

# I'm New... Again: Reconceptualizing the Socialization Process Through Rotational Programs

Stephanie L. Dailey

*Communication scholars have studied how organizations socialize new employees in breadth, but we know less about how employees adapt to multiple roles rather than just one position. With the rise of rotational programs, which introduce newcomers to several different jobs within a brief time, socialization theory should be expanded. This study focused on people's experiences in rotational programs to provide a more accurate picture of this complex socialization process. Longitudinal, qualitative data from employees during their first and second job rotation revealed that such employees' socialization differs from traditional employees' experiences. The results suggested a Model of Rotational Socialization that more accurately portrays the socialization process by accounting for the contrast between role and organizational socialization.*

**Keywords:** New Employees; Organizational Socialization; Role Socialization; Rotational Programs

Every day, newcomers join companies, adapting to new organizations and roles. For this reason, scholars consider socialization a key construct within communication studies (Jablin, 1982; Kramer & Miller, 2013). Theorists commonly depict the socialization process as a linear, four-stage process by which organizational outsiders develop into effective organizational members (Feldman, 1976; Jablin, 2001; Van Maanen, 1975). During this developmental process, individuals purportedly adapt to one organization and one role. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) define socialization as the “process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (p. 211).

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Today, many organizational newcomers are called to enact *multiple* roles within the same organization. Increasingly, businesses are bringing in new talent through corporate rotational programs. Over 500 international companies offer rotational programs (Executive Coaching, 2015), and Martin and Schmidt (2010) have noted that “Practically every company these days has some form of [rotational] program” (p. 2). Organizations name and tailor rotational programs to fit their specific business needs, but most use terms like “leadership,” “career,” “development,” or “rotational” to label their programs (for consistency, I use “rotational program”). Companies recruit employees directly from college or business schools and, thereby, entice young talent with the opportunity to move laterally (every six to eight months) throughout areas of the business. Organizations groom program participants into leaders by assigning intensive projects, providing mentors to participants, and granting employees unparalleled access to upper management. Although most employees only rotate positions for a few years, experts estimate that rotational employees obtain up to 10 years of business experience in this short time (Fraser-Blunt, 2001). Because corporate rotational programs require that newcomers adapt to multiple positions over a length of time, communication studies scholars must expand the socialization process to account for the complexity of this unique work form.

Rotational programs provide an ideal means through which to expand the socialization literature and provide a more comprehensive picture of employees’ development over time. Through analyzing qualitative data, I present a Model of Rotational Socialization that explains the multiple socialization paths employees may experience over time and accounts for unique differences between role and organizational socialization. To frame this contribution, I review the rotational program and socialization literatures in the next section.

## **Rotation and Socialization: An Overview**

### *Rotational Programs*

Companies are increasingly implementing rotational programs as a way to attract, to train, and to develop promising employees (Burke, 1997; Fraser-Blunt, 2001). A rotational program consists of a formalized approach to personnel development, during which organizational leaders select high-potential talent (usually recent college or business school graduates) to work for specified periods in various departments, business units, or geographical locations in an organization. Participants in rotational programs typically specialize in acquiring expertise and cross-functional skills in specific areas, such as finance, engineering, marketing, information management, operations management, or human resources. According to Fraser-Blunt (2001):

The programs usually seek to achieve one or more of the following: assess new employees’ interests and skills to determine their final placement; allow deep immersion into the organizational business and culture; acclimate employees to foreign environments; and groom future managers and executives. (pp. 47–48)

In addition to benefitting organizations, rotational programs help new employees gain exposure to the business, a broader strategic focus, and an exposure to senior leadership. Thus, such programs are becoming a popular employment path.

Despite their popularity, few scholars have investigated rotational programs. Of note, one descriptive study explored the role of rotational programs in an effort to identify guidelines for designing, implementing, and evaluating rotational programs. Kuok and Bell (2005) conducted phone interviews with rotational program managers at 16 companies and determined how various companies selected participants, structured assignments (e.g., program length, assignment duration, and types of assignments), provided supplementary opportunities (e.g., peer buddies and mentors, executive networking, and formal skill building programs), administered their programs and measured program success.

Other research revealed that rotating jobs throughout a career can benefit both organizations and employees. For example, job rotation during a person's career improves career affect, including satisfaction, involvement, and commitment (Campion, Cheraskin, & Stevens, 1994; Khan, Rasli, Yusoff, Rahman, & Khan, 2014), and decreases a worker's monotony (Kaymaz, 2010) and boredom (Eriksson & Ortega, 2006). Job rotation also reportedly strengthens job performance (Khan et al., 2014) by bolstering employees' competencies (Kaymaz, 2010) and teaching them more versatile skills (Eriksson & Ortega, 2006). Finally, job rotation throughout a career helps employees develop better social relationships (Kaymaz, 2010), as well as integrate into the company culture (Campion et al., 1994), while also providing those in positions of leadership the opportunity to learn about employees (Eriksson & Ortega, 2006; Ortega, 2001).

Despite the fact that Kuok and Bell's (2005) study highlighted important components of beneficial rotational programs and other research suggests several positive outcomes of job rotation for employees' affect, productivity, and cultural fit throughout their organizational tenure, we continue to lack an understanding of how communication during rotational programs develops employees. To fill this gap, the present study explored rotational programs from a socialization perspective. Adopting a socialization framework was appropriate for investigating the impact of rotational programs, inasmuch as scholarship relating to socialization explains the communicative process of assuming an organizational role and participating as an organizational member.

### *The Socialization Process*

Scholars have defined socialization as the primary process by which people "learn the ropes" of an organization and adapt to new roles within it (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). Although some scholars prefer "assimilation," I use "socialization" here, as it has been the predominant interdisciplinary term. I avoid "assimilation" because it has privileged organizational interests over individual agency (Bullis, 1999; Turner, 1999), and researchers have characterized assimilation with often conflicting definitions (Jablin, 1982; Katz & Kahn, 1966). This could confuse readers (Clair, 1999; Turner, 1999).

A great deal of conceptual and empirical work has described how companies socialize newcomers into roles and organizations. In doing so, management and

organizational communication scholars have relied on developmental models to explain the process (e.g., Feldman, 1976; Jablin, 1987, 2001). Although critics have faulted conceptualizations for their simple linear nature and their emphasis on the organization (e.g., Bullis, 1993; Clair, 1996), some researchers have continued using this framework, introduced by Jablin (2001), which includes four stages: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit.

The socialization process begins with anticipatory socialization, which involves people “forming expectations about jobs—transmitting, receiving, and evaluating information with prospective employers—and making decisions about employment” (Feldman, 1976, p. 434). Through communication, people learn about roles and organizations before beginning work. Following role and organizational anticipatory socialization, the stage model proposes that people enter specific organizations or careers. This next stage, encounter, describes people’s experiences during the first few days, weeks, or months of membership in an organization, and most scholars have focused their research on this stage of the socialization process. Encounter “ends” when people no longer feel new. Rather than setting a specific time limit on encounter (or any stage for that matter), Kramer (2010) described the passage from newcomer to full member as requiring a psychological adjustment. Scholars have used the term “metamorphosis” to describe this next passage or change. Metamorphosis refers to the process of transformation, and people enter this stage when they feel comfortable in their organization or role. Both people (e.g., individual promotion) and organizations as a whole (e.g., company merger) experience change and must adapt throughout the metamorphosis stage. This adaptation may continue during the final stage of the socialization process, exit, as people’s organizational roles may shift (e.g., from student to alumnus).

In addition to describing how people join, participate in, become part of, and leave roles and organizations through these four stages of socialization, a large volume of socialization research has been concerned with the dimensions or content of the socialization process. Myers and Oetzel’s (2003) measure of organizational socialization captures the content of socialization: supervisor familiarity, acculturation, recognition, involvement, job competency, and role negotiation. Chao and colleagues’ (1994) measure of socialization reflects six dimensions of socialization: performance proficiency, politics, language, people, organizational goals/values, and history. Table 1 summarizes socialization research that has explored a variety of socialization content.

In reviewing the aspects of socialization that studies typically explore, arguably, some dimensions, such as role clarity and task mastery, pertain to *roles* or vocational socialization, whereas others, such as social integration and acculturation, concern *organizational* socialization. Although Table 1 separates role and organizational socialization content, socialization research typically and problematically considers these different aspects of socialization in tandem.

Louis (1980) acknowledged long ago that “two basic kinds of content can be distinguished in socialization. The first is role-related learning, and the second is a more general appreciation of the culture of an organization” (p. 231). However, most research has considered role and organizational socialization as conjoined instead of

**Table 1** Socialization Content Explored in the Literature

Literature	Role Socialization Content	Organizational Socialization Content
Adkins (1995)	task competence, role clarity, realistic job expectations	interpersonal relationships
Anakwe and Greenhaus (1999)	task mastery, personal learning, role clarity	functioning within the work group, knowledge & acceptance of organization's culture
Barge and Schlueter (2004)	professional behavior, work ethic, customer service, you are valued, giving input	work expectations & rules, office politics, welcome to the team
Bauer and Green (1994)	self-efficacy, role ambiguity, and conflict	perceived acceptance by the group
Bauer et al. (2007)	role clarity, self-efficacy	social acceptance
Bullis and Bach (1989)	receiving informal recognition, gaining formal recognition, jumping informal hurdle, approaching formal hurdle, protecting one's "self," getting away, doubting one's "self"	moving in, settling in, socializing, sense of community, representing the organization, disappointment, alienation
Chao et al. (1994)	performance proficiency	organization goals/values, organization history, politics, people/relationships, language
Chen and Klimoski (2003)	empowerment, work characteristics	social exchanges
Cooper-Thomas and Anderson (2002)	role	social, interpersonal resources, organization
Feldman (1981)	initiation to the task, role definition	initiation to the group
Gaillard et al. (2010)	job competency, role negotiation, involvement, recognition	acculturation, familiarity with coworkers, familiarity with supervisors
Hart (2012)	performance proficiency	history, people, politics, language, goals and values

*(Continued)*

Table 1 (Continued)

Literature	Role Socialization Content	Organizational Socialization Content
Hart and Miller (2005)	performance proficiency, role ambiguity, role innovation	organizational history, work unit history, people, politics, language, organizational goals and values
Haueter, Macan, and Winter (2003)	task	organizational, workgroup
Holton (1996)	individual, work task	people, organization
Jablin and Kramer (1998)	complete tasks and influence others	building relationships, knowing appropriate ways of saying things
Kammeyer-Mueller and Wanberg (2003)	task mastery, role clarity	work group integration, political knowledge
Klein and Weaver (2000)	performance proficiency	politics, history, organizational goals/values, people, language
Louis (1980)	role-related learning	cultural learning
Louis (1982)	task/procedures, image/identity	workplace frame, power/players, task/social networks, local language
Madlock and Horan (2009)	task	organizational, workgroup
Miller and Jablin (1991)	referent, appraisal	relational
Morrison (1995)	technical, referent, appraisal	social, normative, organizational, political
Morrison (1995)	technical, referent, performance	social, normative
Morrison (2002)	task mastery, role clarity	organizational knowledge, social integration, organizational commitment

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Myers (2005)	become involved, feel recognized, develop job skills	familiarity with others, acculturate
Myers and Oetzel (2003)	job competency, role negotiation, involvement, recognition	acculturation, supervisor familiarity
Ostroff and Kozlowski (1992)	task, role	group, organization
Saks and Ashforth (1997)	task knowledge	organizational goals and values, power structures
Slaughter and Zickar (2006)	role conflict and ambiguity	attitudinal commitment, citizenship behavior
Stohl (1986)	advancement, role behavior, evaluation, personal growth	family, organizational structure, communication
Teboul (1994)	referent, appraisal	relational
Waldeck et al. (2004)	role clarity, performance/task mastery	social integration

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unique processes. As I discuss below, conceptualizing socialization as simultaneous role and organizational learning poses serious problems for theorizing about non-traditional workers' socialization, such as rotational employees.

### *Reconceptualizing the Socialization Process Through Rotational Programs*

Current practices in rotational programs suggest that companies do not develop employees in the ways that current conceptualizations of socialization indicate. Rather, firms often cultivate their top talent differently from traditional employees in providing unique experiences throughout the four stages of socialization (anticipatory, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit) beyond what current models feature. Specifically, rotational programs have implications for at least two crucial components of the socialization process: role adjustment and identification.

#### *Role adjustment*

First, whereas traditional employees only experience role and organizational anticipatory socialization once (before the start of their employment), rotational program participants likely engage in role anticipatory socialization every time they rotate. Traditionally, newcomers develop inflated expectations of their new roles before working (Wanous, 1976). However, rotational employees might form more realistic expectations and adjust to roles differently because program participants can observe other roles firsthand, seek information from coworkers and often meet with future managers before entering a new role.

Second, rotational program employees might experience the encounter and metamorphosis phases differently than traditional members. Whereas traditional employees enter and adapt to a new role and organization at the same time, rotational program employees are continually encountering new roles with every rotation. Whereas traditional models consider role and organizational socialization in tandem, these two aspects of socialization unfold differently for rotational employees.

Third, traditional and rotational employees experience the exit phase differently. Traditional employees often do not know when their time in their current role will end (Jablin, 2001). In a rotational program, on the other hand, employees know their roles are temporary with fixed timelines, and participants plan their exit. This planned exit might be a socialization turning point (Bullis & Bach, 1989) that influences role adjustment. Workers who know they will soon rotate into a new position might feel the need to adjust to roles quicker. Or, when employees anticipate a rotation, they may not feel the need to adapt to a role since it will end. Such a planned aspect of rotational programs also separates this form of job rotation from related research in job transfers and promotions (Kramer, 1993, 1994, 1989; Kramer, Callister, & Truban, 1995; Kramer & Noland, 1999). Beyond offering a new perspective on employees' role adjustment, rotational programs also hold implications for how members identify with their work.

### *Organizational Identification*

In addition to altering how employees adapt to positions, rotational programs are also likely to influence how workers identify with their work, as “one’s participation in a collective, social role cannot be obtained in any other way” than identification (Burke, 1937, p. 144). People experience identification when they sense an overlap, or what Burke (1950, p. 21) calls “consubstantiality,” between their identity and the organization’s identity, feeling similar to other members and perceiving a sense of belongingness (Cheney, 1983). According to Burke (1950), individuals identify with various targets, such as organizations or roles, in response to the “mystery” or estrangement in the divisions of society. Applying mystery to the study of organizational communication, research has demonstrated that when organizational members perceive a diverse role in another hierarchy to be mysterious, they do not identify with that group (Tompkins, Fisher, Infante, & Tompkins, 1975). Thus, it follows that mystery and identification are important concepts in the socialization process, as newcomers learn about unfamiliar positions and become part of a new group.

Bullis and Bach (1989) were among the first to study identification during organizational socialization and conceptualized identification as “an ongoing process related to the mystery and division inherent in organization” (p. 275). In management, Ashforth and Mael (1989) theorized that socialization affects organizational identification, as newcomers seek to manage and make sense of their new roles. Subsequent scholarship has demonstrated that various organizational tactics, including orientation materials, training, and house organs, cultivate identification in new members (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Cheney, 1983; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Kaufman, 1960; Pribble, 1990; Vaughn, 1997).

Employees in rotational programs, however, may experience organizational identification differently than traditional organizational members. When rotational employees begin working at a new organization, they likely undergo the same organizational activities as traditional employees, which stimulate organizational identities (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998). Furthermore, employees’ identification is reinforced through membership negotiations and their interactions with others (Scott & Myers, 2010). But after they rotate roles, even though employees are in a “new” position, they are likely already identified with the organization. Although the rotation might be a turning point during which organizational identification waxes and wanes (Bullis & Bach, 1989), after their first rotation, rotational employees may be similar to blue collar workers in Gibson and Papa’s (2000) study, where “identification is both hastened and strengthened for newcomers who are already familiar with an organization” (p. 84).

Thus, whereas traditional workers feel part of their role and the organization after several months (Feldman, 1976; Jablin, 2001; Van Maanen, 1975), rotational program employees may not feel comfortable in their role but consider themselves organizational insiders. Although rotational employees might be encountering a new role, they may already feel a sense of attachment to their work during this phase.

In sum, organizations provide rotational employees with different adjustment and identification experiences throughout the four phases of socialization because rotational programs are socializing employees into multiple roles. Furthermore, rotational workers do not experience role and organizational socialization simultaneously, as if every component of the socialization process occurs concurrently. In a traditional work environment, new employees typically learn about their roles and the organization at the same time. Thus, it makes sense that research commonly considers these two complementary aspects of socialization in tandem, as **Table 1** suggests. Exploring socialization in rotational programs, however, allows us to look at the differences between role and organizational socialization because these types of socialization happen at different times. Companies might socialize program participants to both the organization and a role during their first rotation, but rotational employees have to relearn different roles as they move laterally throughout the business. Although rotational employees might feel part of the organization rather quickly, their role socialization occurs repeatedly.

Therefore, the present study examined the socialization process anew by exploring role adjustment and organizational identification in corporate rotational programs. This research had as its aim providing a more complex depiction of how employees learn about organizations and adapt to multiple roles within a rotational program. Accordingly, the following research question is posed:

RQ: How are rotational employees experiencing this new form of socialization, especially in terms of role adjustment and organizational identification?

## METHOD

### *Research Setting*

To address the question, I collected data from employees at Central Bank (a pseudonym, as are all participants' names). Central Bank is a United States-based financial services firm that provides credit cards, banking services, and loans to over 50 million customers. Central Bank employs over 10,000 individuals worldwide, and about 3,000 employees (including those in the current study) work at its headquarters in the Midwest.

At the headquarters, Central Bank has a rotational program with six business tracks (Analytics, Business Technology, Finance, Marketing, and Operations). The organization recruits promising undergraduates and graduate students from local schools. As part of the rotational program for full-time employees, Central Bank also offers a summer internship program with these same six tracks. Traditionally, interns stay on with the company and join the full-time rotational program the following year. Rotational employees participate in two weeks of organizational background training as a cohort and then spend six months to one year in two to three rotations throughout the company. Thus, Central Bank offers an ideal research site to study how employees learn about roles and organizations over multiple rotations.

In general, most rotational employees at Central Bank are recruited from undergraduate and business schools in the Midwestern United States. Current rotational employees attend career fairs of their alma maters to encourage high-achieving students from their school to apply to Central Bank's program. Recruits undergo a three-step interview, including an on-campus interview, phone interview, and an on-site interview at Central Bank's headquarters. Two managers oversee the rotational program and hire only professional employees (building maintenance workers, janitorial staff, secretaries, or security employees are not eligible positions for the rotational program). An equal number of men and women participate in the rotational program, and participants are rather homogeneous. Although I did not formally collect demographic data, through interviewing participants and getting to know employees during informal interactions, I observed that almost all rotational program participants were white, Midwestern, and middle class.

### *Data*

I studied Central Bank from 2011 to 2013 as part of a larger project that received IRB human subjects approval. In 2011, during interviews with rotational employees in their second and third rotations, I began to see differences in role and organizational socialization that seemed to warrant further exploration.

To collect data for the current study, I interviewed 12 of the 25 rotational employees (48% response rate) at the end of their first role or "first rotation" (August 2012) and 10 of the 13 rotational employees (12 employees left the rotational program; 77% response rate) after the fourth week of work in their second role or "second rotation" (August 2013). For my semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996), I created a protocol of questions that called upon respondents to express their opinions or attitudes in ways that permitted flexibility for probes (Charmaz, 2006) and followed up with questions to help respondents extend information and to fill in detail (Weiss, 1994). In the interview guides, I identified certain areas to be covered in the interview (e.g., background, orientation, learning your job) so I could grasp key topics "at a glance" (Weiss, 1994, p. 48). I then developed specific questions that corresponded to each area. I held interviews in private conference rooms and assured participants that their responses would not be directly shared with their employers. I also gave employees the opportunity to create their own pseudonyms to ensure anonymity, as well as explained that I would be the only one to be listening to the audio recording. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes. I later transcribed the interviews for analysis, which resulted in 754 double-spaced pages of text.

To supplement these interviews, I observed participants during a 2-week intensive training for new rotational employees at Central Bank. During the training, new employees received an overview of the financial services industry, watched presentations of business unit summaries, heard advice from executive vice presidents of the company and engaged in networking and team-building exercises. My role as an observer was as a "participant as observer" or "play participant" (Tracy, 2012, p. 109), in that I sat with rotational employees and shadowed their experiences during

training, but my research was explicit rather than covert. Throughout my observations, I took raw field notes of what I learned throughout my experiences and activities (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Later, I formally typed these notes into 76 double-spaced pages of text, which allowed me to add more detail to my raw notes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013).

### *Data Analysis*

I analyzed qualitative data using an iterative approach (Tracy, 2012). I engaged in open coding, that is, assigning text to initial emergent categories using the constant comparative method, comparing each incident in the data with other incidents for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). In this step of “moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 43), I read every transcript and attached codes to data “chunks” of varying size (Miles et al., 2013, p. 71) by comparing events/actions/interactions with others for similarities and differences, by grouping them together to form categories, and by assigning labels to each code (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Although some questions directly asked participants about their role adjustment and organizational identification, I also drew on previous research in order to identify themes related to these concepts. For example, research that has qualitatively explored role adjustment has demonstrated that adjustment involves developing job skills, becoming involved, and feeling recognized and confident in their work (Kramer, 2011; Myers, 2005). Qualitative studies of identification have noted the presence of consubstantial language (e.g., “we” versus “I”) as a marker of identity (Cheney, 1983; DiSannza & Bullis, 1999; Gossett, 2002), as well as communicating a sense of community, shared values, and similar behaviors (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Gossett, 2002; Pratt, 2000). In moving through the data, I coded instances that spoke to the presence or absence of these behaviors (e.g., developing job skills, feeling a part of the community) to identify how employees experienced socialization in terms of role adjustment and organizational identification.

Following this initial coding, I engaged in axial coding, which involved “integrating categories and their properties” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106). Here, I looked for connections among categories and collapsed codes into broader themes that spanned across categories. For example, I combined the initial categories of “observed and enacted behavior,” “adopted jargon,” and “assumed values” into the axial code “adapted to organizational culture.” As I consolidated categories, they became more theoretical in nature and more abstract conceptually (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This phase of coding resulted in the emergence of seven axial codes. Finally, I reexamined the data’s fit/misfit to ensure the data structure best explained the study’s theoretical goal of describing employees’ role and organizational socialization experiences across rotations (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## FINDINGS

The research question centered on how rotational employees experience this new form of socialization, especially in terms of role adjustment and organizational identification. Interviews clearly showed a difference between participants' communication patterns in their first versus second rotations. During their first rotations, participants discussed experiencing role and organizational socialization. In their second rotation, however, they discussed their existing organizational knowledge while still adapting to their roles.

### *First Rotation*

#### *Adapted to Organizational Culture*

Workers reportedly learned about and settled into organizational cultures, an important dimension of organizational socialization (Anakwe & Greenhaus, 1999; Hart, 2012; Jablin & Kramer, 1998; Louis, 1980; Morrison, 1995; Saks & Ashforth, 1997) in their initial rotation. During their first rotation, employees adopted behavior they saw other organizational members enact. Every participant mentioned seeing and hearing about how people typically acted, thought, dressed and communicated at work, and newcomers subscribed to those norms. For example, Maria learned about "Central Bank time," which meant that everyone began meetings five minutes late. Many employees also began to speak the organization's vernacular during their first rotation, which demonstrates the consubstantiality or overlap between employees and the organization that led employees to see things from the "perspective" of Central Bank (Cheney, 1983, p. 146). As Jennifer explained, "Now I can hear myself speaking the lingo sometimes.... I had this moment when I was explaining to my parents the promotion that I've helped with—I kept using the acronyms and they were lost without them. I had to back up and explain myself." Most participants also adapted to Central Bank's culture by espousing the organization's values, identifying with the organization's "outer-voice" (Cheney, 1983, p. 147). Stefan, for example, said he accepted the company's "work hard, play hard" mentality by performing his job-related duties but also playing on a corporate volleyball team.

#### *Acclimated to the Organization*

Whereas adapting to organizational culture referred to more implicit, cultural knowledge, acclimating to the organization involved employees learning about and adapting more explicit organizational information. In line with previous research (Gailliard, Myers, & Seibold, 2010; Hart & Miller, 2005; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Morrison, 2002; Stohl, 1986), gaining organizational knowledge contributed to employees' organizational socialization. Every participant reported learning about the company's history, reputation, and structure.

To illustrate, during their first rotation, most employees learned and referenced facts about Central Bank, including the organization's main functions, the organization's history, and basic organizational processes. Some participants also adjusted to the

bank's reputation, comparing the company with competitors in the financial industry with statements like "We're not as big as BlueCard." In acclimating to the organization, a few employees had to embrace negative aspects of the company. Bianca, for example, said that, "Some of the people... made it seem like Central Bank wasn't as good as some of the more well-respected financial or investor-type banks."

In addition to understanding organizational facts and adjusting to the corporation's reputation, some participants also talked about how they learned the organization's hierarchy during their first rotation. In Burke's (1950) terms, rotational employees began to uncover the mystery or estrangement in organizational divisions. Mason noted that his "manager printed out the [slide] deck of all the chains of command" to show "this is who you will be working with, this is your team, this is the head of our team, this is our team's boss, you know, etcetera." Along with understanding the internal structure of Central Bank, a few other participants also related to clients and vendors during their first rotation, which was an essential part of this client-centered organization. Angela noted how quickly she learned that Central Bank was "number one in customer loyalty."

#### *Met organizational members*

Throughout their first rotation, employees integrated with coworkers and supervisors, key contributors to organizational socialization (Barge & Schlueter, 2004; Bauer & Green, 1994; Bullis & Bach, 1989; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002; Feldman, 1981; Waldeck, Seibold, & Flanagan, 2004). Every participant discussed how getting to know organizational members helped him or her feel part of the company. As part of the rotational program, Central Bank assigned veteran rotational employees or program "alumni" to mentor newcomers and arranged special events, like happy hours, solely for the purpose of informally interacting with other rotational employees. Coworkers helped socialize newcomers by befriending them and helping them feel like they fit into the organization.

Similarly, many participants connected with their managers during their first rotation, learning about their supervisors' work preferences, idiosyncratic communication styles, pet peeves, and personal lives. Bianca explained how her relationship with her manager, Trista, developed into a friendship during her first rotation, which helped Bianca in her role: "We would talk about our personal lives, which has been nice for me." Not all participants, however, had strong relationships with their supervisors. Maria discussed how difficult it was to get to know her manager during her first rotation:

My manager's name is Katherine, and she meets with me every other week for 30 minutes. We don't have a very close relationship. This is a very busy time in her life. She is working on the TI project a lot. She has had to cancel some of our meetings because her schedule is completely packed.... Obviously 30 minutes every other week isn't that much to get to know someone.

For better or for worse, participants' relationships with their managers contributed to rotational employees' role adjustment and identification.

*Gained role competence*

Every participant gained job competence and adapted to organizational roles during his or her first rotation in ways consistent with past research on socialization (Adkins, 1995; Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007; Chen & Klimoski, 2003; Holton, 1996; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003; Myers & Oetzel, 2003). During their first rotation, most participants adjusted to their positions, in respect to understanding how to accomplish daily activities (meetings, updating spreadsheets), mastering the skills required, and adopting best practices. Employees like Stefan, had to adapt to his role as a result of realizing that marketing “is definitely not like *Mad Men* every day” and that he had to complete a lot of “repetitive work.” Role competence came from supervisors or colleagues recognizing rotational employees’ work. By feeling valued and that their work was important, participants felt accepted and better acclimated to various roles. Jennifer said that during her first rotation, “I really feel like I am making a difference,” and Jennifer’s manager made her feel like he “trust[s] my judgment.” Such pride also demonstrates a key marker of employees’ organizational identification (e.g., DiSanza & Bullis, 1999).

In short, participants’ knowledge and adjustment during their first rotation centered on adapting to organizational culture, acclimating to the organization, meeting organizational members, and developing role competence. Whereas they experienced both role and organizational socialization during their first rotation, their second rotation primarily involved role socialization and components of socialization that are less prevalent in prior inquiries relating to socialization.

*Second Rotation**Communicated organizational acumen*

During their second rotation, employees did not experience organizational socialization because they already knew and identified with the organizational culture. Every participant communicated his or her organizational acumen by following norms and behaviors learned during the first rotation. By their second rotation, many employees had also established organizational networks with people they had already met, including coworkers, members of cross-functional teams, and other rotational employees, which deepened their insight of Central Bank. Established networks benefitted rotational employees by providing resources for work-related problems. Griffin found value in coming to know people across the company:

I have access to certain people in this company whereas other [nonrotational] people may not.... I can reach out to someone on the branding team that I have a close relationship and ask what is the best way they would recommend to promote this to cardmembers or whatever it might be. I know people on the network side as well so I can ask them like, “What members accept this card?” or something like that for example. So it’s nice because I know people in different functions, so if I have a question about that, I can ask them or I can ask them if they might know someone who would know the answer on their team.

Thus, an established network helped broaden the number of contacts that employees had for work or social support.

During this rotation, participants began to talk more like organizational insiders, in virtue of expressing their sense of identification with the company. Some employees even attributed this connection to their experiences during their first rotation. As TJ commented, "The first day we came back, it felt like I never even left.... And, I mean, that's identity right there." Similarly, Griffin noted that the first rotation "gave me that initial pride in the company," so he felt like an insider during his second rotation. Despite seeing themselves as part of the organization, employees in their second rotation did not feel acclimated to their role.

### *Expressed role confusion*

Even after four weeks in their second rotation, all but 1 participant talked about their role confusion. This happened at both a micro- and macrolevels. First, most rotational employees revealed uncertainty about jargon and detailed information regarding their second position. When asked how her second rotation compared with her first rotation, Natalie answered, "It's very different because I have to learn computer terms that I'm not really familiar with.... I sit in meetings and it's all over my head. I take notes, even though I don't really know what they mean." Ananya also said that in "the technical meetings, I still have no idea what is going on."

Second, in addition to feeling confused about details, a sizeable number of rotational employees also experienced macro role confusion, acknowledging that they lacked a bird's eye view of their job or high-level information about their role. Dorian explained:

I am still trying to figure things out.... I want to find out how to do things better. But I don't have enough experience yet to understand things at a holistic level to know where there are opportunities to improve things. But I think that I will with time, in a couple of months.

Because employees did not continue in the same job, their second rotation was full of role uncertainty and required additional role socialization at both the micro- and macrolevels. Thus, one primary difference between traditional and rotational employees was added role uncertainty during seasoned employees' work. In addition, rotational employees discussed the agency they had in rotational socialization.

### *Exercised role agency*

All but 1 participant mentioned having agency in their rotational socialization process. In a proactive attempt to obtain a desirable rotation, employees networked with others in the company, worked hard to obtain the job they wanted next and felt as if they had power in determining their future roles.

For example, 1 participant stated that he was "not as much of a fan of the networking piece," explaining that at Central Bank

You navigate your own career. There seems to be a lot of onus on us... after the two one-year rotations, we are supposed to move into some kind of next phase position. And a lot of that sounds like it is on the [employee]. So there really isn't a formal structure in place to support it. It is more networking and reaching out, applying for open jobs, that kind of thing.... I feel like a lot of the message has been that your career is up to you.

Similarly, Hannah commented, "They say network, network. You can find your next job," and Susan explained, "I will be asking people, 'What did you do today?' I am genuinely curious because maybe I will... be interested in it in the future." Quite a few Central Bank employees felt they had the power to choose their own path in the company by networking. Some also exercised agency by working harder and meeting goals so that they could achieve better rotations in the future. Griffin, for example, said that, "Having goals is nice because it shows me what I need to accomplish in order to get a good rotation for my next rotation."

In addition to networking and working harder, numerous participants exercised agency as they ranked, accepted, or denied future roles. Rotational employees, in other words, did not have to accept a position they did not want. When approached about a specific rotation, Sara mentioned, "I admitted that it wasn't something that was really up my alley" because it was more engineering-focused than she wanted. Similarly, Amy said that during her meeting with the rotational managers, "They list off rotations, and I'm like, 'No.'"

In conclusion, rotational employees experienced role and organizational socialization during their first rotation. They entered their second rotation with an organizational network, organizational norms, and organizational identification, but they displayed less role clarity because they were in a different role. In their second rotation, employees also took more of an active role in navigating their future roles. In the following section, I discuss these findings and their implications.

## Discussion

The goal of this research was to reexamine scholars' current conceptualization of the socialization process to account for socialization into multiple roles. This study focused on rotational programs to provide a more complete picture of how the different types of socialization—role and organizational—develop over time. The findings demonstrate that rotational employees experience socialization very differently from traditional employees. Although rotational employees adapt to roles and organizations in their first rotation in a similar way to traditional employees, upon their second rotation, rotational employees are already familiar with the organization. Therefore, they do not undergo organizational socialization alongside role socialization. It is this second rotation that derails rotational employees from current conceptualizations of socialization because role and organizational socialization do not occur simultaneously.

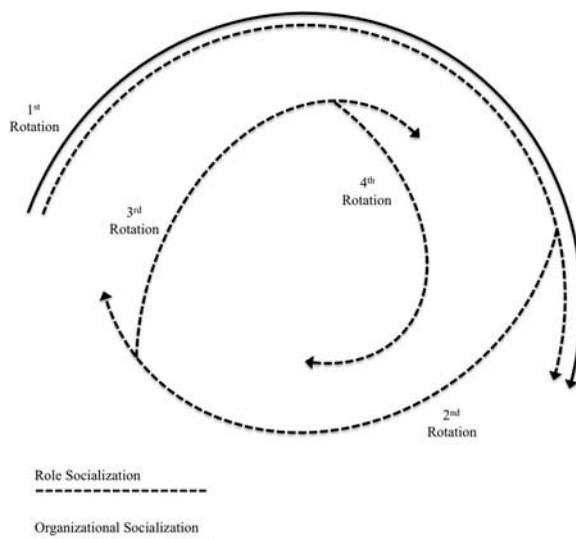
This study contributes to socialization research by demonstrating a more complex socialization perspective. The findings showed that rotational employees become

socialized to the organization during their first role, but they are constantly undergoing role socialization throughout later rotations. Thus, instead of a simple linear model of socialization, this study calls for a Model of Rotational Socialization (see Figure 1) that separates role and organizational socialization and contains multiple socialization paths that overlap over time.

In this model, the outer ring represents employees' first rotation, during which they experience both role and organizational socialization. Specifically, employees in their first rotation experienced organizational socialization by adapting to organizational culture, acclimating to the organization, and meeting organizational members. These experiences fostered workers' organizational identification. In addition, new rotational employees gained role competence and adjusted to their role in their first rotation.

However, in their second rotation, participants only experienced role socialization. Employees in their second rotation communicated organizational acumen, demonstrating their knowledge and identification with the organization. The role socialization arrow in the Model of Rotational Socialization, however, continues in the second rotation, as evidenced by participants who expressed role confusion. With each subsequent role, the model explains that rotational employees continue to experience role socialization but not organizational socialization.

Each rotation in the model is represented by a line, and the arrow at the end of each line represents the idea that employees may continue to work in that role if it is their final rotation. However, as noted in the current study, before employees rotate to their next position, they exercise role agency by proactively engaging in role socialization for new positions before their previous rotation ends. For example, employees mentioned networking to find out about positions and asking others about their roles to learn more before rotating.



**Figure 1** Model of rotational socialization

This model helps explain why participants expressed role confusion. They constantly had to anticipate, to learn and adapt, and to leave new jobs. Although employees experienced structured socialization and a formal training when they joined the organization and began their first rotation, they were left to learn subsequent roles on their own. According to Hart and Miller (2005, p. 296), newcomers often undergo “unstructured socialization” efforts, but few studies have explored communication in these unstructured contexts. In their study of new hotel managers, Hart and Miller (p. 303) found how one unstructured socialization context, “trial-by-fire,” led to role ambiguity. Likewise, rotational employees experienced role confusion because they had to learn their job on their own. Whereas studies of socialization typically center on how communication enables sense making and reduces a newcomer’s uncertainty (Kramer, 1993; Mignerey, Rubin, & Gorden, 1995, 1994), the current study offers an alternative perspective by showing how socialization efforts might create, rather than lessen, ambiguity.

Unlike traditional socialization models, the Model of Rotational Socialization underscores individuals’ agency, because rotations provide the opportunity for employees to take initiative to learn about and adjust to their next rotation (rather than the organization socializing employees). Furthermore, participants noted taking an active role in finding future jobs. Current conceptualizations of socialization often receive criticism for overlooking the role of individual agency because stage models focus on how organizations control the socialization process (Bullis, 1993). Rotational socialization, however, serves to indicate how employees can actively steer their own socialization paths.

This model portrays a new way in which new employees exercise agency via communication. Past theory and research have suggested that newcomers demonstrate agency by proactively seeking information (Miller & Jablin, 1991; Morrison, 1993, 1995, 2002), by expressing likes or dislikes, and by resisting organizational structures, rules, and resources (Scott & Myers, 2010). The current study’s findings demonstrate how employees use communication to proactively network, to learn about, and to work towards future roles. In doing so, rotational employees may have a deeper socialization experience than traditional employees, because with each rotation—as suggested by the curved lines in the model—workers gain a richer, more intimate perspective of the organization. Similar the onion metaphor used by Schein (1985) and Altman and Taylor (1973), rotational employees are able to “dive deeper” in their understanding of the organization through multiple role socialization experiences as opposed to traditional employees who experience a more linear process of role and organizational socialization.

Furthermore, a rotational view of socialization better explains differences in socialization experiences among different employees. As Stephens and Dailey (2012) found in their study of a new employee orientation program, newcomers enter organizations with various levels of knowledge and prior exposure, which puts many in a state of readiness to experience organizational identification upon entry. Findings from this research better explain why certain employees might experience such a readiness. Specifically, employees who rotate jobs or return to organizations to begin a new role

are already familiar with organizational norms, have established an organizational network and feel a strong sense of organizational identification. Unless a large change has occurred and employees must be socialized into a new way of organizational operation (Hart, Miller, & Johnson, 2003), workers only adapt to new roles.

In this way, findings from the current study contribute to socialization theories beyond the scope of rotational employees. Scholars can apply the Model of Rotational Socialization to other role changes (not just via rotation) in organizations. For example, the model might be used to better understand role adjustment and identification in role transitions between temporary/full-time employees or volunteer/paid staff. Similarly, a worker who is promoted or moves laterally throughout an organization, returns to work at a firm after a leave of absence or transitions from member (e.g., student) to employee might also follow the Model of Rotational Socialization. Such employees may recognize the organization's norms, have an established network and feel identified with the organization, but they may experience role confusion upon their transition. Similarly, these workers may exercise role agency by using their network to change positions (e.g., to obtain a full-time job), by working harder to achieve the transition (e.g., to become a paid employee), and by feeling empowered to navigate their future (e.g., to return to work).

Studying multiple roles and transitions via the Model of Rotational Socialization opens the door to understanding socialization from a different perspective. This perspective should lead scholars to reconsider role adjustment, identification, and agency, which may significantly impact our understanding of employees' socialization and how organizations orient and train workers during role transitions. Whereas traditional employees may perceive a different role to be mysterious and difficult with which to identify (Burke, 1950; Tompkins et al., 1975), rotational employees (and others who undergo similar transitions) have contacts to help them with issues, and they may already feel a sense of attachment. When employees have this sense of belongingness, they can take a more proactive role and exercise agency in the socialization process in different ways than traditional newcomers (Scott & Myers, 2010).

In addition to providing a better explanation for employees' varying socialization experiences, this study helps us better account for the unique types of role and organizational socialization. Theory and research often considers role and organizational socialization as conjoined processes without noting their differences. For example, in their investigation of memorable messages during socialization, Barge and Schlueter (2004) identified eight common content areas: professional behavior, work ethic, customer service, you are valued, giving input, work expectations and rules, office politics, and welcome to the team. Although the authors did not distinguish among these content areas, some of the messages deal with role socialization (e.g., customer service), whereas others clearly capture organizational socialization (e.g., welcome to the team). Looking at role and organizational socialization as unique processes addresses a number of the criticisms of current models of socialization. Although the Model of Rotational Socialization still assumes that employees experience socialization in some sequence, the multiple and overlapping paths assuage some critiques of traditional models (Bullis, 1993; Clair, 1996).

By noting how these differences unfold for rotational employees, the current study suggests a need for future theory and research to consider the variance between these two types of socialization, as well as when perceptions of each type may differ. A handful of studies have shown differences among organizational, task, and workgroup socialization (Madlock & Chory, 2014; Madlock & Horan, 2009). This study provides a further rationale for assessing different “targets” of socialization, much as has been the case in the study of organizational identification (e.g., Lammers, Atouba, & Carlson, 2013). In addition to these theoretical contributions, this study also has several practical implications.

### *Practical Implications*

From a practical perspective, this research justifies the feeling of return on investment for rotational program directors and managers because such programs can clearly socialize employees into the organization in promising ways. This study, moreover, provides practitioners with an additional metric to evaluate rotational employees, as practitioners should also measure socialization in addition to retention, promotion, satisfaction, and performance ratings (Kuok & Bell, 2005). This research is supportive of the comment by a rotational program manager that “The return on investment comes in the way our recruits are swiftly immersed into the corporate culture and our products” (Frase-Blunt, 2001, p. 49). The findings show that rotational employees experience organizational socialization during their first rotation, which meets several goals of rotational programs, including being deeply immersed into the culture and acclimating employees to the organizational environment.

This work also highlights some of the challenges with rotational programs. Human Resource (HR) professionals and scholars often tout the effectiveness of rotational programs (e.g., Frase-Blunt, 2001; Kuok & Bell, 2005), but, because employees are constantly rotating, they can easily experience role confusion. As Burke (1997) notes:

Certain assignments, referred to as frame-breaking experiences, demand the attainment of numerous skills without much initial preparation and require a substantial amount of individual investment. The potential return from this is a high degree of learning as well as a high risk of failure. (p. 23)

These data presented herein reinforce Burke’s (1997) notion of frame-breaking experiences in demonstrating role confusion during the second rotation. Although research has uncovered a positive relationship between lateral movement and career attainment (Forbes, 1987), the present findings suggest that rotational program directors and managers be cautious of the frequency and difficulty of job rotations. “Overrotating” might lead to too much role confusion, which may adversely influence intentions underlying programs in respect to turnover (Jaramillo, Mulki, & Solomon, 2006).

### *Limitations and Future Directions*

The current study contributes to theory and practice in several ways, but it is not without limitations. Employees were not interviewed at the end of their second and

third rotations. Future research should explore additional rotations and quantitatively measure role and organizational socialization to assess the rotational socialization model presented here. In addition, the study explored socialization in only one rotational program. Although findings should be conceptually applicable to other organizations, future investigations might compare socialization experiences across various rotational programs, particularly those of differing length, assignment durations, and types of assignments.

Despite these limitations, this study helps close a problematic gap in communication studies by showing how rotational employees are uniquely socialized into multiple roles as organizational newcomers. Rotational workers' socialization differs from that of traditional employees, in that they experience continual role socialization after they learn about and adapt to the organization. This research extends socialization literature and offers ample opportunity for more work on nontraditional employees who do not experience role and organizational socialization concurrently.

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