about how individual differences like age, gender, background and career stage influence socialization processes (Allen, 1996; Jablin, 2001; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). The phenomenon of midcareer transition women leaving their previous jobs and enrolling in traditional graduate study encompasses all of these factors. While it would be valuable to compare midcareer
transition women with their male counterparts or with traditional-aged graduate students (defined in the higher education literature as between ages 22-29) this study is intentionally limited in scope. The purpose is to explore the experiences of a specific, demographically determinant sample.

The midcareer transition woman is an appropriate research subject for reasons beyond broadening our understanding of graduate school socialization. These reasons include burgeoning interest on midlife as a time of self-transformation and multiple transitions for women (Shellenbarger, 2005; Vickers-Willis, 2002). Literature suggests the midlife woman is likely to be more assertive or proactive in pursuit of her goals in comparison to how she behaved earlier in life. She typically reassesses her career path with an interest in balancing multiple identities, priorities, and roles (Josselson, 2002). Deciding to enroll in graduate school is one result of this midlife reassessment process and the phenomenon is reported to be increasing among midlife women (Levine, 2005).

Midcareer transition is a term frequently used in the career paths literature (Hall, 1986). Several authors have focused on midcareer transition and related non-linear, contemporary career paths as growing numbers of established professionals shift careers (e.g., Arthur, 2008; Hall, Zhu, & Yan, 2002). Ibarra (2003) has called specifically for understanding more about socialization processes people may experience during midcareer transition. This thesis responds to her call.

A primary argument underlying this study is that demographic differences like age, the midcareer stage, gender and life experiences matter and impact the socialization process into traditional organizations that may not be prepared for atypical newcomers (Allen, 1996; Hall et al., 2002). Authors in both higher education and organizational
communication argue for the importance of understanding diverse or “non-normative” socialization contexts: all newcomers—and all graduate students—are not the same (Brus, 2006; Jablin, 2001; Polson, 2003; Weidman et al., 2001).

The newcomers in this thesis voluntarily left employment, which distinguishes them from other midlife professionals who work full-time, attend school part-time, or have employers who encourage or even finance graduate study. These graduate school newcomers in midcareer transition enter academic departments after giving up or divesting themselves of significant things they accumulated or took for granted over several years including professional identities, incomes, status, social support and more. They are in a developmental life phase known for changes in women’s identities, roles, and relationships, including an increased likelihood of taking risks and expressing their needs through proactive behavior (Josselson, 2002; Shellenbarger, 2005). Thus in several respects midcareer transition women graduate students differ from typical 22-29 year old graduate students. We know little about how midcareer transition women behave in the context of beginning traditional graduate study and the findings of this research should shed light on this group of atypical newcomers.

**Summary and Assumptions**

In summary, this applied phenomenological study was designed to explore a new research context: traditional academic departments socializing nontraditional, midcareer transition women graduate students. A key assumption is that traditional academic departments intentionally or unintentionally socialize full-time graduate students in ways that may not fit the unconventional, midcareer transition woman student because her age, life experiences, professional background and career stage — including the identity and
status she gave up to enter graduate school at midcareer — make her different from traditional younger graduate students.

Although socialization is normally an experience of uncertainty, change, shock and surprise and graduate school adjustment is nearly always difficult (Louis, 1980; Weidman et al. 2001), adjustment-related challenges may be intensified for a midlife woman in the traditional academic department context (Anderson & Miezitis, 1999; Sanders & Nassar, 1993). This thesis is based on the belief that a midcareer transition woman enters graduate school with a strong age and career-related identity she may seek to maintain, despite having voluntarily given up her job. She filters her experiences as a newcomer through all of her past experiences. This study explores how the early adjustment process unfolds through socialization communication processes in academic departments that from her perspective may or may not seem to recognize her identity as an established midcareer professional. It is important to note this research focuses only on how midcareer transition women perceived or interpreted experiences in their academic departments. It does not challenge the accuracy of midcareer women’s interpretations nor does it address the intentions or perspectives of the academic departments.

In addition to broadening our understanding of communication-socialization processes this study has practical implications for graduate education, i.e., departmental socialization practices. The following literature review discusses selected work focusing on communication socialization processes during the organizational adjustment stage. Relevant interdisciplinary research is included to provide greater context about the socialization environment (the traditional academic graduate department) and the individual being socialized (the midcareer transition woman graduate student).
Organizational Socialization Communication Processes

Diverse perspectives, inconsistency, shifts in thought and controversy characterize the vast body of socialization research. Scholars employ numerous approaches in their work and there is little consensus about theoretical models, terminology or paths to understanding complex socialization processes (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Bullis, 1993; Clair, 1999; Kramer & Miller, 1999; Smith & Turner, 1995). Nevertheless, there is agreement on the need to understand more about the individual-organization relationship (Ashforth et al., 2007; Jablin, 2001; Waldeck & Myers, 2007). We begin the literature review with a general overview highlighting socialization as a communicative process and the significance of fit to successful integration of a newcomer into an organization.

Communication is central to socialization processes because the organization-individual relationship develops through a series of messages and interactions (Jablin, 2001). Research on socialization “endures and evolves, because it is theorizing about fundamentally important, even universal, human experiences and organizational communication processes” (Krone, 2005, p. 99). We know that socialization into organizations typically occurs through interaction with peers, i.e., other newcomers or co-workers, and/or through communication with mentors, superiors, or role models (Jablin, 2001). Socialization is important because a positive socialization experience is more likely to result in a satisfied individual enhancing and remaining in an organization where he or she perceives a good fit, whereas a negative experience not only impacts the individual but could have serious detrimental effects on the organization (Ashforth et al., 2007; Cable & Parsons, 2001). Perceived fit into organizations during socialization is particularly relevant to studies of nontraditional newcomers who by definition lack
commonalities with others in the organization and/or who may not desire to fit the organizational norm (Allen, 1996).

The complex, interrelated nature of research addressing fit and other factors applicable to this thesis is apparent when one considers the large volume of work in other disciplines that emphasize information exchange, interpersonal relationships and interactive socialization processes (e.g., Louis, 1980; Jones, 1986; Lundberg & Young, 1997; Reichers, 1987; Weick, 1995). To trace the development and branches of socialization research relevant to this thesis, I begin with a traditional communication perspective, particularly that of Jablin (1982, 1987, 2001).

*Jablin’s Perspective and Stage Model*

Much communication-centered research is influenced by Jablin’s work (1982, 1987, 2001) including his comprehensive developmental stage model of socialization. Jablin borrowed from theories that originated in disciplines including sociology, industrial psychology and management. Such earlier socialization research, which primarily attended to the role of the organization, assumed a one-way process in which workplaces mold new employees as they are “broken in” or “learn the ropes” (e.g., Hughes, 1958; Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1978).

By contrast, Jablin advocated a dual-process, reciprocal approach to understanding the organization-individual relationship. He posited that newcomers actively engage in communicative processes during socialization, rather than simply being acted upon by socializing agents. He asserted that socialization is a process constituted by communication; formal and informal messages are implicit in the
developmental period when individuals are introduced and become accustomed to organizations (Jablin, 1987; 2001).

Jablin’s framework assumes that “outsiders” become “insiders” or full members of employing organizations as they pass through stages. His model begins with an *anticipatory phase* that occurs before a newcomer enters an organization. This stage represents a life span progression during which the individual learns about work, including specific jobs, vocations or organizations. Jablin noted that prior to joining organizations, individuals typically have unrealistic expectations. To the extent expectations are not met, the next stage of being socialized into the organization is more difficult for the newcomer (Louis, 1980). Jablin referred to this second stage, germane to the present study, as organizational *encounter/entry and assimilation*. This phase, which has generated a huge body of research, begins with the individual’s first day of work with an organization.

The encounter stage involves the newcomer actively or passively learning about her role, while the organization —intentionally, unintentionally, or both— socializes her into the work environment. This transitional stage is known as a period of anxiety, uncertainty, change, contrast, surprise and information seeking for newcomers who try to make sense of new environments (Louis, 1980; Miller & Jablin, 1991; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979; Weick, 1995).

Jablin proposed that the outcome of the entry/assimilation stage is *metamorphosis*, the point at which the newcomer has been assimilated and feels part of the new organization, i.e., has become an insider as opposed to the outsider she was upon entry. Some communication work using Jablin’s model and focused on this stage of the
process is framed as *assimilation* research, whereas other authors prefer the umbrella term of socialization when referring to any or all phases of organizational socialization (see Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Bullis, 1993; Smith & Turner, 1995). Finally, Jablin’s model delineates the organizational *exit* stage, which, as the term implies, marks the moment when an employee leaves the workplace.

This thesis is concerned exclusively with the narrow time period Jablin framed as organizational entry or encounter. Among its many labels are the “breaking in” period, indoctrination, enculturation or adjustment. I have chosen to use the latter term. During this adjustment stage, the newcomer pays careful attention to messages from organizational sources to reduce uncertainty as the organization uses various tactics or strategies to socialize the newcomer (Jablin, 1987; Jones, 1986; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Most research on this stage, including the present study, assumes organizational adjustment lasts up to six months, although the length of this significant developmental period may differ by individual or context (Ashford & Black, 1996; Jablin, 2001; Weidman et al., 2001).

Jablin summarized what happens via communication during the adjustment stage, stating that newcomers adjust through “a chain of events, activities, message exchanges, interpretations, and related processes—essentially ‘links’” in which they come to understand the new organizational context *by building upon what they have learned in the past and considering how best to adapt to their present or future circumstances*” (2001, p. 759, emphasis added). As will be explained further, the research questions guiding this thesis explore socialization processes through tracing the chain of events or links Jablin thus described in his latest (2001) writing on the subject.
Although Jablin’s work is a foundation and informs the research questions, this study incorporates other approaches to investigating socialization, i.e., a constant comparative method and qualitative thematic analysis. In his 2001 literature review Jablin acknowledged the limitations of his own stage model and advocated diverse research methods. He reviewed a large body of work from the 1980s and 1990s that criticized traditional research and employed interpretive methods. Jablin underscored the need to continue exploring communication socialization processes in ways that would help us to better understand the perspective of individuals adjusting to new organizations.

**Criticisms of Traditional Research Approaches**

Beginning in the 1980s scholars introduced alternatives to traditional quantitative work that focused primarily on socialization stage models and outcomes. They also challenged the models directly and advanced qualitative research, including exploratory studies on how newcomers experienced socialization and on how the process unfolded differently depending on organizational context and other individual factors (e.g., Allen, 1996; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Clair, 1996; Stohl, 1986; Turner 1999). For example, Bullis (1993) criticized socialization research in a groundbreaking article on enabling, constraining, and shifting research perspectives, in which she argued both for and against traditional socialization theories and frameworks. Bullis called for more work that explores socialization using existing, traditional models, as appropriate, while also employing other approaches. Numerous scholars responded to her call, as does this thesis, which incorporates traditional models within an interpretive approach.

Other weaknesses identified in earlier socialization work included problems with the linear or predictable progression assumed in socialization stage models and in related
conceptualizations of career paths (e.g., Buzzanell & Goldzwig, 1991; Clair, 1996).

Socialization theorizing was criticized for being based on narrow, outdated employment
trends and for assuming uniformity in organizational contexts, the sequence of
socialization events and in newcomers (Allen, 1996; Bullis & Stout, 2000).

In the last decade traditional socialization stage models have fallen out of favor as
a research focus. However, issues related to the adjustment phase continue to be relevant
to most newcomers and organizations. Thus it remains a fertile area of study (Ashforth et
al., 2007). For example, the burgeoning research on proactive newcomer socialization is
based on the organizational adjustment stage, which continues to “provide a useful
heuristic for thinking through the challenges that newcomers (and their employers) tend
to face” (Ashforth et al., p. 9).

Contemporary Research Foci: Proactive Newcomers and Socialization in Context

From the early 1990s to date literature on newcomer proactivity has exploded.

Much of the research was based on the work of Miller and Ja blin (1991) who stimulated
hundreds of studies on information-seeking tactics among newcomers (e.g. Forward,
1999; Holder, 1996; Morrison, 1993; Myers, 1998). In the last decade the focus has
shifted to considering individual differences among newcomers’ socialization processes
and proactive behaviors (e.g., Gibson & Papa, 2003; Tidwell & Sias, 2005). Also,

scholars are increasingly interested in how socialization context or content impacts the
interactive socialization process. This growing body of research considers what kinds of
work cultures or socialization tactics help or hinder newcomer adjustment, including how
factors unique to an organization may encourage or predict proactive behaviors in
newcomers (Ashforth et al., 2007; Hart & Miller, 2005; Scott & Myers, 2005; Slaughter & Zickar, 2006).

Socialization researchers are being challenged to integrate their work with related theoretical concepts, including Person-Organization Fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001) and how socialization processes unfold in nonstandard work relationships (Ballard & Gossett, 2007; Kim, Cable & Kim, 2005). Consensus has grown that more research in narrow, applied contexts is required to broaden our knowledge of socialization processes. This is because: a) socialization can’t be understood well unless one considers who is interacting with what kind of newcomer/s and under what circumstances; and b) socialization occurs in and impacts the discrete local organizational environment, such as a work group, team of colleagues or an academic department (Ashforth et al, 2007; Gardner, 2010; Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

Finally, recent literature trends underscore what Jablin (1982; 1987) originally emphasized: socialization is a dynamic, developmental communicative process. Our understanding improves when research links both what organizations do and what newcomers do during this reciprocal process. As stated earlier, this thesis is intentionally limited to only one half of this process, i.e., the newcomer’s perspective of events in which the organization is equally involved. Although only the newcomer’s interpretations of “what organizations do” are addressed and the intentions or actions from organizational perspectives are not explored, it is essential to understand the organization’s integral role in a reciprocal process. Thus, we begin the next section with what organizations generally do during the interactive socialization process, based on the assumption that organizations recognize the need to orient newcomers.
How Organizations Socialize Newcomers

Organizations continue to socialize newcomers in traditional ways described in half a century of research (Hughes, 1958; Jablin, 2001; Jones, 1986; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Schein, 1968; Van Maanen, 1978). There is no universally accepted definition or conceptualization of socialization processes, strategies, tactics or messages (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Bullis, 1999; Dallimore, 2003; Smith & Turner, 1995). Yet there is widespread agreement on how organizations and their members attempt to orient newcomers through information exchange and interactions (communication), based on thousands of studies across disciplines. Much of the research focuses on socialization strategies or tactics that are intentional, planned or designed to orient newcomers in a particular way and/or strategies that are used unintentionally or by default, i.e., when the organization may not have particular plans for newcomers.

Organizational Socialization Processes: Tactics and Messages

Much of our knowledge about how organizations approach the socialization of newcomers is based on a frequently used model originated by Brim (1966) and re-conceptualized various ways by Van Maanen & Schein (1979), Jones (1986), and others. This model proposes that organizations socialize new employees with six tactics that may overlap and are practiced along a continuum as follows: a) individual or collective, i.e., newcomers may be oriented by themselves or in a group; b) informal or formal, i.e., the newcomer immediately becomes part of the work group and learns “on the job” or is segregated from the work group while learning about roles; c) random or sequential, i.e., the socialization process unfolds in a haphazard way or in a planned series of stages; d) variable or fixed, i.e., the organization has no specific time table for newcomer
adjustment or delineates a clear time period for orientation and socialization activities; e) disjunctive or serial, i.e., there is a lack of previous cohorts from which the newcomer can learn (no one available to “pass down” information), as opposed to others with relevant organizational experience being available, willing or assigned to help the newcomer; and f) divestiture or investiture, i.e., organizational members deny or strip away elements of the newcomer’s identity, in contrast to organizational members recognizing and confirming the identity, skills and experience of the newcomer.

Although hundreds of studies have investigated socialization tactics and the model remains robust, research is inconclusive and there is more to learn about how particular tactics may influence socialization outcomes or newcomer behavior (Ashforth et al. 2007). Following the lead of Jones (1986) some scholars have collapsed the six tactics into two general domains labeled as institutional or collective socialization strategies (encompassing collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial and investiture tactics) and individual strategies (individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive and divestiture). For example, Cable and Parsons (2001) found that highly institutionalized tactics were positively correlated to newcomers’ perceptions of organizational fit.

Researchers have emphasized that organizations use both institutional and individualized tactics in ways that may be idiosyncratic. Tactics grouped together by Jones (1986) and others (e.g., divestiture and disjunctive tactics vs. investiture and serial tactics), and labeled as either “individual” or “institutional,” are not always practiced together. This is especially true of investiture and divestiture, which may or may not correlate with the other “institutionalized” or “individualized” tactics (Ashforth et al. 2007). For example, the military is known for strong institutional socialization tactics
(collective, formal, sequential, fixed and serial) and uses divestiture with new recruits, as their former identities are stripped away to form them into taking on new identities as soldiers. Other organizations may use informal, random or variable tactics overall yet also affirm new members’ prior identities through practicing investiture during which an established organization member communicates that she values the newcomer’s incoming identity.

For the purposes of this study we are primarily interested in the influence of investiture and divestiture socialization tactics as practiced by members of work groups or departments. Jones (1986) and other researchers including Griffin, Colella and Goparaju (2000) have argued that investiture and divestiture tactics, specifically, represent the social (i.e., interpersonal or interactive) dimension of socialization. Griffin et al. point out that newcomers experience investiture or divestiture in terms of whether or not they have social support in the organization. The use of investiture tactics communicate to the newcomer that she is important as an individual and that the organization accepts her identity. In contrast, when divestiture strategies are used the newcomer gets the message that she must change or give up her prior identity to fit into the organization. Griffin et al. further note that in some organizational contexts where collective or institutionalized tactics including investiture are absent, newcomers may be forced to be more proactive as they must engage in a self-socialization process.

Korte (2009) recently affirmed the importance of what he termed “relational processes” and “social tactics” in successful newcomer socialization. Korte also advanced the argument that socialization occurs in discrete work groups or departments, and that practices can vary considerably within the same organization. Korte interviewed
30 recently hired engineers representing different departments in a global organization that employs thousands of engineers. Korte found that the quality of relationships within work departments, specifically newcomers’ perceptions of key interpersonal interactions, was the single most important factor in the socialization of new engineers. The most satisfied newcomers felt they had received valuable support through helpful and respectful interactions with co-workers and managers. In contrast, the most frustrated and unhappy newcomers expressed how dissatisfied they were with their new engineering jobs due to lack of social support, which they attributed to receiving no interest, respect or attention from others in their department.

Overall, there has never been consistency in the vast body of socialization research, nor in findings related to specific socialization tactics as originally outlined by Brim (1966) and re-conceptualized numerous ways since. This lack of consistency is not surprising because socialization experiences vary considerably from the perspectives of unique types of newcomers and research has been done in widely divergent settings. However, there are some areas of agreement in the literature. We do know that socialization tactics — especially the “social” tactics of investiture or divestiture — are enacted via communication, i.e., information exchanges between the organization (or its members) and the newcomer. Jablin’s (2001) inclusive term encompassing socialization tactics, communicative events and information from the organization is “socialization messages.” Socialization messages initiate the chain of events explored in this thesis.

Organizational Socialization Messages

Socialization messages have been defined or identified in a number of ways (Dallimore, 2003; Jablin, 2001; Turner, 1999). Organizational newcomers learn culture or
role-related information from official, formal, or planned events/sources, i.e., collective or institutional strategies, as characterized by Jones (1986). Newcomers also adjust through observation, stories and informal encounters with others in the organization from which they receive advice or messages that seem relevant. Common sources of socialization messages in traditional employment settings include the newcomer’s supervisor and co-workers, upper-level management and written documents provided by the organization (e.g., training manuals). People also pick up significant cues about the culture and their status in ways that can be both mundane and subtle, such as noticing how others are addressed, workspace organization, the use of humor, nonverbal communication, who is included in departmental functions and more (Falcione & Wilson, 1988; Hess, 1993; Louis, 1980; Jablin, 2001).

Several scholars have explored specific types of socialization messages including speech acts, discursive formations, and other communicative events they argue are particularly significant to newcomers. These include stories (Brown, 1985), memorable messages (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Dallimore, 2003; Stohl, 1986;), colloquialisms (Clair, 1996), turning points (Bullis & Bach, 1989) and critical incidents (Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Korte, 2009; Lundberg & Young, 1997; Teboul, 1997).

Jablin’s 2001 review broadly characterized socialization messages as communicative events, activities and interactions. He acknowledged the diverse range of messages and concluded that something meaningful to a newcomer—i.e., perceived as pertinent to her place or value in the organization although not necessarily an explicit action—may be construed as a “message.” This study uses Jablin’s broad 2001 definition through identifying and gathering all types of communicative events or organizational
socialization messages relevant to the research context and purpose. (See Appendix B for how organizational socialization messages were defined and identified in this thesis.)

For nearly three decades researchers have pointed out the need to highlight individuals’ socialization experiences and perspectives (Allen, 1996; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Louis, 1980; Reichers, 1987; Stohl, 1986). Despite the large body of research responding to these calls we need to learn more about what newcomers typically do and how they feel when entering and adjusting to organizations. The next section reviews socialization processes from the perspective of the newcomer during the organizational adjustment stage.

How Newcomers Interpret and Respond to Socialization Messages

Beginning in the 1980s socialization research gradually shifted from an emphasis on the organization to considering the individual newcomer’s point of view. The newcomer’s sensemaking, or perceptions of new environments, is based on cues or socialization messages from a number of sources (Jablin, 2001). However, newcomers do not enter organizations as blank slates; they bring prior experiences and professional identities with them. These imported identities also influence how newcomers make sense of an unfamiliar environment (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995).

Hundreds — if not thousands — of studies have affirmed newcomer uncertainty, stress or anxiety during adjustment and that individual newcomers respond and attempt to cope through engaging in information seeking (Ashforth et al., 2007; Jablin, 2001; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Beginning in the 1990s researchers turned their attention to variations in newcomer behaviors, including ways newcomers interpret and respond proactively to socialization messages beyond the expected information seeking. This study assumes that
the stress experienced by midcareer transition women as newcomers in graduate school as well as their responses and ways of being proactive are unique.

**Proactive Newcomer Communication in Context**

Among the large, growing body of literature on proactive newcomer communication, recent work highlights the influence of localized socialization contexts on newcomers’ behavior and/or distinct proactive behaviors associated with individual newcomer characteristics. When newcomers enter organizations they do more than ask questions to clear up confusion and in some contexts they may be required to ask more questions than in others (Griffin et al., 2000; Jablin, 2001). Across disciplines scholars recognize that most newcomers must engage in at least some self-socialization through information seeking and thus are forced to be proactive, especially in work environments where little orientation or information is offered to them (Ashforth et al., 2007). Grant and Ashford (2008) assert that proactive behavior is increased by ambiguity, including confusion about roles, procedures and expectations (see also Weick, 1995).

Miller and Jablin (1991) were instrumental in initiating hundreds of variable/analytic studies focusing on information seeking, the most universal type of proactive newcomer communication. Ashford and Black (1996) built upon Miller and Jablin’s work, defining newcomer proactivity as including seven components: 1) information seeking to learn how the organization operates; 2) feedback seeking to inquire about one’s work performance; 3) relationship building to connect positively with others; 4) general socializing or participating in social events; 5) networking or socializing with people outside one’s work group; 6) job-change negotiating to modify
job-related tasks or expectations, and 7) positive framing, or trying to view things in an optimistic way.

Saks and Ashforth (1997) called for research that addresses what organizational socialization programs or tactics are most likely to facilitate newcomer proactivity. In response to this and other calls from the 1990s to date scholars have proposed various models and/or definitions of proactivity at work, proactive behavior, proactive newcomer communication or proactive socialization (e.g., Scott & Myers, 2005). As is the case with other concepts and theories related to socialization, there is no consistent definition of proactive newcomer communication. This study was guided by a definition informed by Myers and McPhee (2006) who characterized proactivity as “the initiative to work to obtain desired goals” (p. 446). Therefore proactive communication was defined broadly as: communication initiated by the newcomer during adjustment and targeted to organizational sources to achieve the newcomer’s immediate goals during graduate study and/or her related future career goals. Appendix B further explains how proactive communication was defined and identified in this thesis.

Research has found that various individual or demographic attributes including newcomer gender, race, past work experience, age, and personality traits influence how they interpret and respond to socialization processes when they join organizations (Finkelstein, Kulas, & Dages, 2003; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Saks & Ashforth, 1997; Tidwell & Sias, 2005). In short, newcomers are not all alike, but it is useful to look for trends in groups of newcomers that share attributes. Just as socialization is better understood when embedded in localized contexts, we learn the most about socialization processes when distinct characteristics of newcomers being socialized are considered.
A localized research context that to date has not been studied through the lens of these combined factors is the traditional academic department. Although no two academic programs, disciplines or departments are the same in their cultures or socialization practices, the higher education research on graduate student socialization offers relevant information on how traditional departments generally socialize students into master’s or doctoral programs.

The Research Context: Graduate Student Socialization

Graduate school — which may last for several years — is a transitional period during which students are socialized into academic disciplines, professions and departments (Golde, 2005; Weidman et al., 2001). This thesis is concerned with the discrete time period of adjustment when graduate students enter their departments and navigate their first semesters. Orientation practices offered by departments may vary greatly by disciplines and department cultures yet there are longstanding academic traditions and expectations applicable to most graduate programs (Austin, 2002).

Adaptation to graduate study comprises activities beyond official orientation meetings or reading departmental handbooks; these activities include important interactions with others in the department (Brus, 2006; Myers, 1998; Polson, 2003).

Overall, the research on graduate student socialization published during the last decade is alarming in tone and highlights widespread inadequate practices and negative outcomes, including high attrition rates framed as a crisis in higher education (Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Golde 2005; Nesheim et al., 2006). Lovitts and Nelson (2000) argue that high attrition rates are attributable to students’ negative experiences when they begin graduate school, including lack of integration into the social structures of graduate
programs. They stated, “Students leave less because of what they bring with them to the university than because of what happens to them after they arrive” (p. 50). Across disciplines around 57% of graduate students drop out before completion of their degrees and other scholars have linked this problem to poor socialization and bad fit (e.g., Gardner, 2010; Golde, 2005).

Trends indicate graduate students are increasingly diverse with growing numbers of older nontraditional students and more women entering graduate school (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). Higher education research has found that orientation programs may be especially inadequate for nontraditional, older students who bring a different set of expectations, knowledge and needs to universities (Austin, 2002; Brus, 2006; Nesheim et al. 2006; Polson, 2003). As will be discussed further, most departments officially or unofficially assume that graduate students are socialized primarily with the cohort (other graduate students) with whom they are likely to bond and share some characteristics, including age. This thesis argues that one reason traditional socialization practices may be inadequate for nontraditional older students is that they are unlikely to feel similar to and connect with peers who are half their ages.

Graduate school adjustment is consistently described in the literature as a highly interactive, social process during which integration into department cultures and forming relationships with others in the department are keys to student success (Weidman et al., 2001). Research has affirmed that positive outcomes including higher completion rates and students who perceive their departments favorably are linked with strong departmental support from both peers (the graduate student cohort) and faculty (Gardner, 2010; Polson, 2003).
Weidman et al. (2001) proposed a comprehensive model of graduate student socialization cited often in the literature. They concluded that peer climate is a critical aspect of the culture graduate students encounter: “the cohort influences the learning process, opens support mechanisms, and enriches the experience socially and emotionally” (p. 62). The authors state that when fellow graduate students are demographically similar, peer bonding and support is more likely to be strong and their adjustment to graduate study is easier. In addition to addressing the significance of peer support, Weidman et al. discuss what graduate departments attempt to accomplish via socialization. They refer to students as “neophytes” whose socialization outcomes are the acquisition of sufficient knowledge, skills, and values for successful entry into a professional career. Adjustment to a subordinate student role is necessary for progression to professional status and an individual student’s personality or stage of development may require abandonment of previous roles and identities, which may cause internal conflict. This “abandonment of previous roles and identities” is consistent with divestiture, a socialization tactic described earlier in this literature review.

Although Weidman et al. only briefly introduce socialization tactics as conceptualized by Van Maanen and Schein (1979), they make points relevant to this thesis. They note the importance of investiture for successful transformation of the student into a new professional academic role and argue that this typically occurs along with serial socialization as faculty train, mentor and act as role models for graduate students. They also state that faculty members may not readily accept new nontraditional students, because they are not like their predecessors or other students in the department. In such cases, disjunctive socialization and divestiture may be more likely to occur as
there are no role models for the nontraditional student and/or her characteristics seem incompatible with what is expected in the department.

Weidman et al. emphasize that no two graduate student socialization experiences are identical. Nevertheless, the normative process is to pass through traditional rites of passage (some originating hundreds of years ago) that bring students to a higher level of personal and professional maturity. In order to mature, new graduate students rely on faculty and older peers as role models. Interaction with role models in the academic department is such an important part of the socialization process because the graduate student’s new identity as an academic is built around learning from and following the lead of her superiors (i.e., more experienced faculty members who explain how things are done and act as mentors).

The Weidman et al. report assumes a homogeneous population of traditional, younger graduate students being assisted or mentored by older or more experienced department members. Clearly, aspects of this model do not fit experienced graduate students who entered professions years ago and who are already “mature” by most definitions. Such students might be older than the department members who may or may not mentor them. Presumably older students have also reached stages of personal or professional development that will require divestiture of prior roles and identities above and beyond what is normally expected of all graduate students. Midcareer transition women students, in particular, are likely to have strong age and career-related identities they may not wish to give up upon entering graduate school.

This thesis, like Brus (2006) and Polson (2003), challenges traditional graduate student socialization practices in that they fail to value and address the specific needs of
nontraditional graduate students. Brus highlights changing demographic trends in graduate schools including increasing numbers of older women students who are challenged to balance school with other life issues and who don’t fit the normative profile for graduate students. She argues that such students often perceive a “chilly climate” in their graduate departments and that the “one-size-fits-all” model is inadequate in providing the academic and social support that will increase satisfaction and retention among nontraditional students (p. 43).

Polson (2003) emphasizes that graduate student role socialization is a primary responsibility of academic departments, while noting that most departmental orientation programs are not designed for the needs of older students. Like Brus, Polson notes that nontraditional graduate students’ life circumstances make their adjustments to graduate school more difficult. These circumstances may include juggling multiple roles (i.e., providing materially for self or family, elder care, and other “adult” responsibilities). Polson argues that there is a need for better departmental support as nontraditional students deal with possible role conflicts and the burden of extra responsibilities not shared by typical younger graduate students. She recommends that department members must do a better job of communicating to older graduate students that their experiences and opinions matter; however, she does not specify how academic departments should accomplish this.

Although Polson’s article does not incorporate socialization tactics, the idea that departments must communicate to students that they “matter” is consistent with the investiture socialization tactics discussed in the previous section. To review, when an organization practices investiture tactics through members’ interactions with the
newcomer, the newcomer’s unique identity and experiences are being recognized and affirmed. Finally, Polson underscores that graduate student demographics are increasingly diverse, and require “sensitive, flexible, and creative” responses from graduate departments if institutions wish to retain and earn the loyalty of mature, high-performing students.

**Summary and Research Focus**

The higher education literature on graduate student socialization is incomplete. It marginalizes or does not adequately address the experiences and needs of increasing numbers of nontraditional, older graduate students and no study explores the experiences of midcareer transition women specifically. However, the higher education research informs this thesis as follows: a) it affirms the centrality of communication in socialization (i.e., social support or integration, interactions, and relationships with faculty and other graduate students); b) it suggests that *investiture tactics*, especially, might improve socialization experiences for nontraditional older students by academic departments recognizing the unique “adult” identities of such students (Polson, 2003); c) it notes that normative graduate student socialization processes require a divestiture of prior identities in order to take on a new academic identity; and d) such divestiture is likely to be experienced more strongly by nontraditional students who enter departments where they don’t fit the norm (Weidman et al, 2001).

In sum, the higher education literature associates inadequate socialization with alarming graduate student attrition rates and indicates further study is needed if graduate departments wish to socialize and retain increasing numbers of older nontraditional students (Brus, 2006; Council of Graduate Schools, 2004; Golde, 2005; Lovitts &
Nelson, 2000). This thesis explores the experiences of a distinct and under-studied type of older nontraditional student labeled the midcareer transition woman graduate student. I argue that the midcareer transition woman graduate student begins graduate school as an *atypical, proactive newcomer* unlikely to fit the mold in her academic department.

**The Newcomer: Midcareer Transition Women Graduate Students**

This section discusses selected work to shed light on characteristics and experiences of midcareer transition women graduate students. The limited research on this group also frames my argument for labeling thesis participants *atypical, proactive newcomers* in the context of being socialized into traditional academic departments.

As briefly discussed in the introduction of this chapter, the midlife period for women and the midcareer transition phase in a professional’s career are both associated with self-directed, proactive behavior (Hall et al., 2002; Josselson, 2002). At midlife, a woman is typically focused on integrating aspects of her identity and she desires work-life balance, including a career that reflects how she sees herself during a stage known for transformation (Vickers-Willis, 2002). This thesis argues that the midcareer transition woman graduate student is by definition proactive because she chose to give up her previous established, fulltime career to attend graduate school in anticipation of a new career. She is also atypical as a newcomer to fulltime graduate study because job or career-related losses she voluntarily incurred immediately prior to starting graduate school make her different from traditional graduate students in their 20s.

Little is known about how midcareer transition women behave in and what they experience in traditional graduate departments. No research addresses their socialization into graduate study specifically. We need to understand more about how their life stage,
career stage and age-related identity may (or may not) impact their adjustment. The limited literature on midcareer transition women graduate students summarized here highlights some unique challenges these women experience that are relevant to this thesis.

Graduate students have been the subjects of hundreds of studies. However, as addressed in the previous section, the literature focuses almost exclusively on traditional graduate students between the ages of 22 and 29 and overlooks the perspectives of older students (Brus, 2006; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002; Polson, 2003). Furthermore, the higher education literature does not adequately address the needs of distinct groups of older students, e.g., distinguishing male students from female students or looking at those in midcareer transition, specifically. The research fails to recognize that nontraditional midcareer transition women graduate students may be entering graduate school with distinct motivations, characteristics, and experiences. The few studies that narrowly describe the midcareer transition woman’s experience call for the need to learn more about how women adjust to academic departments after choosing to leave their longtime jobs and give up previous lifestyles and identities in pursuit of a career change.

Sanders and Nassar (1993) conducted an exploratory study on master’s level social work (MSW) students who had previously held careers yet chose to enter social work as a new profession. As graduate faculty members who interacted regularly with their subjects, the authors were keenly aware of how experienced nontraditional women students differed from their younger cohort. They interviewed mature women (mean age: 43) in their master’s programs and described their subjects as “‘atypical’ in terms of their
social and psychological maturity” (p. 108). Participants responded to questions about factors related to their career change and graduate student life.

Sanders and Nassar found that many subjects experienced a “profound identity crisis” (p. 109) when they entered the MSW program that they associated with a sudden change and loss in status (e.g., from successful entrepreneur or professional to the role of subordinate student). The researchers found that the oldest members of the graduate student cohort reported the most difficulty adjusting to the student role. The authors argued for graduate programs to differentiate such students’ needs from the needs of traditional graduate students.

Another exploratory study by Anderson and Miezitis (1999) described the perceived stress and life satisfaction of ten women who had been active in established careers prior to beginning graduate study. These women were in graduate school to begin new careers. As expected, the researchers reported that their respondents experienced a lot of stress while adjusting to graduate school. The authors found that participants who had formerly occupied positions of authority reported the most stress related to policies, expectations and academic hierarchies they perceived both as too rigid and as designed for younger, traditional graduate students.

Dissertation research by Spaite (2004) examined how participants perceived their graduate educations and role transitions when they decided to pursue new careers as professional psychologists, in particular how subjects’ previous career identities influenced their transitions to new identities. Spaite found that women coped most effectively with the stresses related to demanding graduate programs when they were able to rely upon multiple identities and roles. This dissertation was accessible only in the
form of an abstract so limited information was available. However, Spaite’s finding about seasoned graduate students depending on multiple identities to cope with stress seems connected to Josselson’s (2002) assertion that midlife women seek to integrate multiple identities and roles rather than giving up one identity for another.

Literature Summary and Research Questions

Knowledge from diverse disciplines and perspectives plus personal experience informs this thesis. Higher education scholarship highlights the applied research context (graduate student socialization in traditional academic departments). Through the literature on midcareer transition women graduate students we know something about characteristics associated with thesis participants, whom I label atypical proactive newcomers when they begin graduate school. The communication socialization literature provides the theoretical framework and research questions.

To understand how midcareer transition women experience adjustment into academic departments through communication socialization processes, decades of literature suggest that we must: a) explore socialization from the individual’s point of view (Allen, 1996; Clair, 1999; Gundry & Rousseau, 1994; Louis, 1980; Stohl, 1986); and b) look at socialization as a developmental interactive process, considering how various strategies, tactics or messages used by the organization influence perception of fit and patterns of newcomer interpretation, response and proactive communication (Cable & Parsons, 2001; Jablin, 1987, 2001; Jones, 1986; Korte, 2009; Reichers, 1987).

The higher education literature on graduate student socialization is incomplete and does not address what happens when a midcareer transition woman enters a traditional academic department as a new graduate student. The organizational
socialization research, while rich and deep, continues to overlook early socialization experiences from perspectives of newcomers in contemporary contexts that do not fit outdated assumptions or limited models (Allen, 1996; Ashforth et al., 2007; Waldeck & Myers, 2007).

This thesis argues that life stage (age), career stage and pre-entry identity or status-loss issues are central to understanding how midcareer transition women experience their organizational adjustment-socialization process into traditional graduate programs. My assumption is that characteristics these women share impact their interpretation and responses to socialization messages from academic departments, as well as their proactive behavior. It is expected that a distinctly different socialization process will occur because prior to entering graduate school the midcareer transition woman graduate student had substantive life experiences and made significant life decisions (including leaving behind her previous career and related roles). These differences distinguish her from typical younger graduate students. A useful way to explore how midcareer transition women experience socialization is through the lens of communication processes she recalls from her graduate department adjustment.

This study starts with socialization messages the midcareer transition student receives in her graduate department. They begin a chain of events during the critical organizational adjustment period through which a newcomer comes to understand her role, the organizational culture and how well she fits (Ashforth et al. 2007; Jablin, 2001; Louis, 1980). These messages initiate the newcomer’s interpretation and response according to Jablin’s (1982) observation that newcomers interpret new work environments primarily from formal and informal communication received from others.
This study assumes that, like all newcomers, the midcareer transition woman will try to make sense of messages and is likely to respond with uncertainty and information seeking, a nearly universal type of proactive communication. However, unlike other newcomers, she may interpret messages, respond to them, and behave proactively in unique ways because she does not fit the typical profile in the context of traditional graduate study.

The three research questions guiding this study assume a progression or dynamic unfolding of socialization-communication processes, beginning with the subjective meanings newcomers make of socialization messages. They are as follows:

RQ1: How do midcareer transition women graduate students interpret organizational socialization messages during organizational adjustment?

RQ2: How do midcareer transition women graduate students respond to organizational socialization messages during organizational adjustment?

RQ3: How do midcareer transition women graduate students engage in proactive communication during organizational adjustment?

The next chapter outlines the methods I used to explore 20 midcareer transition women’s interpretations, responses and proactive communication patterns during adjustment to graduate study.
CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

The research questions in this study were answered using an interpretive phenomenological interviewing approach. Phenomenology investigates lived experience through describing individual recollections and personal accounts and derives meaning from these descriptions (Van Manen, 1990). The research design was built on Jablin’s (1987; 2001) conceptual framework of communication socialization processes and responds to numerous calls to examine socialization from the perspective of individuals and/or in contexts that do not fit established models or assumptions (e.g., Allen, 1996; Ballard & Gossett, 2007; Clair, 1999; Polson, 2003).

The goal was to extend the socialization literature through exploring a localized context to unearth authentic stories of subjective experiences (Ashforth et al., 2007; Silverman, 2001). Accordingly, this exploration focused exclusively on 20 midlife women participants who chose to begin traditional full-time graduate study at an age and career stage that was atypical. This thesis distinguished full-time, traditional graduate education from part-time, distance learning, or other specialized curricula that may have been created specifically for mature adults who are working or have other responsibilities precluding full-time attendance. Traditional graduate departments and programs are not defined explicitly in the higher education literature. However, there is an implicit assumption and understanding that such programs and related departmental policies are designed for traditional graduate students, generally defined as between 22-29 years of age (Brus, 2006; National Center for Education Statistics, 2007).
To keep this study focused I explored what this transitional time of graduate study adjustment meant through a specific lens: participants’ interpretations and responses to organizational socialization messages. I also wished to understand how they engaged in proactive communication within their academic departments. This was based on an assumption that midcareer transition women were likely to behave proactively, and the need to address an area about which we know little in the growing proactive newcomer literature (Grant & Ashford, 2008; Josselson, 2002; Levine, 2005).

Recruitment and Description of Participants

To identify mid-career transition women graduate students, I used a purposive sampling strategy (also known as criterion sampling), plus snowball sampling. Purposive sampling identifies subjects representative of a special population and snowball sampling allows volunteer respondents to suggest other possible study participants (Babbie, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The criteria to identify mid-career transition women graduate students was informed by the career stages work of Hall (1986) and Ibarra (2003). The sampling frame was set as follows:

1. Self-identified, established career women who were employed full time for 10 or more years prior to graduate school enrollment.
2. Enrolled in graduate school for reason(s) related to mid-career transition (planning a different career).
3. Completed at least six months’ full-time graduate study in traditional academic departments within the three most recent academic years (i.e., the years closest to the data collection period of summer and fall, 2006).
In addition to meeting the above eligibility requirements, participants identified themselves as willing to engage in an in-depth e-mail interviewing process and to be available by phone, if necessary.

Participants were recruited in August 2006, using multiple-channel networking (word of mouth, phone, and the Internet, including the National Communication Association’s Communication Research and Theory Network [CRTNET] service). After volunteers were pre-screened for eligibility, 23 signed consent forms and began the interviewing process. Three chose to withdraw from the study, which left a remaining sample of 20. Table 1 on the following page depicts the make-up of the sample.

The mean age of participants when they started graduate school was 42.3 years. The sample represented a variety of living arrangements, degree programs, and geographic locations in the United States. Participants attended graduate school in 15 states: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania (3), Ohio (4), Indiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Texas, California, New Mexico, North Dakota, and Montana. Ten respondents had relocated to new communities for graduate school, including two who moved across the country (e.g., from the West Coast to New England). Ten women were Ph.D. students; one was pursuing a law degree (JD). The remaining nine were pursuing master’s degrees.

Participants’ earlier professional careers were also varied. Most held management or leadership positions prior to beginning graduate study, including one publishing company president, a corporate human resources director, a city planning engineer, an officer in the military, and a news bureau chief for one of the nation’s largest newspapers. The majority of participants (75%) planned to transition their career into academia.
## Table 1 – Sample Description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Previous fulltime career or position</th>
<th>New career choice following graduate school</th>
<th>Degree program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Manager/public retirement system</td>
<td>Professor or consultant</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Newspaper reporter/editor</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Hawken</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Community College Administrator</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bess</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Environment/Safety Consultant</td>
<td>Consulting/Teaching</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Sunset</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Marketing Director</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doria</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>University administrator</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>President of publishing firm</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>County Detective/Major Crimes</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiona</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Military officer/Air Nat'l Guard</td>
<td>Adult learning/development/teaching</td>
<td>M Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Director, Information Technology</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karin</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Television producer/director</td>
<td>Consultant to TV industry/professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Program administrator/State DOT</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mabel</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Corporate Director/materials</td>
<td>College instructor</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pandora</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>International news bureau chief</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. Hat</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Corporate HR Director</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>PhD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ n = 15 (75\%) \text{ with professor or teaching role as primary or secondary new career choice}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Previous fulltime career or position</th>
<th>New career choice following graduate school</th>
<th>Degree program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estelle</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>National sales manager</td>
<td>Speech Pathologist</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>City Planning Engineer</td>
<td>Marketing Consultant</td>
<td>MBA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Alice</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Systems Analyst/Software consultant</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>JD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rainey</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Writer/Editor</td>
<td>Marketing/Corporate Communications</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Secondary education/counselor</td>
<td>Non-profit Executive Director</td>
<td>MA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ n = 5 (25\%) \text{ with plans to enter a new career outside academia (following graduate school)}\]

Mean age 42.3

| Age Range | 34 to 52 |
During their first semester of graduate study, most (85%) participants were married or in a committed relationship. Two married respondents lived alone during graduate school adjustment (their spouses remained in other states). The two single respondents also lived alone and had moved to new states to begin their programs. Sixteen research participants lived with others. Of these, 15 cohabited with spouses or partners and four had at least one child living at home. The one divorced respondent lived with a roommate during her first semester of graduate study.

Data Collection: The Interviewing Procedure

Phenomenological studies use in-depth interviews to provide portrayals of lived experience and then offer insightful reflections on the meanings of those complex experiences (Van Manen, 2002). I used computer-mediated communication in the form of electronic interviews (hereafter referred to as e-mail interviewing) to elicit detailed, deep descriptions of participants’ graduate school adjustment. This method was suitable to the goals of this study for several reasons, including the desire to interview a national, verifiable sample from diverse institutions within a short time frame and at minimal expense (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

E-mail interviewing is noted for being efficient and effective (Meho, 2006). It has been successfully employed in numerous studies (e.g., Creswell, 2002; Dallimore & Mickel, 2006; McAuliffe, 2003). Morgan and Symon (2004) found that e-mail interviews provide many advantages, especially for samples of populations who are familiar and comfortable with using e-mail such as the participants in this study who were career-oriented professionals before entering graduate school.
A comprehensive review of this rapidly growing research method highlights several benefits of e-mail interviewing. These advantages include gathering data quickly from geographically dispersed participants, allowing conversations to continue over a series of days (encouraging enhanced reflection and further probing into participants responses), and the end result: a transcript in participants’ own words (Meho, 2006). This low-inference data (i.e., verbatim transcripts) is guaranteed in e-mail interviews because respondents provide the text for analysis, which eliminates the risk of transcription error (Silverman, 2001). An accurate transcript of participants’ accounts is also especially appropriate to a phenomenological research approach that attempts to capture the essence of lived experience using participants’ own words (Van Manen, 2002).

Upon initiation of e-mail interviewing I set the context for the study, emphasizing that I wanted participants to focus on what they experienced in their first semesters of graduate school within the boundaries of their academic departments. I also asked the respondents to choose pseudonyms. Thereafter, I addressed and identified them by their pseudonyms.

Because this study examined a context that had not been researched previously, the guiding research questions represented a best guess of what might be revealed in the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). As indicated in the literature review, the research questions were derived from Jablin’s (2001) theoretical framework and reflected a developmental communication socialization process that unfolds in a fairly predictable way, yet I remained open to finding unanticipated results, with the intent of answering the original questions broadly (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).
Interview questions were sent in a series of sequential e-mails, at the rate of one to three questions per message. This method ensured that participants met study parameters and clearly understood the questions. Initial questions were designed to determine study eligibility, set the context, and introduce topics related to the research questions. I had pre-tested my interview questions with five pilot interviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). During and following this process I received feedback from pilot participants that boosted my confidence in question clarity and wording. I used a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix A) that included 14 questions and instructions such as:

- What graduate student orientation-related information do you remember receiving when you started?
- Tell me about messages or interactions that stood out for you during this adjustment period.
- How did you respond to the messages you received (and/or interactions you experienced) at this time?
- Can you think of other factors that influenced your feelings about your role in your graduate department during this adjustment period (or, is there anything else you wish I had asked, or that you wish to share)?

Although I sometimes changed the order or adapted wording to fit with the flow of respondents’ answers, I made sure that each interviewee addressed every question (King, 2004). I remained open to other issues respondents brought out in interviews, because my goal was to collect rich data encompassing the complete range of adjustment experiences (Van Manen, 1990). The full raw data set consisted of 232 single-spaced pages (10,456 lines) of printed e-mail interview transcripts to be interpreted. At this point, I began data analysis using a recommended detailed, line-by-line approach as my first step to reduce data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The data analysis and interpretation process is explained in the following section.
Data Analysis and Interpretation

The goal was to identify common patterns of: a) socialization message interpretation; b) responses to these messages; and c) incidents of proactive communication in which participants engaged during first semesters of graduate study.

To accomplish this, I analyzed interview transcripts following procedures recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Strauss and Corbin (1998). I used a constant comparative method, explained by Strauss and Corbin as an interpretive nonmathematical data analysis process designed to discover concepts and patterns in the data, followed by arranging findings in a manner that makes sense theoretically.

This required multiple readings and rounds of data analysis, undertaken in four general stages: a) data reduction and preparation for coding, based on theoretical sensitivity; b) organizing or segmenting reduced data into units of analysis (thought units) and coding or labeling the thought units; c) clustering thought units into categories (or themes); and d) using a thematic analysis process to identify the primary themes for the entire data set. The following sections explain these steps in more detail.

Data Reduction and Theoretical Sensitivity

I prepared data for coding by combining each respondent’s individual e-mail messages into one document or “transcript” identified by her pseudonym. Early on in the data collection process, I began to make notes in text margins as I recognized material that seemed related to research questions or was most emphasized by respondents (Shank, 2006). My process of filtering raw data for relevant concepts was guided by theoretical sensitivity, or being sensitive to material I might expect to find, based on established research and theory. This data reduction method is recommended as an early
step in qualitative research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Although I also read for and paid attention to unexpected information in the interview transcripts, my data reduction process was informed by definitions used in earlier socialization research. Appendix B explains this process in detail and includes the information I used as sensitizing concepts.

First, I dissected raw data to identify pre-existing categories derived from socialization theory and the localized context I had set for this research. I used sensitizing concepts or definitions from Jablin’s (2001) broad conceptualization of socialization messages, responses and categories of proactive communication. I also remained open to other examples of messages, responses, and newcomer proactivity as described in studies published after 2001 (e.g. Scott & Myers, 2005).

As the analytical starting point, socialization messages were identified in order to trace participants’ impressions or conclusions about these messages. This required several readings to locate references to socialization messages, defined broadly as all types of communicative events relevant to the research context and purpose, i.e., any message from the academic department that made an impression on the newcomer because she perceived it as relevant to understanding the new culture or her role.

I highlighted every line of text that contained something related to socialization messages and interpretations, responses or proactive communication that were linked to these messages. In addition, I highlighted any other factors emphasized as integral to respondents’ first semester transition. Appendix B explicates this process in more detail, including my initial definitions, guidelines, and exemplars. This multi-step process of data reduction resulted in 106 single-spaced pages, or 4808 lines of text highlighted for the next stage: coding and segmenting by thought unit.
The Coding Process

After data reduction or narrowing the data set to what is of interest (Keyton, 2006), I identified which data I would code. The next step was to choose a unit of analysis (i.e., a standard, well-defined element within the text). Because my intent was to capture deep descriptions of lived experience and complex communication socialization processes Jablin (2001) described as a linked chain of events, I chose the thought unit as my unit of analysis. This has been employed in hundreds of studies that use thematic analysis and/or analyze interview text to explore socialization, individual-work relationships and messages (e.g., Canary & Canary, 2007; Donohue & Druckman, 2009; Jehn & Shah, 1997; Mickel, Dallimore, & Nelson, 2008; Souza, 1999).

The thought unit was defined as a complete statement of any length, ranging from a phrase to a string of sentences or paragraphs, focusing on a cohesive topic, communicative event or main idea. This is consistent with the definition used by several researchers (e.g., Atwater, Waldman, Carey & Cartier, 2001; Canary & Canary, 2007; Dallimore & Mickel, 2006). After reorganizing and piecing together data into coherent thought units, 519 thought units were identified and coded for the next stage: organizing/clustering into themes.

Clustering Data Into Categories

Following identification of thought units, I generated a list of 57 codes or labels and organized each by their apparent relationships to the three original research questions plus an important “other” category. My procedure for axial coding, i.e., categorizing open codes into groups or themes, was influenced by Boyatzis (1998) who lists the attributes of good codes, including: a label, a definition of what a theme concerns, a description of
how to recognize when themes occur, and theme qualifications or exclusions, which may be demonstrated by exemplars. Thus I created my axial codes (clustered categories), defined them, and set parameters for applying them. At this stage I needed to prioritize and reduce categories, and I used a thematic analysis process to do so. My codebook incorporating the reduced categories that resulted in final themes appears in Appendix C. The themes are explained in detail in the following two chapters of this thesis.

The thematic analysis process involved organizing or generating meaning from a large amount of data, especially when attempting to preserve each participant’s lived experience or language (Ezzy, 2002; Shank, 2006). I applied Owen’s (1984) thematic analysis as I reached the final stage of reviewing categories and narrowing them to the most significant, over-arching themes or findings. Owen’s method has been employed in numerous socialization and other organizational communication studies (e.g., Clair, 1996; Dallimore, 2003; Kramer & Noland, 1999; Lui & Buzzanell, 2004; Souza, 1999; Zorn & Gregory, 2005). I used Owen’s criteria of repetition, recurrence, and forcefulness to identify primary themes for the data set by cross-referencing all 20 participants’ most-emphasized themes.

Repetition refers to words or phrases repeated within the text and related to research questions or emerging themes. Recurrence is noted when identical or similar meanings show up throughout multiple participants’ accounts (i.e., different words used to express the same theme). Forcefulness indicates emphasis or importance. In addition to obvious emphasis through language (e.g., “absolutely the most important factor was...”), forcefulness was shown through bold, underlined or italicized words, use of all capital
letters, exclamation points, or other unusual punctuation. I confirmed indications of forcefulness with respondents to ensure things such as capitalization or punctuation, were not merely features of e-mail programs or of my computer printer.

In the interest of themes best fitting Owens’ criteria, I limited final themes described in Chapters 3 and 4 to concerns or patterns of response most predominant across the data set and meeting all three criteria (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003). I was careful to confirm my perceptions of participants’ areas of emphasis. I used established methods to check the credibility of my findings, as the next section describes.

Credibility of Findings and Member Checking

In their widely cited work Miles & Huberman (1994) address the credibility of qualitative research findings in terms of whether findings have “truth value” or make sense to both the participants studied and to the reader. Shank (2006) affirms that verification of meaning is fundamental to good interpretive research. The authenticity or plausibility of findings are enhanced by rigorous data analysis procedures as well as by checking in with participants (often referred to as member checking) to confirm whether the researcher’s interpretation of findings matches participants’ experiences.

As a means to ensure the credibility of my findings I employed a member checking process through which I engaged with respondents regularly and rigorously by e-mail, checking my interpretations as data was being gathered (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For example, upon receipt of an e-mail answer to a specific question, I e-mailed back to confirm my understanding of the answer and/or to request more information. Following the initial confirming/clarifying e-mail, I typically responded with another follow-up
e-mail message in which I requested affirmation that I “understand correctly” or “have it right.” Participants would respond with comments such as “exactly,” “you are correct in your understanding,” or “yes, I’m confirming you have it right!” This process of constant e-mailing back and forth occurred with all 20 participants during data collection and up to 72 separate e-mail messages were exchanged between me and each participant. Additional member checking, to confirm my assumptions and/or to collect more data, occurred via telephone with 25% of participants. All five women with whom I had in-depth confirmatory phone conversations agreed with my interpretations of their experiences, which boosted my confidence in my conclusions (Silverman, 2001).

I used other recommended practices for enhancing the credibility of qualitative research as listed here, to bolster the authenticity of my data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Shank, 2006; Silverman, 2001):

1. Pre-testing the interview schedule, to check that questions were being interpreted consistently by participants
2. Addressing data dependability and integrity by clarifying where data originated and tracing it via an audit trail that showed specifically how it was collected and used
3. Seeking enhanced believability of findings, through maintaining extended contact with participants and noting findings that indicated more than one participant experienced the same phenomena
4. Organizing data in various ways, including within case and cross case research displays to discover or explain patterns in the data
5. Taking care to reduce bias inherent in exploring a process with which I had personal experience, recognizing there is no such thing as “neutral” research. To control for my own position and interpretations, I put data aside for long periods (several months) and reviewed it anew, repeatedly. I checked in with participants again for validation of their interpretations and intentionally sought information in the data that differed or contrasted sharply with my own experiences to ensure I was not overlooking anything.

Summary

An in-depth phenomenological e-mail interviewing process was used to capture authentic descriptions of participants’ lived experience as they recalled their adjustment to graduate school. A constant comparative data analysis method and thematic analysis were applied to generate understanding — from the perspectives of 20 mid-career transition women — of their socialization communication patterns in traditional academic departments during their first semesters. In the next chapter, an explanation of results from the thematic analysis process is presented to further demonstrate how meaning was generated from participants’ descriptions of their experiences (Van Manen, 2002).
CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Introduction of Themes

As discussed in the literature review, socialization communication for newcomers is a dynamic, complex process of sensemaking, reacting, responding and interacting while attempting to understand and fit into a new organization and role. The guiding research questions were designed to discover common ways twenty midcareer transition women experienced a discrete period through tracing the socialization-communication processes they recalled from first semesters of graduate study.

Research questions were informed by work of Jablin (1987; 2001). The first research question asked how do midcareer transition women graduate students interpret organizational socialization messages during organizational adjustment? The second question asked how do midcareer transition women graduate students respond to organizational socialization messages during organizational adjustment? Finally, research question three asked how do midcareer transition women graduate students engage in proactive communication during organizational adjustment?

The research questions are answered from a perspective appropriate to the phenomenological interviewing approach described in the previous chapter. Findings reflect participants’ own words and the full story as they shared it, i.e., the “lived experience” of their socialization-communication processes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Van Manen, 2002). Data consisted of e-mail responses to questions related exclusively to participants’ perceptions of their experiences when they started graduate school. For example, they were asked: What orientation-related information do you remember
receiving? Who were the significant people (and their roles) who influenced you at this
time? How did you respond to the messages you received (and/or interactions you
experienced) at this time? (See Appendix A for interview schedule.)

Although findings are addressed by research question and are described separately
in this chapter, they overlap and are connected, as explained by Jablin (1987; 2001) who
characterized the developmental nature of communication-socialization. To review, he
described the process as a series of communicative events, message exchanges,
interpretations and responses through which newcomers attempt to make sense of
unfamiliar organizations by calling upon their past experiences while simultaneously
coping with present circumstances and thinking about the future. This thesis assumed that
past experiences would influence the socialization process strongly because of midcareer
transition women’s established age and career-related identities.

This study identified aspects of the socialization process unique to midcareer
transition women in the localized, academic department context of beginning fulltime
graduate school. Findings also highlighted the interrelated nature of socialization
processes through revealing extra-organizational factors unique to a group of experienced
newcomers who entered graduate study in the midst of multiple transitions related to a
midcareer change (Ibarra, 2003; Josselson, 2002). This thesis was designed to reveal and
understand commonalities in experiences based on assumptions that participants began
graduate study as atypical newcomers who had voluntarily given up previous careers and
who had proactive orientations. Thus, findings are organized based on the commonalities
or the six most prevalent, global themes across the data set. These themes were identified
using Owen’s (1984) criteria of repetition, recurrence and forcefulness, described in Chapter Two.

Primary themes related to the research questions as follows: a) two perspectives through which participants interpreted socialization messages (department fit and identity losses); b) two patterns of response to these messages (interactive stress reactions and internal success strategies); and c) two contrasting ways they engaged in proactive communication in their academic departments during adjustment (positive proactive communication and sink or swim survival communication). A description and examples of each theme follows, organized by research question.

Interpretations of Socialization Messages

The first research question asked how participants interpreted a broad range of socialization messages they received from their graduate departments. A newcomer’s interpretations of earliest organizational encounters are highly influential in setting the stage for her relationship with the organization. They initiate reactions or responses from the newcomer, which may include information seeking and other forms of proactive communication with the intent to clarify roles or advance in the organization (Jablin, 2001).

In this study organizational socialization messages were defined broadly as all communicative events the newcomer perceived as relevant to her organizational role(s) and/or her learning about the new culture (Jablin, 2001; Louis, 1980; Smircich & Calas, 1987; Weidman et al., 2001). Participants reported a wide range of socialization messages and information from a number of sources. However, specific messages from sources outside of the academic department were outside the scope of this study. (See
Appendix B for parameters I used to determine socialization messages.) In brief, socialization messages encompassed the full continuum of collective and/or individualized departmental socialization tactics (Jones, 1986) including planned, official information exchanges (or encounters) as well as unplanned, unofficial or implicit information exchanges.

In their retrospective accounts of first semester experiences, participants expressed their interpretations of departmental socialization messages in terms of what was happening to them both within and outside their academic departments. They emphasized a multi-layered adaptation process of simultaneously navigating significant changes in lifestyle, roles and personal/professional identity while adjusting to the graduate department (Brus, 2006; Josselson, 2002; Spaite, 2004). The women interviewed for this research changed their lives to begin graduate school and their message interpretations were filtered through an awareness of these changes, including what they had given up. Several years of having worked in professional organizational contexts distinguished midcareer women from younger, traditional-aged graduate students in their departments. A comparison to past professional experiences in other organizations is inherent in midcareer transition women’s interpretations and responses to socialization messages in the new organizational context of graduate study (Louis, 1980).

Participants’ interpretations of socialization messages focused upon their personal assessments of how well they fit or found their place in the academic department, and external identity loss issues related to the midcareer transition that brought them to graduate school. External identity loss issues impacted internal departmental adjustment in significant ways. Themes of loss and trying to find fit reflected the concerns foremost
in participants’ minds while concurrently adapting to new lifestyles, roles and organizational environments. The two predominant and interrelated issues newcomers attempted to resolve during their adjustment to the graduate department were: a) Department Fit, i.e., to what extent she experienced a sense of belonging and insider support; and b) Identity Losses, i.e., the impact of what she gave up to attend graduate school in pursuit of a new career, including status, roles and rewards associated with her former career. The two themes of Department Fit and Identity Losses are described in the following sections. The participants in this study self selected their pseudonyms at the beginning of data collection. These pseudonyms are used to identify the source of each exemplar and appear in italic type for ease of identification (e.g., Pandora).

**Department Fit**

As indicated in the literature review, issues of fit are fundamental to organizational socialization and reflect a core assumption of this study: when atypical newcomers enter traditional organizations that socialize newcomers in standard ways, the process may not unfold as expected (Allen, 1996; Golde, 2005; Jablin, 2001). Midcareer transition women beginning graduate programs in established academic departments do not fit the organizational norms and have distinct needs differentiating them from traditional aged students (Polson, 2003; Sanders & Nassar, 1993). Although they were not asked explicitly about fit, participants were asked to explain how they felt during their first semesters of graduate study and how they would describe their place in relation to their academic departments (see the interview schedule in Appendix A).

In this thesis department fit was defined along three dimensions, informed by relevant interdisciplinary literature on graduate department socialization, person-
organization fit, communication socialization processes, and organizational cultures (e.g., Austin, 2002; Cable & Parsons, 2001; Jablin, 2001; Smircich & Calas, 1987).

Department fit issues encompassed each participant’s interpretation of her difference or similarity to others in the academic program in which she had enrolled. Several participants responded specifically that they did not fit the mold in their departments. Hence, this theme’s label was derived from participants’ words.

The three dimensions of department fit are explained further in Appendix C. They are: a) culture fit, e.g., fit with department rules, status or hierarchy issues, and communication climate; b) role fit, e.g., fit with departmental expectations of a first-semester graduate student, class participant, teaching assistant, novice researcher, scholar, or aspiring professional; and c) relational fit and insider support, e.g., fit with others in the department, including finding peers or connecting with department members who recognized the newcomer’s needs and offered instrumental help.

Not surprisingly, given their nontraditional life stage upon beginning graduate school and the uncertainty newcomers experience as they try to fit into organizations, all 20 participants emphasized department fit in their accounts. Good fit was suggested by positive descriptions or a sense of belonging or congruence with the department culture, role(s) or relationships with others in the department. For example, feeling comfortable with informal dress and the communication climate suggested good fit with the culture. Finding one’s place as a scholar in the discipline suggested fit with the graduate student role of novice researcher, and connecting with a faculty member who offered insider support suggested good relational fit.
In contrast, bad fit was suggested by negative descriptions or a sense of not belonging or incongruence with the academic culture, role(s) and relationships. For example, struggling with departmental practices drastically different from past experiences, not feeling comfortable in a new teaching role, or failing to bond with or get help from anyone in the department indicated bad fit.

The most important dimension of fit emphasized in participants’ accounts was relational fit and specifically the role of insider support. Most participants found it difficult to connect or identify with others in their departments due to being older than their cohort (i.e., fellow graduate students) or faculty. A majority (70%) noted they felt out of place with other graduate students who were much younger.

Another pattern in the data was particularly significant because of how much it influenced interpretations of good or bad department fit: this factor was the presence or absence of insider support from faculty. Over half (12) participants in this study reported bad fit overall in their departments and emphasized a lack of insider support. In contrast, the eight participants who reported good fit overall underscored the instrumental role of faculty support. We begin with examples of bad fit in academic departments where participants felt they did not belong with other students, faculty, or both.

*Bad fit and lack of insider support*

Midcareer transition women who experienced bad fit described their lack of connections and relational fit in terms of feeling isolated, unwelcome, awkward, different, lonely or uncomfortable in departments accustomed to younger students. Common characterizations of this theme in participants’ own words included feeling out of place or not belonging. For example, *C. Sunset* felt disconnected from both her
graduate student cohort and faculty. She reported that she felt shocked and frightened, like an alien from another planet who was “completely clueless and out of the loop… I felt like an outsider and that I did not belong there… and to make matters worse, I think the faculty agreed that I didn’t belong.”

Several participants noted they had little in common with other graduate students because of age disparities. Among the 14 respondents who emphasized being older than fellow graduate students, some mentioned they were old enough to be their parent. Ann reported she hated being assigned to a “squirrely, childish master’s student office” with fifteen immature 22-year olds who behaved like something out of Animal House or Old School.

Mary Alice did not fit well with her younger cohort, who surprised and annoyed her with their casual attitudes. She felt “old and out of place” compared to other students.

I assumed that my classmates would be like the grad students I worked with when I was an undergrad in physics — smart, interested in what they were doing, highly motivated… It was disappointing. I thought I'd finally be in a class with grownups and instead I was in a class with a bunch of kids. … And use of language — using "like" and "you know" in class discussions. Drove me up the wall….

Emily also noticed how different she was from other graduate students, especially since she was old enough to be their mother:

I was the oldest… they went out drinking and partying … I was in grad school to learn and earn the degree, not to socialize. I did not want to appear like a snob – but I also did not want to go to smoke-filled bars and talk to people I did not know while a band played in the background… I did that in the 1970s.

Although the data included numerous accounts highlighting the youthfulness of other graduate students, anecdotes about bad relational fit and lack of support from faculty were emphasized more. The issue of faculty support made the biggest difference in terms of participants’ overall assessments of department fit. Faculty and other older,
paid department members had official authority to help, advise or direct graduate students. Many participants struggled to get this help and felt no one in the department noticed or cared about them.

*R. Hat* explained she endured a full semester of ambiguous academic expectations including multiple fruitless encounters with a department head and professors she described as “disorganized” and “of no help whatsoever” as she tried to figure out program requirements. Other participants were officially assigned faculty mentors or temporary advisors, but found their interactions with them to be awkward and unhelpful.

*Doria* characterized her department as a “sink or swim environment” that offered no orientation and was “sorely lacking in communication.” However, graduate students were “randomly assigned” advisors and she looked forward to having things clarified in a meeting with her advisor, including recommendations about courses. She was disappointed:

> The advisor I was assigned was not talkative. She seemed curt and hurried. Our ideas of an advisor meeting were very different… she did not ask me anything about my background and experience.

*Doria* had also hoped her unanswered questions would be addressed during a “meet and greet” session announced by a faculty member during which new graduate students were supposed to get to know faculty and one another. She eagerly anticipated this meeting and drove to campus on a day she would not normally be there, which was inconvenient and cost her valuable time and additional expense.

… when I got to the classroom there was a note on the door saying that it had been cancelled. I was ANGRY that in the communication department no one thought to send an e-mail … so that we didn’t WASTE OUR TIME coming on to campus… finding parking… which you have to pay for … I thought the way the cancellation was handled was INCONSIDERATE. We all had to come to campus to find out it was cancelled!
Like *Doria*, other participants experienced bad fit because the department did not value them or failed to recognize their professional backgrounds. Many noted that faculty taught as if all students were neophytes with no experience. One participant, *G.*, actually did quit her program at the end of the first semester because interactions with faculty led her to conclude it was a bad fit for what she wanted and needed to learn:

Professors did not acknowledge that the classes were not composed entirely of 23 year olds… being in that environment just wasn’t for me… the program I had enrolled in was not adequate for individuals with significant professional and life experience.

*G.* noted that the department was supposed to pair graduate students with mentors, but “I never got my mentor because I asked for one who had more experience than me!”

*C. Sunset* felt angry and further alienated from her department when a much younger faculty member failed to acknowledge the valuable life and career backgrounds of the three older students in a class of 14. The professor was discussing a topic with which *C. Sunset* had a lot of professional experience.

I remember … she talked to us as if we were children, telling us … how to act. I’m older and more experienced than she is, and I was deeply offended… I have been … speaking at professional conferences longer than she has been alive!

In contrast to participants who lacked insider support, the eight participants who experienced good department fit and felt more at home were able to make key connections in the department and formed supportive, helpful relationships with faculty.

*Feeling at home - finding relational fit and insider faculty support*

Adjustment experiences were not all grim. When department fit was good it appeared to be driven by early insider support, especially from faculty who treated the newcomer as a respected peer. Participants paid careful attention to what department
members did or did not do to help them, specifically. Some respondents noted how fortunate they felt to have practical assistance and support from department members as a whole when they started their programs. For instance, Estelle expressed her admiration and gratitude for faculty, administrators and staff whom she found to be “extremely approachable.”

I “lucked” into a great program… They were always willing to discuss courses, requirements and the details that have arisen. I think the professors… are extremely talented … providing me with a fantastic life experience!

Particularly noteworthy is that insider support from faculty was automatically available to the eight respondents who emphasized the importance of this issue. They reported they did not have to ask for this help. It was freely offered and in some cases faculty members were proactive on behalf of participants, going out of their way to ease the socialization experience. This is in sharp contrast to those who experienced bad fit and were unable to get help from faculty even when they tried, often repeatedly.

Within the first two weeks of the semester Ann reported that her department head recognized she was not going to “survive” in a shared graduate student office with 22-year olds. Without being asked, he arranged to move her into a “grown up” office closer to faculty where she was “immediately much happier.” She believed he did this because he was a smart man who could see her discomfort and “he wanted to retain me as a graduate student.”

Lydia’s first semester account emphasized a pervasive “sense of community,” including the presence of other older students and faculty around her age with whom she related as peers from her first day on campus. Because she was the only participant who emphasized both faculty and fellow graduate students in her department being similar to
Lydia was a unique case in this study. Lydia described a “very collegial” environment where she was consistently recognized as an experienced adult. She noted that faculty played an instrumental role in setting the inclusive tone. She emphasized that she realized her experience was unusual in that there were several other older nontraditional graduate students in her cohort. People went out of their way to offer Lydia assistance, including her graduate program director. He had welcomed her and her husband when they moved from another state for her to begin graduate school:

I quickly developed a friendly relationship with the graduate program director, a longtime faculty member who is only a year older than I am… … I felt that he really extended himself and his friendship.

She underscored what she most appreciated about her first semester - an environment of colleagues upon whom she could depend:

I think it’s testament to the sense of community in the program that I could readily voice …concerns, without hesitation, and have a number of people willingly offer their suggestions and relate their own experiences.

Like Lydia, Elizabeth recalled being treated as a respected adult peer by the faculty in her department, and this bolstered her through times of doubt.

Everyone was extraordinarily friendly to me… I got the feeling that they saw me as being very professional and competent (perhaps because of my age… or because of my professional experience). If they hadn't treated me so well, I don't know that I would have succeeded. …They took time in responding to my questions. They felt motivated to help me get answers to questions when they didn't know the answers. They also included me in professional conversations and when we met at parties, I felt like they talked to me as their equal.

Fiona shared an anecdote of how a professor extended his support when she was feeling overwhelmed with anxiety on her first day as a graduate student. This support made a significant difference and set a positive tone for her first semester. Fiona reported that she felt distant from other graduate students with whom she had little in common.
She also felt inadequate and unprepared compared to the apparently confident students she observed around her as they waited for class to begin. She was wondering whether she had made a mistake by enrolling in her program.

… I remember … waiting for the instructor to show up … I sat far away from the rest of my classmates… feeling so anxious… and just as I believed I was not intelligent enough to even sit in this class, my professor showed up. He placed a hand on my shoulder and said, "Come join us." I was overwhelmed with emotion and began my first class teary-eyed.

I asked Fiona to clarify how she felt about her professor’s gesture and she responded, “absolutely reassured.” She added that prior to this act—which she perceived as genuine and welcoming—she had been considering leaving the class and opting out of the program, as she felt she did not fit in well with other students in her program. Fiona highlighted what she called a department-wide “student-centered approach” and how much she appreciated the reliable support she was offered by this professor, and by all faculty, during her entire first semester.

… my advisor and other teachers practiced what they preached, so to speak. They believed in setting the example for their students and were consistently accessible for questions, concerns, etc.

Although participants had different experiences in terms of good or bad department fit, they had similar experiences in terms of identity losses associated with giving up their previous careers. The impact of these losses and how they influenced department adjustment — independent of good or bad fit — was one of the most significant findings unique to midcareer transition women graduate students.

Identity Losses: Another Layer of Complexity

Midcareer transition women changed their lives and left behind important, established aspects of their identity to enter graduate study. For many respondents, these
changes impacted their first semesters significantly. Respondents influenced most by identity loss issues were constantly aware of what they gave up to be in graduate school. Specifically, they chose to let go of established careers and job titles plus the tangible and intangible things that went along with those careers. These losses included financial independence (or being an equal partner contributing materially to their household), and the respected, experienced adult professional status associated with management and leadership positions they formerly held. Concerns about these identity losses were literally described as inseparable from their adjustment to the new graduate student role. They were another layer or lens through which they interpreted and responded to departmental socialization messages.

The new identity of being a “graduate student” instead of a fulltime professional impacted participants’ lives in significant and complex ways. A core assumption underlying this thesis is that a midcareer transition woman experiences her socialization into graduate school in unique ways because she entered graduate school after several years during which she built a career and took on multiple adult life responsibilities and roles (Brus, 2006; Josselson, 2002; Polson, 2003).

These adult roles included being a financial contributor to a family or household. Most participants were married or in a committed relationship. Of this group the majority depended on partners for financial support and/or for managing a greater share of household responsibilities or roles they had handled independently or jointly prior to attending graduate school. Husbands and partners provided critical financial support and were credited for freeing up time for the student to concentrate on her new graduate student role. For example, Estelle underscored her reliance on her husband:
My husband is EXTRAORDINARY in terms of … support… I wouldn’t have been so successful without him. He wanted to know how things were going and provided positive feedback.

_Bess_ shared how her partner made it possible for her to complete the semester:

The biggest issue I faced was juggling my roles … with my grad student responsibilities. I relied heavily upon my partner to free me up from household responsibilities since I wasn’t able to fulfill both sets of needs (school and home). …In fact, my partner picked up so much slack, I would not have been able to finish that first semester if he hadn’t helped me out in so many ways.

In addition to depending on supportive partners to compensate for lost income or time, many participants emphasized challenges related to professional identity losses. These included loss of status, professional perks, self worth, confidence, community, respect, and voice (i.e., freedom to speak out, or to be one’s authentic, preferred, adult self in the new environment). These losses made the adjustment to graduate school difficult for 16 (80%) of participants; thus, even when department fit was good, some women felt upset or experienced additional stress during their first semesters because of what they had given up.

_Elizabeth’s_ early experiences in the context of her department were mostly positive. She felt she was treated as a competent and experienced adult professional, in addition to being helped and welcomed by faculty. However, her first semester adjustment was clouded by the difficulties of making the “huge” identity and lifestyle change she had chosen, including moving out of state and leaving the business she had once led. Throughout her narrative _Elizabeth_ offered details about the identity she had left behind, comparing her former high status with her low status as a graduate student:

…. I missed that lifestyle … I really felt as though it had been ripped away from me… I was no longer the president of a publishing company. I no longer had business cards, a nice office, employees to delegate work to …. now… I was just a grad student like so many others. I felt like I may as well have been 22 years old
with no professional experience or competencies… I remember when I met people and they asked me what I did for a living, I felt it necessary to say what I used to do first… It was important that they see value in me because I guess I didn't feel very much self worth as a grad student.

Helen explained at length the painful process of feeling forced to suppress everything she knew and had accomplished during a remarkable career. She felt that entering graduate study required that she return to a childlike status:

… my first semester was an adaptation process in the extreme, seeking to find that balance of how much of my previous identity, career, and successes that I could claim, and how much I had to cut loose. This was really the most difficult part of the whole process… Most frustrating was the sense that my identity (“who I am”), then, must be tightly coupled with what I’m doing professionally (“what you do”). Thus, losing my professional status somehow also meant losing my adult status, and this was just jarring!

Sophia emphasized how her first semester was a time of feeling unsettled and in emotional upheaval after leaving a community of professional colleagues who saw her as a leader. Her story represents how some participants experienced profound identity losses plus poor department fit, an especially negative combination:

I was unprepared for the emotional impact of leaving behind my wonderful connections… and career. I was in culture shock, I suppose, because the adjustment was multidimensional. I was not ready for this! I had not considered just what I would be facing, starting over so to speak as a woman in her 50s. It did not help when I realized the school was not equipped to deal with older students and faculty did not treat me as an equal… I was used to being a mentor and leader and suddenly my opinion did not matter, even with all my relevant experience.

Summary of Themes Related to Interpretations of Socialization Messages

Midcareer transition women graduate students interpreted organizational socialization messages in terms of department fit and the identity losses they experienced in order to begin graduate school. Most participants found it difficult to connect or identify with their departments and even when they did, they still experienced blows to their identity related to their lower status student role. Their positive or negative
interpretations of department fit combined with the impact of challenging identity loss issues influenced their reactive and strategic responses to socialization messages, as will be discussed in the next section.

Responses to Socialization Messages

Midcareer transition women graduate students’ responded to organizational socialization messages in two main ways: a) interactive stress reactions, defined as passive or non-instrumental responses to ease anxiety; and b) internal success strategies, defined as instrumental responses through which participants empowered themselves. (See Appendix C for further information on how response themes were defined.) The first theme of interactive stress reactions underscores decades of findings that newcomer socialization into organizations — and into academic departments specifically — is stressful (Jablin, 2001; Louis, 1980; Weidman et al., 2001).

Because stress responses are nearly universal during organizational adjustment, the description of this theme is limited here to how midcareer transition women students responded in ways that may differ from how more traditional graduate students would respond to stress. This theme highlights communicative responses to stress, the most recurrent type of response across the data set (Owen, 1984).

Interactive Stress Reactions

Interactive stress reactions encompassed non-instrumental ways of coping with the intent of alleviating intense emotions or anxiety. All 20 participants mentioned stress in their accounts. As participants dealt with their concerns related to department fit and/or concurrent identity loss issues, they typically concluded they were overwhelmed. The word “overwhelmed” was one of the most frequently mentioned in the data set and
“stressed out” was high on the list as well. What makes this group of nontraditional newcomers different from other, traditional aged overwhelmed graduate students is how, to what extent and with whom they communicated to manage their stress.

The most common reaction to socialization messages mentioned in the data set was to vent or “blow off steam,” emphasized by 19 out of 20 participants. However only six (30%) of participants reported that they “complained,” “commiserated” or “shared concerns” with fellow graduate students. Of these six who commiserated with the cohort, three of them noted that they typically did not interact with fellow graduate students in other contexts (with the exception of the classroom). Kvetching inside graduate departments with other students was sometimes described as being coupled with humor, e.g., “laughing over our shared misery,” or “misery loves company.” For example, R. Hat explained “we were all in the soup together and tried to help each other cope as best as we could.”

In contrast to limited descriptions of commiserating with graduate students, 90% of participants shared numerous examples of venting with significant others outside the department, or at home. This was three times more common than blowing off steam in the departmental context. Most participants did not identify with younger graduate students nor did they feel comfortable sharing negative feedback with faculty. Therefore, talking with trusted outsiders was often described as necessary to help with a difficult adjustment in departments where they felt little connection with insiders or felt the need to remain silent about their discontent. This pattern seems unusual in that the literature on graduate student socialization highlights the importance of peer climate, emphasizing a
norm of regular social interaction among graduate students to share stress and concerns (Weidman et al. 2001).

Participants emphasized how they sought reassurance, escape from department “politics,” or someone who would listen to them “moan and groan” about what was happening in graduate school. They relied a great deal on friends, a husband/partner, other family members, or professionals in helping roles (e.g., a minister, therapist, and a long-time professional mentor). For instance, Pandora noted “my poor husband heard a lot about this,” referring to her feelings of “being hazed” and negative messages she was getting in her department that made her feel ignored. She purposely chose not to share her feelings with others in the department. G. credited her husband and her teenage daughter with helping her to “endure” the first semester through regular conversations about what was happening in classes she felt were “totally inadequate” for someone with her level of professional experience. Karin depended heavily on regular long, encouraging talks with a former professional mentor to help her process negative department experiences.

The stress, anxiety, and overwhelming feelings experienced by participants were constant throughout their first semesters. While some passively accepted it and dealt with it through interactive stress reactions and venting, others were determined to adapt and decided to change the only thing they could control: themselves. When they recognized poor fit or worried about whether they could succeed in their new identity as a graduate student, they moved into action through internal success strategies.

**Internal Success Strategies**

Internal success strategies involved re-positioning one’s self, re-framing a problem, and/or implementing a behavioral change to facilitate success. These proactive
decisions and behaviors were enacted independently, i.e., they were not interactive or
dependent on cooperation from others, nor were they intended to change anything in the
graduate department. Among the 14 respondents who described these strategic decisions,
only three of them reported good department fit and 11 reported bad department fit.
Whether or not they fit in their departments, those who implemented internal success
strategies were explicit in explaining their motives: they were determined to succeed in
graduate school, on their own terms, and they created plans to reach their goals.

I originally coded these themes as “doing it my way” because participants shared
how they took charge of their programs through making the best of bad fit, overall, or
coming up with strategies to turn around a particular issue causing them concern. The
women who implemented internal success strategies worked consciously to change
attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, or perspectives to bolster confidence, or chose a self-
empowering “keep the eyes on the prize” approach to getting through difficulties. They
also relied upon their past experiences to come up with a plan that would work.

Success strategies most often originated in a participant’s recognition that she did
not fit in her department and she had to do something about it. For example, C. Sunset
described navigating an environment that was “frightening” at times, but instead of
giving up she took action, ultimately turning the situation around via success strategies.
Nothing changed in her department, but she consciously changed the ways she thought
about her doctoral program. After describing several “disturbing” encounters and
situations where she felt insulted, alienated and ignored by faculty, C. Sunset explained
how she responded:

But… it’s people and situations like that… that get me going, and … I decided
it’s up to me to take responsibility and to make my program … work for me. I
was not going to allow anyone’s behavior in the department get to me! I can’t depend on others to make me happy… when I make up my mind to do something – and tell many others that I am going to do it – I will do whatever it takes to not let myself or those others down – it is a strategy that has served me well.

_Pandora_ had an impressive record of achievement in her career prior to beginning graduate school. She felt her professional accomplishments were “pointedly ignored” in her department and she refused to believe messages about what kinds of research first semester graduate students should (or should not) do. She was confident that her background, expertise and contacts could benefit the department and gave her advantages compared to other graduate students.

When she realized that “no one cared” and that “people were recognized only for what they accomplished in classes and by such standards as conference paper acceptances” _Pandora_ decided to “prove a point” to her department and to set her own standards for success. She noted that while in her department “I mainly observed and kept a low profile” but she was always thinking of her future as she independently pursued conference and publication opportunities to show she could accomplish more than less experienced graduate students.

I became determined to excel in this new challenge, submitting papers to conferences as soon as I finished them for classes, for example. I also insisted on doing research that took advantage of language skills and contacts that others did not have. I tried to force professors to recognize that my previous experience had value and had prepared me to undertake research that most of them could not. In the end, I proved the point to myself and if no one else could see it, it did not matter.

Other participants enacted self-directed learning strategies. These included doing additional reading, initiating better study habits, or making changes to improve academic performance, ease fears, or compensate when they felt overwhelmed and/or
underprepared. For instance, Emily created a way to learn what she needed to know because she lacked the background coursework that had been taken by her graduate student peers, whom had learned more up-to-date theory from their recent undergraduate or master’s programs. Emily’s proactive strategy was rooted in a fear of failure after early negative feedback on her performance.

I felt out of the loop – and stupid. … if you can imagine driving along a road at night and your headlights illuminate a deer in the road … I … had that stunned look the whole first semester. My papers (and the grades I received on them) reflected that same helpless feeling.

I knew that I would have to ‘catch up’ … and I did. My days were often 12 hours long and I lived in the library… but the strategy worked... I began to be overly organized and I outlined every book we read (10-12 per course). I typed up my notes through the early hours… I could not let my guard down or I might fail.

Elizabeth was among the three respondents who experienced good department fit and also enacted internal success strategies. She shared that although she was excited by the challenges of graduate school she was also afraid of being unable to manage her workload. Because it had been so painful to lose her former high status identity as a successful business owner, she was highly motivated to succeed in her new role as a graduate student. To deal with her anxiety she tried to stay ahead in her courses and worked constantly. “I thought that if I could spend enough time studying, reading, writing papers, I could be successful.”

Summary of Themes Related to Socialization Message Responses

Midcareer transition women graduate students responded to organizational socialization messages — influenced by their interpretations of good or bad department fit and challenging identity losses — with non-instrumental stress responses, especially venting outside their departments, and/or with internal success strategies designed to help
them succeed in graduate school on their own terms. Also, most participants either freely chose or felt forced to engage in proactive communication in their departments, as explained in the next section.

Proactive Communication Themes

Proactive communication was defined as targeted communication initiated by the newcomer to achieve her graduate study goals or future career related goals. For instance, information seeking to reduce uncertainty is among the most common types of proactive communication (Jablin, 2001; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Proactive behavior is anticipatory, strategic and action oriented. Proactive newcomers in organizations show initiative because they are motivated to change something (e.g., improve their situation in the organization or improve the environment). Proactive communication is intentional and focused; it requires thought, time and energy (Grant & Ashford, 2008).

Fifteen (75%) of participants engaged in proactive communication. The most common behavior was information seeking about everything from how to receive a teaching assistant paycheck to how to connect with the department’s most respected faculty member in order to reach a long-range career objective. The most striking findings related to proactive communication were: a) how participants framed these interactions in sharply contrasting positive or negative ways; and b) how the negatively framed proactive communication was reported only by participants who had experienced bad department fit.

In some cases, proactive communication was positive and something participants wanted to pursue. In other instances, applying exclusively to participants who felt they did not fit in their departments, proactive communication was negative, a cause of
additional stress, and perceived as *unwanted* but necessary. The following sections describe these disparate views of proactive interactions, with the first labeled positive proactive communication and the latter labeled sink or swim survival communication.

*Positive Proactive Communication*

Positive proactive communication was an intentional, interactive activity that participants *wanted* to pursue. They felt comfortable and confident engaging in this communication. As discussed briefly in the literature review, proactive behavior is associated with midlife women and with self-directed professionals in midcareer transition who are proactive by definition (Hall, et al., 2002; Ibarra, 2003; Josselson, 2002). Participants anticipated these interactions as a means to move ahead or enhance graduate study and future career goals. This communication was growth/success oriented and characterized by freedom to choose, because the participant instrumentally selected her message channel, timing, content and target(s). It was focused on making the most of the present and initiating opportunities for the future.

Eight respondents (40% of the data set) reported instances of positive proactive communication, typically described in favorable terms (e.g., as pleasant, energizing, worth the time and effort or fun). In addition to asking lots of questions of selected sources to reduce uncertainty, participants targeted communication to help them meet goals through impression management, relationship building and related strategies.

Impression management included introductory interactions (early in department tenure) with faculty, peers and other key people with the intent to be included, liked, taken seriously as a student, respected or otherwise seen in a favorable light. Relationship-building communication was initiated to achieve one’s own instrumental
goals and/or in response to others’ goals. This included proposing collaboration, learning and development strategies (seeking advice, finding an advisor or mentor), information sharing, coaching and offering to assist other department members. It is important to note that in most cases, positive proactive communication was described as having multiple purposes.

Elizabeth engaged in proactive relationship building and information seeking, approaching faculty or peers regularly to get what she needed, ranging from departmental facts to new social connections. She wanted to make a good impression with faculty and she wanted to make connections since she had moved to another state for graduate school. After a successful career as a business owner, Elizabeth started graduate school with a strategy to succeed in an unfamiliar environment. She was comfortable with approaching anyone in her department to find out what she needed to know.

When I get started in something new, I typically want to get as much information (to be successful), as possible. Since I didn't know anyone… I wanted to make friends. … I asked my cohorts what they knew because some of them had done undergraduate work at ___ and others were from the area. I also was not shy about asking questions of my advisor (who was also the grad director) and other professors that I met.

Helen characterized faculty in her department as closed off and “selfish.” Yet she wished to develop a mutually beneficial relationship with a particular faculty member and had a plan to engage him in a joint research project. Her proactive communication was a success strategy motivated by wanting to succeed in her new academic career.

One faculty member is very prolific and productive, and I was hoping to find an opportunity to work on something with him. So I asked if he’d be willing to collaborate on this paper, and offered some suggestions about how to expand its thesis into some publishable work. He seemed very pleased, and I was happy to have a project with him. I’ve definitely been “strategic” about some of the connections I have tried to build.
Like Helen, other participants reported initiating conversations with professors to meet various goals. Some respondents combined faculty relationship-building strategies with proactive impression-management strategies, hoping to create rapport with professors they admired. Mary Alice shared what motivated her to start a relationship with professors she had observed and liked:

I approached two professors to ostensibly talk about classes for the following year, but my real motive was to try and get to know them — although I did want advice, what I really wanted was to form a connection. One of them has since become a fantastic mentor for me, and I’m so grateful.

Sophia not only initiated communication with professors; she was one of the most proactive women in the sample. Throughout her account she used forceful language to describe what motivated her to speak up. She wanted to improve things in her department, not only for her own sake but also on behalf of other students. Sophia had earned a master’s in education several years prior to entering her graduate program at midlife and she had many years’ teaching experience, including at the college level. She had several suggestions she did not hesitate to share especially since she believed it was likely other mature students would enter her graduate program.

Coming from a background in education, with 20+ years of experience …I was a real critic of processes that seemed outdated. The school, moving at the pace of a dinosaur, was not making headway fast enough to incorporate the energy and experience of older, returning students.

I vociferously challenged the system… … I hoped to improve things… to be a part of the conversation at least. I spoke up, as often as I felt necessary, because an issue was not resolved…

I am tenacious and gave no respite until I at least had a listening ear. …I also made a ruckus when it seemed a "large" issue was at stake—one that affected many people, not just me.
By the end of her first semester, *Sophia* felt she had been heard, because her department head had implemented some of the changes she had recommended and thanked her for the input.

Two final examples of positive proactive communication are based on a universal graduate student experience: selecting an advisor. *Ann’s* interview underscored her careful observations of professors early in her departmental tenure and her subsequent choice of the department chair as advisor. She described him as a “wise and intuitive man” and emphasized his maturity in contrast to younger faculty members in her department. Her department chair was older than her, near his retirement. She asked him to be her advisor because she felt respected, understood and had a good rapport with him. She also chose him in order to pursue the research that interested her most:

… my department head… was the only potential advisor … who would let me be me. The other professors… made it clear that their advisees should become clones… mimicking their research… The department chair was completely comfortable with helping guide me on whatever research path I chose …

Another respondent, *A. Hawken*, used a similar strategic approach to decide upon an advisor, actively observing faculty in her department—all younger than her—and weighing options to facilitate the outcome she desired. She had been assigned an “inexperienced” temporary advisor 15 years her junior and had a hard time taking him seriously, because he looked like her son. She described his behavior as “socially inept and immature.” She believed he was repelling potential advisees because of his demeanor and at first, she said, “he drove me crazy.” She wasn’t sure she could handle having him as an advisor.

After assessing the situation based on what would serve her needs, she realized it made sense to keep her youthful advisor. From her stance as an older woman she
recognized what her young, inexperienced advisor needed to learn and she also wished to avoid unwanted advice that would interfere with her research plans.

I felt sorry for my advisor. I didn’t want to abandon him… A younger female professor hinted that she wanted to be my advisor, but I felt that she would give me too much advice… I was mostly just enjoying what I was doing. I didn’t want an advisor who would push me this way or that way. So I decided to stick with my young advisor because I knew he wouldn’t give me so much advice. I also felt that HE would learn a lot from me about being an advisor.

In contrast to newcomers like Sophia or Ann who initiated positive changes and/or felt their objectives to move ahead were being met through positive proactive communication, others felt disempowered and drained, as they were forced to engage in negative sink or swim survival communication to stay afloat during their first semesters.

*Sink or Swim Survival Communication*

Half of the participants in this research had common, difficult experiences that were coded as sink or swim survival communication. These interactions were universally described as draining and “required” to resolve issues perceived as slowing down or blocking their progress. A negative frame characterized sink or swim communication, as participants felt they had little or no choice in terms of message content, channel, timing, target and the need to be proactive. This proactive communication was — paradoxically — *reactive and unplanned*, in contrast to strategic positive proactive communication.

One of the most significant findings in this study is that sink or swim survival communication was reported *only by participants who experienced bad department fit* (10 out of 12 or 83% of those who reported bad fit also emphasized sink or swim survival communication).

Sink or swim communication was described as demanding a great deal of time, effort and patience. A cost, perceived punishment, or negative outcome was associated
with these interactions. When a respondent perceived a lack of departmental support and no help was available she concluded that she had to figure things out on her own. It was necessary to go on numerous information-seeking missions to resolve her concerns. Grant and Ashford (2008) argue that proactive behavior is increased by ambiguity, including uncertainty about roles, procedures and expectations (see also Weick, 1995). Sink or swim communicators experienced ambiguity and felt required to socialize themselves because they received little or no direction from their departments. In some cases, they received information, but it contradicted what they had been told earlier and they struggled to resolve these contradictions.

For example Karin received official information from her department, but she thought her orientation was incomplete, unclear and not helpful. Furthermore, what she was told at one point directly contradicted what she had been told earlier. She had sacrificed much to be in graduate school and her plans were not working out as expected. She felt resentment that things were not more organized after several unsuccessful attempts to go through “official channels” for information she needed. I noticed that three times in her interview text Karin referred to the “dead” of graduate studies. I asked her about it. She responded that she meant the dean of graduate studies, and that he was so unapproachable, no wonder she had written about him as “dead.” She summed up her first semester this way:

This made me angry … I needed clear answers and I wasn’t getting them…. After all these failed attempts to get answers, I stopped communicating. There was nothing else I could do… I just sucked it up … Unfortunately in the end, I really felt like I’d made a bad choice … It was upsetting… I had come to this school based on “false advertising.” I’ve concluded I just don’t fit the mold here.
Karin’s failed attempts at proactively resolving her issues led to further stress and she gave up, falling back on passive/reactive responses. She mentioned that in the end she was disengaged from her department and very eager to get her program over with as quickly as possible. She emphasized that she would not recommend her prestigious graduate program to anyone else.

Rainey’s experience was also characterized by a series of unpleasant, draining interactions. By semester’s end, she summed up her relationship to her department as the “lowest life form in the department” and with one particular department staff member as “gum underneath his shoe.” She shared how she came to these conclusions after multiple sink or swim encounters with people she would have preferred to avoid because they treated her so poorly. She recalled spending a lot of her time during the first semester going on information-seeking missions and she described key insiders as being “passive,” “unhelpful,” or unwilling to do their jobs. This anecdote about her first teaching assistant paycheck is representative of how little help she received in her department.

One of the first questions I had to ask involved … a paycheck … I asked …if my paperwork had been submitted. He…. responded "I don't know"… so I had to inquire how I could find out. He again responded… "I don't know, maybe ask _____" …. When I asked her, I got a grimace like I was bothering her… her response was that the paperwork had been sent to the dean… but she didn't know… I then went to someone else who didn’t know… Much of my first semester was like that…

Rainey noted that the negative tone of forced interactions with faculty and staff she perceived as rude, unprofessional, and unpleasant ultimately dampened her enthusiasm for graduate school and impacted her performance.

These interactions left me feeling like I wasn't important as a person or a contributor to the department; like I was even less of a peon than a low-level clerk in some office somewhere. It also affected my schoolwork. By the end of the semester, I had lost interest and enthusiasm in my classes… and couldn't wait for
the semester to get over. It even affected my desire to return the following semester.

Like Rainey, R. Hat reported several instances of information seeking in an academic department populated with unhelpful people at every turn. She noted trying to track down the department head, several faculty and others who seemed “disorganized” or uninformed. Finally, she found out the official person she needed to approach about an important issue related to her timeline for completing her doctorate, but dreaded having to interact with this individual again:

The graduate coordinator person responsible for course selection was just horrid… her attitude exuded superiority and power abuse. She treated me as though I didn’t matter as an individual. She was inflexible and didn’t want to hear about the fact that taking additional courses I didn’t need would literally cost me a semester. She was of little assistance other than spitting back the rules, in the rigid way that she understood them. She just wasn’t a nice or helpful person.

In sum, participants noted how their efforts to find information or resolve problems through sink or swim survival communication were demoralizing or a “waste of time.” Those who felt forced to engage in this communication had negative impressions of their departments and felt these interactions added to their stress.

Summary of Findings

This chapter described the unique and most significant socialization communication processes reported by twenty midcareer transition women during their first semester adjustment to graduate study. Participants interpreted organizational socialization messages (research question one) based on good or bad department fit and identity loss issues that differentiated them from more traditional graduate students. They responded to messages (research question two) through interactive stress reactions including venting with people outside the department when they did not connect with
others within the department. They also engaged in internal success strategies that helped them to experience their new identity as a graduate student in positive terms and take control in difficult circumstances. Finally, they engaged in proactive communication (research question three) including positive proactive communication calculated as an interactive success strategy and negative, reactive sink or swim survival communication reflective of not fitting in their departments.

Findings suggested several patterns of influence that may have important implications for graduate student socialization practices, especially for academic departments interested in attracting and retaining midcareer transition women students. The connections between the themes will be explored further in the final chapter, along with theoretical and practical implications of findings.
CHAPTER IV
DISCUSSION

Introduction

This research was designed to answer calls in the literature to more fully understand interactive organizational socialization processes from newcomers’ perspectives in localized contexts that do not fit traditional assumptions or models (Allen, 1996; Ashforth et al., 2007; Bullis & Stout, 2000; Jablin, 2001; Louis, 1980). More specifically, it responded to calls in higher education literature to learn more about nontraditional older graduate students’ socialization into academic departments (Brus, 2006; Polson, 2003). As an applied, exploratory study, this thesis also aimed to identify areas for further research and to inform practices in traditional academic departments wishing to socialize midcareer transition women students.

In the previous chapter, the three research questions about socialization experiences of midcareer transition women graduate students were answered separately using six integrated themes. To review, participants’ interpretations of socialization messages were influenced by perceived department fit and identity losses. Two common responses to messages were interactive stress reactions and internal success strategies. The two contrasting ways participants engaged in proactive communication were positive proactive communication and sink or swim survival communication.

This study assumed that midcareer transition women entered graduate study with more and different past experiences than their typical younger counterparts, i.e., traditional students aged 22-29 (Polson, 2006). They also experienced more lifestyle and identity losses than their traditional aged peers. Thus, participants were framed as
atypical proactive newcomers and the adjustment was expected to be qualitatively different from what traditional beginning graduate students might experience (Brus, 2006; Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002). Findings showed that midcareer transition women did have unique socialization adjustment experiences. This chapter discusses selected results and significant patterns of influence revealed in the data.

Findings as described in the previous chapter illuminated the critical role of departmental fit in helping or hindering the socialization adjustment process. Further, results highlighted how the adjustment process for midcareer transition women graduate students is more difficult due to identity loss issues related to giving up a professional career identity for a new, lower status graduate student identity. Finally, one of the most significant findings was the apparent connection between participants’ perceptions of bad fit in their departments and negative, sink or swim survival communication. These interrelated findings can be explored in terms of organizational socialization processes, focusing specifically on socialization strategies or tactics used by organizations.

Implications For Organizational Socialization Processes

Findings suggested socialization experiences of midcareer transition women graduate students were unique in three ways. First, the socialization tactics departments used influenced participants’ interpretations of department fit. When departments as a whole affirmed the identity of the newcomer and/or the newcomer felt supported by at least one member of the faculty participants seemed to perceive good fit. The socialization tactic that best supports identity affirmation is that of investiture. Conversely, when departments did not recognize newcomer identity and there was not support from at least one faculty insider the newcomer perceived bad fit. The majority or
60% of thesis participants perceived bad fit. The socialization tactic associated with bad fit and most disaffirming of identity is that of divestiture. Both of these tactics and their explanatory power in this study will be discussed further in this chapter. Second, identity losses related to midcareer transition women giving up previous careers before entering graduate school strongly impacted the socialization process. Finally, the third most significant finding related to socialization during adjustment was the nature of proactive communication experiences participants had which seemed driven by whether they perceived good fit or bad fit. Women who perceived bad department fit were the only participants who engaged in draining and negatively framed proactive communication identified as “sink or swim survival” communication.

These findings have both theoretical and practical implications for organizational socialization. We begin with the theoretical implications related to socialization tactics, contrasting the experiences of participants who perceived good fit with those who perceived bad fit.

Department Fit and Socialization Tactics

As Cable and Parsons (2001) state, the ways organizations manage or fail to manage newcomers’ encounters with other organizational members influence newcomers’ subjective perceptions of how they fit. Organizations manage these encounters through intentional or unintentional socialization messages or socialization tactics (Jablin, 2001; Jones, 1986). As addressed in the literature review, socialization tactics include formal and informal strategies used to orient all newcomers to their role in the organization. Two contrasting tactics particularly relevant to this study were those of investiture and divestiture (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).
Investiture involves the confirmation of the individual newcomer’s previous role/identity. Conversely, divestiture tactics involve not recognizing the newcomer’s previous identity in order to create a collective identity for newcomers. The military uses divestiture tactics in the hopes of creating soldiers. “Soldier” becomes a primary identifier rather than the job. For example, the Army has lawyers, doctors and accountants but soldier is the most salient identity. Similarly, graduate school socialization is a complex process of taking on a new identity as “graduate student” or aspiring professional academic. The assumption is that beginning graduate students are inexperienced neophytes who must mature, develop under the direction of more experienced mentors, and learn how to be professional through following the lead of older faculty role models (Austin, 2002). The challenging process of fitting into the new academic department is facilitated through the cohort or support from graduate student peers (Weidman et al., 2001).

Findings of this thesis indicate this model doesn’t work for mature, experienced midcareer transition women, who don’t fit with their cohort and who are around the same age and life stage as faculty. In fact, this research indicates that connecting with faculty is very important for midcareer transition women graduate students, as the adjustment process and perception of good fit are enhanced through faculty investiture tactics.

*Good Fit, Investiture and Faculty Support*

For the eight participants in this thesis who experienced good department fit, it seemed to be driven especially by investiture socialization tactics practiced by faculty members. Investiture includes respecting, recognizing and affirming the individuality, value, past experiences and potential contributions of the newcomer (Jones, 1986).
The data suggested that good fit with at least one faculty member who provided reliable support and encouragement to the midcareer transition student facilitated her feelings of department fit. Even if other aspects of departmental adjustment felt awkward or were perceived negatively (such as feeling out of place among other graduate students or being bored with coursework), the interest and attention of a single faculty member made a positive difference. For example, some participants emphasized how a department head or faculty advisor recognized her unique needs or made it clear she was seen as an adult peer rather than as just another graduate student. One of the most significant findings overall is that participants who perceived good fit reported no negative (sink or swim survival) communication, which contrasts them sharply with women who experienced bad fit. This will be discussed further later in the chapter.

Good department fit through positive connections with faculty is not meant to suggest the adjustment period was easy. Participants who experienced good fit were still strongly impacted by identity loss issues that caused considerable angst, such as loss of professional status, financial independence, or self worth. In this respect, they were similar to participants who experienced bad department fit. The impact of identity losses for most participants in this thesis is briefly summarized in the next section.

Identity Losses and Pre-entry Divestiture

The majority of participants (16 of 20) experienced what I label a “pre-entry divestiture” factor that seemed to influence socialization experiences in ways that have not been addressed in previous research. Regardless of socialization tactics departments used and resulting perceptions of department fit, participants emphasized that the adjustment to graduate school was hindered or made significantly more difficult because
of lifestyle and identity losses they had voluntarily assumed just before starting graduate school. For example, they missed the professional perks and higher status identity associated with being a business owner or with holding a management position. They bemoaned having to rely excessively on husbands or partners when they were accustomed to contributing more time or resources in their households.

This pre-entry divestiture was foremost in participants’ minds throughout their adjustment to academic departments. For 80% of participants, the awareness of what they had given up to be in graduate school was described repeatedly and forcefully as an extra layer of complexity through which they navigated their adaptation to graduate study. For new graduate students dealing with significant losses related to pre-entry divestiture, additional divestiture or bad fit within their academic departments was especially difficult and disappointing.

Participants who perceived bad department fit had an experience and pattern of responses that contrasted in significant ways with the eight women who perceived good department fit. For one half of participants in this study the adjustment to graduate school included an unwelcome, unplanned form of communication framed as sink or swim survival communication. This negative factor and its connection to bad fit and departmental divestiture socialization tactics are explained in the next section.

**Bad Fit, Divestiture and Sink or Swim Proactivity**

Perception of poor fit, described as a lack of orientation, direction and support from academic departments seemed connected with a sink-or-swim survival self-socialization process reported as draining. These “required” proactive encounters were associated with negative impressions of departments in which participants felt
disrespected, devalued, uninformed or ignored. The ways they were treated by department insiders suggested divestiture rather than investiture; i.e., from the newcomers’ perspectives their identities and previous experiences were not recognized or affirmed by the department (Jones, 1986). Participants experiencing poor fit also described some apparently disjunctive socialization tactics that were non-existent (i.e., no orientation whatsoever), unhelpful, confusing or contradictory.

Ten out of twelve (83%) participants who experienced poor fit emphasized they spent a lot of time and effort engaging in unwelcome sink-or-swim communication to stay afloat in programs where they had no guidance. Some of these sink-or-swim survivalists also reported internal success strategies explicitly designed to help them cope with poor department fit (in contrast to internal success strategies reported by “good fit” participants which were more often motivated by wanting to improve learning or performance in departments where they already felt respected and valued).

As described earlier, poor fit was also interpreted through the lens of challenging identity loss issues. The most dissatisfied respondents seemed to be those who perceived they sacrificed a lot to enter graduate school only to be divested further of previous identities in their academic departments. Thus this study suggests they experienced a “double divestiture” during their adjustment to graduate study.

In sum, findings suggested that academic departments helped or hindered the adjustment process for new midcareer transition women graduate students through socialization tactics that either supported individual identity (investiture) or disaffirmed individual identity (divestiture). Based on the results of this thesis, for midcareer transition women graduate students it appears important to their satisfaction and
perception of a successful adjustment that the academic department use investiture socialization strategies to facilitate fit. Practical implications of these findings are explored next.

Implications for Practice in Traditional Graduate Departments

Numerous reports about graduate education emphasize a growing crisis: increasing numbers of graduate students do not complete their programs, resulting in wasted dollars, time and resources (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Higher education research has linked these graduate student attrition issues to a number of factors including inadequate socialization (Austin, 2002; Golde, 2005; Weidman et al., 2001). Presently it is common knowledge that institutions are pressed to further reduce expenses and maximize resources due to budget cuts related to a significant global recession. Meanwhile a reduction in the population of typical graduate students indicates more atypical newcomers, i.e., nontraditional graduate students, may be needed to fill graduate programs. As the demographic profile of students changes institutions will need to be more concerned with recruitment and retention of older students. The average age of graduate students is increasing and greater numbers of nontraditional students are entering graduate study (Brus, 2006; Gardner, 2010; Polson, 2003). This thesis provides insights about how socialization should be adapted for midcareer transition women.

Implications for Department-wide Socialization Practices

Research on graduate student socialization practices emphasizes insider peer support from fellow graduate students as easing the socialization process (Brus, 2006; Myers, 1998). The most cited graduate student socialization models take for granted that socialization occurs with and through the peer group and characterize this support as
“critical” to a successful transition into graduate school (e.g. Weidman et al. 2001). However, this model proved to be ineffective with participants in this study. Significant demographic and background differences impeded bonding with other graduate students and socialization most often did not occur through social support from the cohort. Rather, faculty and administrators played a more instrumental role in establishing the good fit that facilitates retention. Participants who felt they were socialized effectively in their departments were recognized and treated by faculty and administrators as experienced professionals.

Some of the most positive socialization experiences in the present study seemed related to a departmental-wide focus on welcoming, orienting and providing consistent relational support to newcomers. Department chairs and other insiders (i.e., graduate coordinators and faculty) were described as setting an example and modeling expectations for all department members to follow, including being attentive to or anticipating the needs and questions of midcareer transition women graduate students (and of all graduate students in their departments). Socialization responsibilities were managed collectively, with every employee of the department prepared, willing and available to help new graduate students.

Findings of this study suggest that the importance of the academic department respecting the individual identity, background and experienced adulthood of the midcareer transition woman student is especially salient for women who voluntarily take on significant losses immediately prior to entering graduate school, divesting themselves of previous professional identities, status, homes, relationships, financial independence and more. The “pre-entry divestiture” identified in this thesis affirms findings in the
limited earlier research on midcareer transition women graduate students who reported extreme stress and identity crises related to giving up careers they had held prior to graduate school (e.g., Sanders & Nassar, 1993).

The majority of participants in this research were constantly aware of midcareer transition-related identity losses while adjusting to new academic environments. When faced with additional losses (e.g., the perception of being treated like a child, having one’s background ignored or being challenged instead of being helped by people in the department) the process was more difficult. These participants felt forced to engage in sink or swim survival communication to make progress in departments where they felt they did not fit.

Implications for Graduate Faculty

Findings have implications for graduate faculty members because for some participants the actions of just one person helped her feel like she found good fit in the department. Participants’ accounts suggested that a sensitive faculty member can make a significant positive difference regardless of how effective or ineffective department-wide socialization practices may be. Those who reported good fit were able to connect with at least one faculty member who recognized and affirmed her as an experienced professional or peer (i.e., communicated in ways suggesting investiture).

One participant noted “my advisor respected my adulthood” and others highlighted how department chairs intervened to ease various challenges or make the student feel more comfortable. For example, a graduate director arranged for a welcome dinner after a student moved with her husband to attend graduate school out-of-state, and a department chair moved a midcareer student out of a crowded graduate student office
she “hated” because it was filled with 22-year olds with whom she had nothing in common.

In contrast, participants who reported bad department fit emphasized that faculty may be have been well-intentioned but seemed uninformed, “clueless,” disengaged, and insensitive to the age, life/professional experiences and different needs of midcareer transition women students. When it was difficult to connect with other graduate students and equally challenging to find peers among faculty, participants had negative perceptions of their departments. These findings suggest that departments might offer faculty development programming emphasizing a culture of inclusion that does not treat graduate students with a “one size fits all” approach.

Limitations and Future Research

This applied study explored the experiences of a small, purposive sample adjusting to a unique organizational context. The findings are most informative to academic departments wishing to recruit, socialize and retain midcareer transition women graduate students. Findings should be applied to socialization experiences in other contexts with caution; i.e., they are not transferrable to other types of newcomers or other types of organizations.

Due to the sampling strategy used more than half of participants were pursuing advanced degrees in communication studies or related disciplines (e.g. journalism and mass communication). These participants may be more aware of socialization messages because they are predisposed to consider perspectives related to their area of study. Although there appeared to be no significant differences in data collected from
participants representing the various academic disciplines, caution should be used in applying results.

A primary goal of exploratory research is to identify areas for further study. This thesis explored a narrow time period of organizational adjustment (the first semester or six months of graduate study). While findings may have implications for organizational socialization theorizing about this stage, they also suggest that we need to learn more about the role of anticipatory socialization as an earlier stage in the socialization process in terms of expectation-setting for newcomers (Jablin, 2001; Louis, 1980). Further testing is needed of findings connected to outcome variables such as satisfaction and retention, especially as low graduate student satisfaction and related high attrition rates are framed as a growing crisis in higher education (Gardner, 2010; Polson, 2003). It would also be helpful to compare traditional graduate departments that appear to use “best practices” in socializing midcareer transition women students with those that don’t by examining their socialization tactics.

Thesis participants were in the midst of broader life and career stages that have received a lot of research attention. Findings revealed important and under-studied factors that have implications beyond organizational socialization theory; they may build upon our knowledge of midcareer women in transition. For instance, we need to understand more about how and why women make significant career shifts at midlife and how this impacts identity. Ibarra (2003) called for research to shed light on the organizational socialization experiences of people in midcareer transition, specifically.

Many respondents credited husbands or partners for being critical sources of support, and others commented they might have left graduate school if not for the steady
encouragement or tangible help provided by close friends or family. Data suggested that the transition was more difficult for those who made the most significant lifestyle changes (e.g., moving across country, selling homes, losing financial independence, leaving loved ones and familiar communities behind).

When the decision to enter an organization represents significant losses or sacrifices, the stakes are high. The usual shock, disappointment, and surprise associated with entering unfamiliar environments may be intensified (Louis, 1980). Thus, we need to learn more about what this study identified as “pre-entry divestiture,” or the losses that precede organizational entry and adjustment. Finally, in addition to “pre-entry divestiture” identity losses, the least satisfied respondents experienced what appeared to be a “double divestiture” when they perceived poor department fit and no affirmation of their identities. This concept deserves further exploration.

Conclusions

In sum, this thesis answered a call in the literature to study a new research context in depth by exploring the experiences of midcareer transition women graduate students entering traditional academic departments where they did not fit the norm. Findings add to our knowledge through affirming the connection between investiture socialization tactics and perception of good fit (Cable & Parsons, 2001). Results also suggest that for midcareer transition women graduate students a lack of faculty support and academic department divestiture tactics, in particular, lead to a perception of poor organizational fit and subsequent sink or swim proactive communication. This finding underscores the link between ambiguity and proactivity proposed by Grant & Ashford (2008). This thesis also identified a significant “pre-entry divestiture” factor, i.e., identity losses, that impacted
newcomer adjustment in negative ways, even when the organization used socialization
tactics resulting in the perception of good fit.

In terms of practical implications, this thesis found that for midcareer transition
women graduate students who did not fit with their cohort, building relationships with
faculty members was an important substitute or means of investiture through providing
insider support. Those participants who lacked both peer (fellow graduate students)
support and faculty support experienced the most negative and difficult socialization
processes. This finding informs the limited higher education research stating that
graduate student socialization processes need to be improved and different for older
nontraditional students (e.g., Brus, 2006; Polson, 2003). It also directly challenges
established models for graduate student socialization that emphasize the central role of
peer climate and regular interaction among graduate students to facilitate socialization
and provide support (e.g., Weidman et al., 2001).

Van Manen (2002) wrote that perhaps the best place to begin phenomenological
research exploring common human experiences (such as socialization into a new
organization) is in the context of one’s own experience. This study originated in my
experiences as a midcareer transition woman who started full-time graduate study at age
45. I wanted to understand more about my own socialization process through exploring
the experiences of demographically similar students entering similar contexts. I felt
compelled to find out whether other women experienced my conflicting feelings about
where they fit as new graduate students after giving up established professional identities.
Each of the twenty midcareer transition women interviewed for this thesis had unique life
circumstances during graduate school adjustment and their first semester experiences
were not all the same. They had enrolled in different programs, had varied living
arrangements, distinct personalities and a wide range of work/life backgrounds.
Nevertheless, this thesis found there were significant similarities in the experiences of
these 20 individuals during the first semester of graduate school.

As I reflect on the process, I am grateful to the women I interviewed and I am
inspired by their stories. Three and a half years have passed since I interviewed them.
I’ve learned that some have embarked on highly successful new careers in academia and I
was pleased to encounter a recently published peer-reviewed publication by one of my
research participants. For me, completing this thesis was a highly personal and
introspective endeavor. I hope my attempt to share participants’ personal perspectives of
starting graduate school in midcareer transition has been fair to them and informative to
the reader.
APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

Please provide the following introductory and background information:

1. Name (a pseudonym of your choice).

2. List all degrees previously earned (*before* entering your midcareer transition).
   Include your major or concentration.

3. Provide title and brief description of last fulltime position held *before* entering
   your midcareer transition.

4. Number of years you worked, *fulltime, before entering midcareer transition*.

5. What is your new (most recent, or current) career choice?

6. What is your most recent, or current, graduate degree program and concentration.

7. Your age when you *started* fulltime graduate school, in your most recent (or
   current) program.

8. a) Please describe how your *graduate school expenses* (tuition, fees, books) were
   funded in your first full semester (approximately six months).
   b) Please describe how your *living expenses* were funded at this time.

9. Please describe your living circumstances when you started fulltime graduate
   school as a midcareer transition student (e.g., living alone, living with husband
   and two children, single parent, living with partner, spouse, roommate, etc.).

10. Please tell me a bit about what’s going on in your life right now.

The following information was provided to orient participants to the study context (i.e.,
the first semester or first six months of graduate study):
The context (time and place) for this study is the first six months you attended graduate school as a fulltime, midcareer transition student. Please think back to the period when you entered graduate school, and how you perceived your situation then. Specifically, I will ask you to focus on interactions or messages related to your role as a graduate student during the time you were a “newcomer” in graduate school.

Questions:

1. What happened in your life that led to you becoming a midcareer, fulltime graduate student?

2. When you first started graduate school, what expectations did you have about graduate school?

3. What graduate student orientation-related information do you remember receiving when you started? (e.g., formal training/orientation materials, informal messages or stories you were told about how to navigate graduate school, what you needed to know about your department, expectations about your role, etc.)

4. What—or who—were the most accurate sources of information?

5. Overall, what was your first semester of fulltime graduate school like for you? Describe how you felt at the time.

6. Tell me about messages or interactions that stood out for you during this adjustment period.

7. What were the key sources of information for you?

8. Who were the significant people (and their roles) who influenced you at this time?

9. How did you respond to the messages you received (and/or interactions you experienced) at this time?
10. With whom did you choose to communicate regarding your role as a graduate student?

11. What did you hope to accomplish?

12. After your first full semester, or your first six months of fulltime graduate school, how would you describe yourself in relation to your graduate department?

13. Can you think of other factors that influenced your feelings about your role in your graduate department during this adjustment period?

14. What advice would you offer to other midcareer-transition women entering fulltime graduate school?

Thank you for participating in this study.
APPENDIX B

Definitions and Parameters For Data Reduction and Analysis

This appendix explains a priori definitions and parameters used for data reduction based on the three guiding research questions and theoretical sensitivity. It includes exemplars to illustrate the process used during early stages of data analysis. Jablin (2001) and other scholars have emphasized there are no consistent conceptual or operational definitions for socialization-communication processes. As explained in the literature review, definitions for this study were determined based on sources that have been widely cited, and/or that had purposes or perspectives most similar to this thesis.

Organizational Socialization Messages

Socialization messages were defined broadly as all types of communicative events or organizational socialization messages relevant to the research context and purpose, based on Jablin (2001). I identified organizational socialization messages in raw data as any message, piece of information, event, interaction, observation, incident, or “clue” from organizational sources or within the organization that made an impression on the newcomer because she perceived it as relevant to her new organizational role(s) and/or her learning about the new culture.

Socialization message parameters included:

- Formal, planned, official and explicit information as well as informal, unplanned, unofficial or implicit information.
- Institutionalized (or collective) socialization tactics as well as individualized socialization tactics (Jones, 1986)
• Messages received from the first day of the newcomer’s first semester in her graduate department, through the end of her first semester, or after approximately six months (limited to the organizational adjustment stage, as defined by Jablin, 1987; 2001).

• Messages originating from organizational sources, i.e., others who were representatives or had roles in the graduate department.

• Observations or clues the newcomer perceived in the new organizational context, i.e., what she noticed about the culture or what made an impression on her while she was physically present in the graduate department.

Exemplars of organizational socialization messages:

All new graduate students received a packet of official orientation materials on our first day, including departmental policies and a graduate handbook. We got this information from the department secretary.

I discovered professors’ offices were on a separate floor, as far from the graduate student office as possible. Professors’ office doors were always closed, although I knew at least some of them were in their offices.

Parameters excluded:

• Messages, observations or opinions originating from outsiders about the department, graduate schools, or academia.

• Observations the newcomer made about areas of the university outside her graduate department.

• Messages received in the academic department prior to or after the organizational adjustment stage of socialization.
Exemplars of data excluded from further analysis:

My sister works at another university and before I started graduate school she… warned me it was not going to be like the “real world.”

Near the end of my first year, my advisor gave me positive feedback on my research ideas and suggested we work on a summer project together.

Identifying Socialization Message Interpretations and Responses

The first two research questions in this thesis are based on Jablin (1982; 1987; 2001) and they are linked. The first question asked how participants interpreted socialization messages and the second question asked how they responded to these messages. The socialization messages (defined above) were identified first and then the data was analyzed for related interpretations and responses.

This research did not use pre-determined definitions for socialization message interpretations and responses, as the purposes were to discover what the data revealed. However, the following parameters were used to reduce data prior to coding.

Interpretations and responses included thoughts, feelings, behaviors, emotions, and reactions linked to one or more departmental socialization message. They included respondents’ initial thoughts and feelings or sensemaking about their departments’ socialization messages, and how they reacted or responded to messages (with the exception of proactive communication responses, defined separately).

Exemplars of socialization message interpretation and response:

I noticed the other graduate students were half my age. I was old enough to be their mother, and I was older than some faculty. I felt old and unsure of where I fit in.

My temporary advisor was wonderful; she made an effort to support me in any way she could, starting with good advice about how to get started on my research early.
Interpretations and responses excluded thoughts or feelings about organizational socialization messages received from institutional (university) sources outside the newcomer’s academic department.

Exemplar of data excluded for further analysis:

On my first day, I was walking around … the main library… someone welcomed me and asked if I was interested in a tour or had questions. I was excited to be on campus and impressed with this offer of help.

Combining Data into Cohesive Thought Units

Following is a more detailed exemplar of how data was combined into a thought unit for further analysis and coding. This illustrates how I identified and gathered the linking threads of data from the original socialization message to the interpretation and the response.

I got the message that required coursework was going to be “by the book” and little discussion was going to happen in class because professors were into lecturing (socialization message). I felt frustrated and bored in these traditional lecture classes. I wanted to discuss and apply the material because for me that’s an enjoyable and rich aspect of learning (message interpretation; i.e., feeling/thought about the socialization message). So after complaining numerous times to my husband about this—bless his heart—I finally decided I had to suck it up and resign myself to boring lectures. I was also looking forward to my electives the next semester and hoping they would be better (responses to the socialization message).

Guiding Definition For Proactive Communication

The third research question in this thesis asked how participants engaged in proactive communication during graduate school adjustment. Proactive communication was defined broadly as: communication initiated by the newcomer during adjustment and targeted to organizational sources to achieve the newcomer’s immediate goals during graduate study and/or her related future career goals. This was informed by the work of
Myers and McPhee (2006), who defined proactivity as “the initiative to work to obtain desired goals” (p. 446).

There are various conceptualizations or categories of proactive behavior in the literature with no one definitive list. For this study, Miller and Jablin (1991) and Ashford and Black (1996) were consulted. Also, Jablin’s (2001) list of newcomer proactive communication behaviors was used as a guideline to identify instances of proactive communication. These behaviors include but are not limited to: information seeking, feedback seeking, information giving (also encompassing impression management), relationship development, and role negotiation.

Exemplars of proactive communication:

I initiated contact with professors I admired most and who were influential in the department. It was important to me that they see me as a serious, good graduate student.

I needed to get information, so I latched onto the graduate student association president, and asked him lots of questions.
APPENDIX C

Codebook Defining Final Themes

Interpretation Themes

Department fit

The definition of department fit was informed by multidisciplinary literature (e.g., Austin, 2002; Cable & Parsons, 2001; Jablin, 2001; Smircich & Calas, 1987).

Department fit issues encompassed each participant’s interpretation of her difference or similarity to others in the academic program in which she had enrolled. These differences or similarities were clustered into three dimensions: culture fit, role fit, and relational fit/insider support.

Detailed definition:

Expressions of suitability, appropriateness, comfort, and satisfaction with the organizational culture (pre-existing academic department norms), roles, and/or relationships and level of insider support, indicating finding one’s place, belonging to a peer group, and/or adapting to established practices and expectations.

Parameters:

Culture fit
- How things are done, formal and informal rules
- Personality of the department as a whole
- The use of time or space
- Status and hierarchy issues
- Communication climate

Role fit
- As a new graduate student in the discipline or academic program
- With knowledge or learning expectations and coursework requirements
- As a class participant (in graduate course meetings)
- Other or unofficially assigned roles as applicable, e.g., teaching assistant, novice researcher, scholar or aspiring professional
Relational fit and insider support

- A sense of belonging, similarity, or being a peer with groups in the department as a whole (graduate student cohort or faculty)
- Insider support - connecting with key department members who recognized the newcomer’s needs and offered instrumental help
- Affirmation of newcomer’s identity

Exemplars of department fit:

I felt thrilled to be in a classroom environment studying something interesting… really stretching my brain. I started to have some ideas about how the school was structured, and I was feeling at home with it.

I think I began to find “my people” which was a means of confirming this new identity I’d adopted as a graduate student. Finding common interests with the other cultural studies students and faculty was a way in which I settled into the department.

Lack of fit exemplars:

I hated some of the old methods of instruction… I needed a more diverse bulk of material and variety of interactive experiences (I was bored otherwise) and they were into rote memorization.

I felt old, and out of place vis a vis most classmates.

Identity losses

Identity losses comprised tangible and intangible losses participants attributed to their midcareer transition and their choice to leave established jobs prior to enrolling in fulltime graduate study.

Detailed definition and parameters:

Includes losses or divestiture of tangible things, e.g., income, benefits, financial independence, homes, time, other material goods, companionship, community relationships, professional perks; and/or intangible things, e.g., status, positive self image, confidence, professional identity, respect, authority, “adulthood,” voice, and freedom. Also includes loss of ability to handle household or other responsibilities on her own, requiring reliance on others.
Exemplars of identity losses:

I could no longer handle everything that was on my plate, even though I was always a “multi-tasker.” My husband didn’t seem to mind paying all the bills and helping out, but it really bothered me because I needed to see myself as an equal contributor around the house.

Not a day went by during that first semester that I didn’t miss my salary and benefits. The financial losses I faced were probably the most difficult part of my adjustment.

Response Themes

Interactive stress reactions

Interactive stress reactions were non-instrumental “venting” episodes participants engaged in with others described as a means of coping with intense emotions or the anxiety related to adjusting to graduate school.

Detailed definition and parameters:

Passive or reactive (non-instrumental) interactive episodes or encounters that were attributed to the stress or overwhelming feelings related to graduate department adjustment. These interactions occurred with both internal (departmental) targets and external targets (e.g., family members and trusted friends). These encounters were unplanned. The intent was to relieve stress or to be heard and understood by others who cared (or with whom the participant could commiserate).

Exemplars of interactive stress reactions:

I really needed to blow off steam. I moaned and groaned a lot to my husband.

It was a highly stressful time and I sometimes commiserated with my classmates, who were over 15 years younger, but a good source for feedback when I had that “overwhelmed” feeling.

Internal success strategies

Internal success strategies included instrumental decisions and actions motivated by the desire to take charge of, improve, or advance one’s academic program, situation, or future career path.
Detailed definition and parameters:

Includes non-interactive strategies and decisions such as re-positioning one’s self, re-framing a problem, working consciously to change an attitude, belief, or perspective to bolster confidence, or choosing a self-empowering approach to getting through difficulties. Includes working independently on self-directed learning strategies to improve academic performance or to address fear of failure. Also includes defining one’s own goals or measures of “success” for graduate study, and/or implementing a behavioral change to facilitate success.

Exemplars of internal success strategies:

I decided it was up to me to make this program work. I was not going to allow anyone’s behavior in the department to get to me! I made up my mind that I would change my attitude and do whatever it takes to not let myself down, and this strategy served me well.

I wanted to succeed so I studied constantly, stayed focused on my own goals and worked hard.

Proactive Communication Themes

Positive proactive communication

Positive proactive communication was intentional (strategic or planned) and desired interaction with academic department members initiated to further one’s graduate study or future career-related goals.

Detailed definition and parameters:

Includes positively framed and planned communication initiated by the newcomer and motivated by the desire to succeed or advance in various ways. Such communication included information seeking, impression management and instrumental relationship building. It was characterized by freedom to choose, because the subject instrumentally selected her message channel, timing, content, and target(s). Includes interactions described in favorable terms (e.g., as pleasant, energizing, worth the time and effort, or fun). Also includes communication resulting in a reward or positive outcome.
Exemplars of positive proactive communication:

I’m an extrovert so I worked on being a part of the department more by starting a conversation with a faculty member who seemed approachable. I invited her out to lunch. I needed to make some connections and this worked out well. I enjoyed getting to know her.

One faculty member is very prolific and productive, and I was hoping to find an opportunity to work on something with him. So I asked if he’d be willing to collaborate on this paper, and offered some suggestions about how to expand its thesis into some publishable work. He seemed very pleased, and I was happy to have a project with him. I’ve definitely been “strategic” about some of the connections I have tried to build.

*Sink or swim survival proactive communication*

Sink or swim survival proactive communication was negative, unwanted, unplanned and framed as necessary or required to resolve issues during adjustment.

**Detailed definition and parameters:**

Interactions with department members, initiated by the newcomer, and reported as draining, forced, and required for self-orientation, or to resolve issues perceived as slowing down or blocking progress. Includes communication initiated to address immediate role requirements or needs, when the newcomer had little or no choice in terms of message content, channel, timing, or target. Includes interactions initiated by the newcomer and framed negatively as demanding time, effort, and patience, and/or resulting in perceived punishment (negative outcome).

Exemplars of sink or swim survival communication:

I was forced to track down the graduate coordinator or plan my week around people’s schedules, to see when someone that I needed might be available. I was wasting my time chasing down information, and I had way more questions than answers, but I needed to get answers, because I could end up taking the wrong courses or doing something else that would set me back.

I was given no information or help whatsoever. So I had to ask lots of questions and deal with issues or problems as necessary. It was very difficult to approach people with my questions when they acted like they couldn’t be bothered and gave me the runaround.
REFERENCES


