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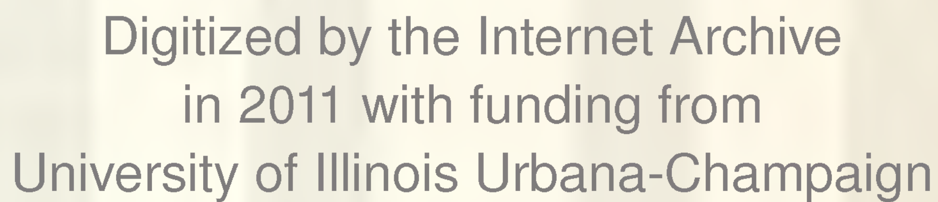

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ANIZATIONAL ENTRY: TOWARD A MORE COMPLETE
NDERSTANDING OF NEWCOMERS' EXPERIENCES*[1]

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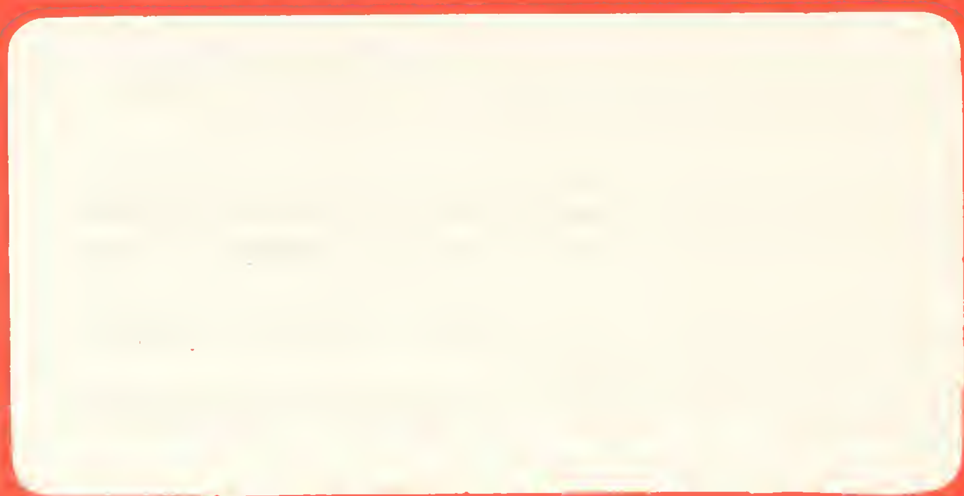

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ORGANIZATIONAL ENTRY: TOWARD A MORE COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF NEWCOMERS' EXPERIENCES*[1]

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Summary:

Growing disillusionment among new members of organizations has been traced to inadequacies in approaches to organizational entry. To provide a foundation for more adequate organizational entry practices, gaps in existing approaches are identified and a more comprehensive conceptual framework is developed. The framework: identifies key features of transition experiences; describes the sense-making processes by which individuals cope with transition features, in particular "surprises"; highlights how newcomers and insiders differ in sense-making needs and resources. Implications are drawn for organizational entry practices.

*An earlier version of the paper was presented at the November 1978 Los Angeles Meetings of the Operations Research Society of America/The Institute of Management Sciences.

ORGANIZATIONAL ENTRY: TOWARD A MORE COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING OF NEWCOMERS' EXPERIENCES

There is growing concern that current organizational entry practices do not adequately facilitate the transition of new members into work organizations. Voluntary turnover during the first 18 months on the job is increasing among college graduates in first career jobs. Reports of mounting disillusionment among new recruits are accumulating in college placement offices and in corporate personnel departments (Lamb, 1977; Moe, 1977; Louis, 1978). That these trends are found despite growing attention of companies to new member orientation highlights the problematic nature of bringing newcomers on board and the need for improved organizational entry practices.

The purpose here is to identify crucial gaps in current approaches to organizational entry and develop a perspective which fills the gaps. The new perspective proposes that an appreciation of what newcomers typically experience during the transition period and how they cope with their experiences is fundamental to designing entry practices which facilitate newcomers' adaptation in the new setting. The paper is organized in three parts: the first section reviews previous research on organizational entry and suggests limitations of current perspectives. In the second section, a new perspective is presented; its implications for organizational entry practices are discussed in the final section.

Previous Research

Historically, two distinct approaches or focuses to research on organizational entry phenomena have been followed. One has examined

causes of recruit turnover and the other has described stages of organizational socialization through which recruits pass. In the first approach, researchers have sought to identify antecedents or causes of recruit turnover in order to control or reduce it. Results of this work indicate that the single most important factor (of the factors studied) associated with recruit turnover is recruit expectations (Ross & Zander, 1957; Dunnette, Arvey, & Banas, 1973; Katzell, 1968; Wanous, 1976; Steers & Porter, 1974).

Two interpretations of the role of recruit expectations in turnover have emerged, however. In the first, turnover is attributed to unrealistic expectations that individuals bring as they enter organizations (Wanous, 1976; Bray, Campbell, & Grant, 1974); in the second, turnover is attributed to differences between newcomers' pre-entry expectations and early job experience, labeled unmet expectations (Ross & Zander; Dunnette et al.). Since the interpretations suggest different entry strategies, each is briefly explored here.

In work on realism, Wanous (1976) has found that newcomers' expectations are more inflated or unrealistic about intrinsic job aspects (i.e., the nature and characteristics of the work itself) than are expectations about extrinsic aspects of the job (i.e., working conditions, salary and benefits). Wanous attributes this difference to the fact that it is more difficult to describe the intrinsic nature and characteristics of a job than to convey the extrinsic features of the work setting and benefits package. The typical recruitment strategy of "selling" the individual on the organization by emphasizing its

desirable aspects is one source of unrealistic expectations (Ward & Athos, 1972).

Based on these findings, researchers have developed a technique called the Realistic Job Preview (RJP) to promote more realistic pre-entry job expectations among company recruits. Wanous (1976) has found that greater realism in expectations results when recruits receive preview booklets describing the company and the job. Furthermore, Wanous (1977) has found realism to be negatively associated with turnover.

While realism, the key word used in this approach, suggests accuracy and appropriateness of expectations, it is operationalized merely as the inverse of expectation level; lower expectations are considered more realistic than are higher expectations.

In contrast to the realism approach, the work of Ross & Zander and Dunnette et. al. operationalizes <u>unmet</u> expectations as the difference between initial expectations (or needs) and actual experiences on the job.

Dunnette et. al. found that among college graduates in one large company, those who resigned had significantly more <u>unmet</u> job expectations than did those who remained in the organization. What is noteworthy is that those who stayed and those who left "...were nearly identical in what they [initially] expected from their jobs at the time they decided to go with the company (p. 28)." Although it would seem that lower initial job expectations would be more easily met than higher expectations (e.g., "I'm not expecting much responsibility on the job" versus "I'm expecting a lot"), Dunnette's work indicates that

it is the extent of unmet expectations or unmet needs (Ross & Zander) rather than level of initial expectations per se that is predictive of voluntary turnover.

In sum, this approach suggests that recruit turnover can be reduced by reducing unmet expectations. However, unmet expectations, broadly defined, may be an inevitable accompaniment to such major transitions as the move from school to work. This possibility and its implications for managing recruit turnover are explored later in the paper.

The second major approach to the study of organizational entry provides descriptions of stages through which recruits pass and the probable outcomes of each stage (Merton, 1957; Schein, 1962, 1968; Van Maanen, 1976; Schein & Van Maanen, 1978). According to Schein (1968), the organizational socialization process begins in a stage called _anticipatory socialization_. Recruits, while still outsiders, anticipate their experiences in the organization they are about to enter. During that period, outsiders develop expectations about their life in the organization and on the job. It is here that the unrealistic expectations identified by Wanous develop.

On beginning work, the individual passes from outsider to newcomer and enters the _encounter_ stage. During encounter, newcomers' pre-entry expectations are tested against the reality of their new work experiences. Differences between expectations and experiences (the previously described unmet expectations) result in what Hughes (1958) has called "reality shock." Coping with such differences and "learning the ropes"

(Ritti & Funkhouser, 1977) of the new setting typically occupy the newcomer for the first 6 to 10 months on the job.

The passage from newcomer to insider marks the individual's resolution of, or adaptation to, differences between expectations and early job experiences. The final stage of organizational socialization has been termed metamorphosis.

In assessing current approaches to organizational entry, three important gaps can be identified. First, there has been little integration of the two approaches to date (Louis, 1978). Yet the stages of organizational socialization describe the context in which recruit turnover takes place.

Secondly, in current approaches there has been insufficient study of the ways in which newcomers detect, diagnose, interpret, and select responses to differences between pre-entry expectations and early job experiences. Why is it that some newcomers choose to leave work organizations, others try to renegotiate job descriptions, and still others accept more readily the unanticipated reality of the new setting? What is it about the individuals themselves (e.g., personality and background), their situations in the organizations, or the ways in which they internally process their experiences as newcomers that leads them to choose one of these responses over another? Answers to these questions should enlighten efforts to improve organizational entry practices.

Finally, it seems important to design entry practices based on a rich appreciation of the nature of newcomer transition experiences. Yet to date no adequate experience-based and/or holistic description of the phenomenon has been developed and integrated into work on organizational entry.

A Model of the Newcomer Experience

What do newcomers typically experience in entering new organizations? How do newcomers cope with their transition experiences? In the following pages key features of the newcomer experience are described and a framework for understanding newcomers' coping or sense-making processes is developed.

Characteristics of the Transition Experience. It is proposed that change, contrast and surprise constitute major types of transition features. While all refer to various types of differences attendant to entering new settings, they focus on separate areas of difference. Each is briefly defined and illustrated in the next few pages.

Often the college graduate entering a work organization experiences several major changes at once. For instance, starting a new job may also involve moving to a different city, developing a new social network, buying a house. Such change produces stress, whether the change is for the good or bad (Cobb, 1976; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Holmes & Rahe, 1967). It is the newness of the "changed to" situation that requires adjustment by the individual. Change is defined here as an objective difference in a major feature between the new and old settings. The more elements that are different in the new situation compared with the previous situation, the more the newcomer potentially has to cope with. This is true even though differences represent improvements over the previous situation.

Defined more elaborately, change is publicly noted and knowable; that is, there is recordable evidence of a difference. Evidence includes new addresses and telephone numbers, title, salary, job

description, organizational affiliation, perquisites, etc. Such evidence exists in advance of the transition. In fact, changes themselves are knowable in advance.

With the start of a new job, the individual experiences a change in role and often in professional identity; from student to financial analyst, for instance. Such role changes are often accompanied by changes in status. Similarly, there are often major differences in basic working conditions. Discretion in scheduling time, opportunities for feedback and peer interaction may be very different at work than in school, in field sales versus marketing research or management.

What else changes as the newcomer begins life in a new setting? Schein (1971) has stated that an individual entering an organization crosses three boundaries: functional, hierarchical, and inclusionary. The newcomer takes on a set of tasks within a functional area (e.g., marketing, finance) and must learn how they are to be accomplished. The newcomer also acquires a position in the hierarchy, implying supervisory authority over subordinates, and reporting responsibility to a superior.

A more informal but no less crucial boundary to cross is the inclusionary one. This boundary refers to one's position in the informal information and influence networks. Influence and information access from the previous situation can seldom be transferred into the new situation. As a result, newcomers usually hold peripheral rather than central positions in the inclusionary network. Over time they may develop access and influence bases, but initially they are usually "on

the outside." Together, these boundaries represent three more dimensions of newness or change for newcomers. Based on this view of change, we can generally expect a transition from school to a first full-time, career-related job to be accompanied by more changes and therefore more stress, than a transition from one work organization to another, especially when the new job is similar to the previous one.

A second type of transition feature is contrast. Contrast is personally, rather than publicly, noticed. Contrasts constitute how the individual defines the situation. They are not for the most part knowable in advance. Contrast is therefore person-specific rather than indigenous to the organization transition. That is to say, for two people undergoing the same change (e.g., leaving Stanford and entering Merrill Lynch) different contrasts will emerge.

Contrast, an effect described by Gestalt psychologists (Kohler, 1947; Koffka, 1935), involves the emergence within a perceptual field of figure, or noticed features, against ground, or general background. Particular features emerge when individuals experience new settings. Which features emerge as "figure" is in part determined by features of previously experienced settings. Both between setting differences and within (new) setting characteristics contribute to the selection of features experienced as figure. For example, how people dress in the new setting may or may not be noticed or experienced as a contrast by the newcomer, depending in part on whether dress differs between new and old settings. The presence of a difference in dress is a necessary but not sufficient precondition for the noticing of a contrast. Similarly, the absence of windows may or may not emerge through the

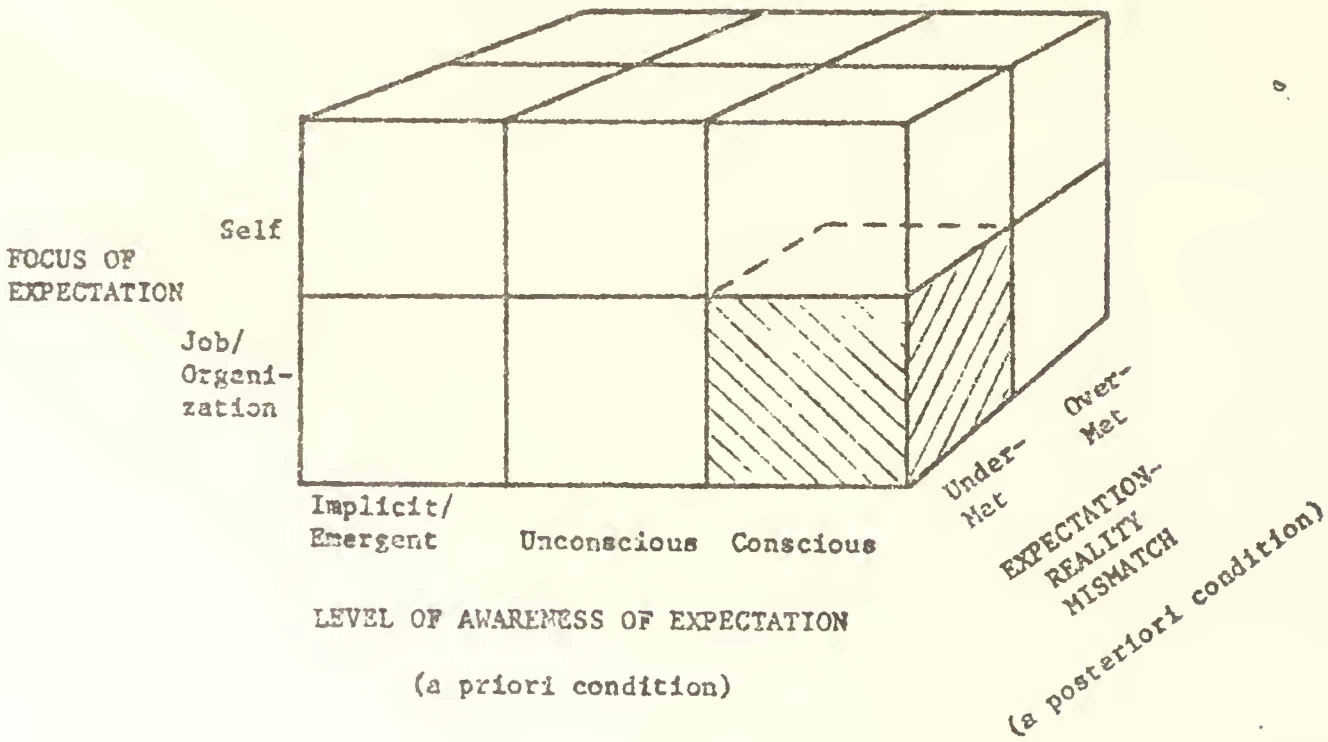
contrast effect as a distinguishing feature of the new setting, depending on the individual and the full set of potential contrasts in the situation.

That there are natural perceptual limits operating to set some maximum number of contrasts to which individuals can attend is implied in work by Miller (1956), but requires direct examination. Additionally, this researcher's observations and intuitions suggest that for individuals in new situations, some minimum number of contrasts emerge by which the newness of the situation is identified and described.

The third type of transition feature is surprise. Surprise represents both a difference between an individual's prior anticipations and subsequent experience in the new setting and his/her affective reactions to differences (including contrasts and changes). Surprises may be positive (e.g., delight at finding your office window overlooks a garden) and/or negative (e.g., disappointment at finding your office window cannot be opened). The subject of anticipations and, therefore, surprise may be the job, organization or self. Anticipations may be conscious or unconscious, and either overmet or undermet anticipations can produce surprise. Figure I summarizes the forms of surprise in relation to three dimensions for understanding organizational entry phenomena.

It is proposed that several forms of surprise often arise during the encounter stage and require adaptation on the part of the newcomer. The first form of surprise occurs when conscious expectations about the job are not fulfilled in the newcomers' early job experiences. 'Unmet expectations' as typically used (e.g., in the research reviewed in the

FIGURE I. VARIETIES OF SURPRISE



previous section) refers to undermet conscious job expectations, shown as the shaded area in Figure I.

A second form of surprise which may occur during encounter, arises when expectations (both conscious and unconscious) about oneself are unmet. Choice of the new organization is often based on assumptions about one's own skills, values, needs, etc. During encounter, errors in assumptions sometimes emerge and the newcomer must cope with the recognition that he/she is different than was previously thought. Witness this example: "I chose this job because it offered a great deal of freedom; now I realize I really don't want so much freedom."

A third form of surprise arises when unconscious job expectations are unmet or when features of the job are unanticipated. Job aspects not previously considered important stand out as important because their presence or absence is experienced as undesirable. As one newcomer said: "I had no idea how important windows were to me till I'd spent a week in a staff room without any." This is an example of both inadequacy in prior anticipations producing surprise and a contrast, indicating a typical overlap between the two types of features.

A fourth form of surprise arises from difficulties in accurately forecasting internal reactions to a particular new experience. "What will happen" (the external events) may be accurately anticipated while "how it will feel" (the internal experience of external events) may not be accurately assessed by the individual. How new experiences will feel, as opposed to how the individual expected them to feel, is difficult to anticipate and often surprising. "I knew I'd have to put in a lot of overtime. But I had no idea how bad I'd feel after a month of

65 hour weeks, how tired I'd be all the time." In this example, the facts were available to the individual ahead of time, and were accepted; what was inaccurately anticipated, and therefore surprising, was how it would "actually feel," the subjective experience. The individual in this example might interpret his/her experience as "I don't have as much energy as I thought," experiencing an unmet expectation about self.

A final point about surprise is necessary. Just as both positive and negative change produce stress to be coped with, both pleasant and unpleasant surprises require adaptation. However, traditional formulations of unmet expectations implicitly treat only undermet expectations or unpleasant surprises. In future, it will be important to include both overmet as well as undermet expectations in considering surprises that contribute to newcomer stress.

The picture of the newcomer experience developed here suggests that the strategy of enhancing the "realism" of only conscious pre-entry job expectations is not adequate. Similarly, strategies to insure that conscious pre-entry job expectations are not underfulfilled ("unmet") in early job experiences are also not sufficient. Ultimately both views seek to aid newcomers by reducing the extent of their unmet expectations. Both implicitly deny the near inevitability of the myriad unanticipated and even unanticipatable changes, contrasts and surprises attendant to entering substantially different organizational settings. Unmet conscious job expectations constitute merely one subset of surprise.

It is proposed that appreciation of changes, surprises, and contrasts characteristic of newcomer transitions is essential in designing organizational structures that facilitate newcomer transitions. In

essence, they constitute a part of the experiential landscape of individuals during the encounter stage of organizational socialization. How newcomers navigate the landscape (that is, the processes by which they cope with such features) is the subject of the remainder of the section.

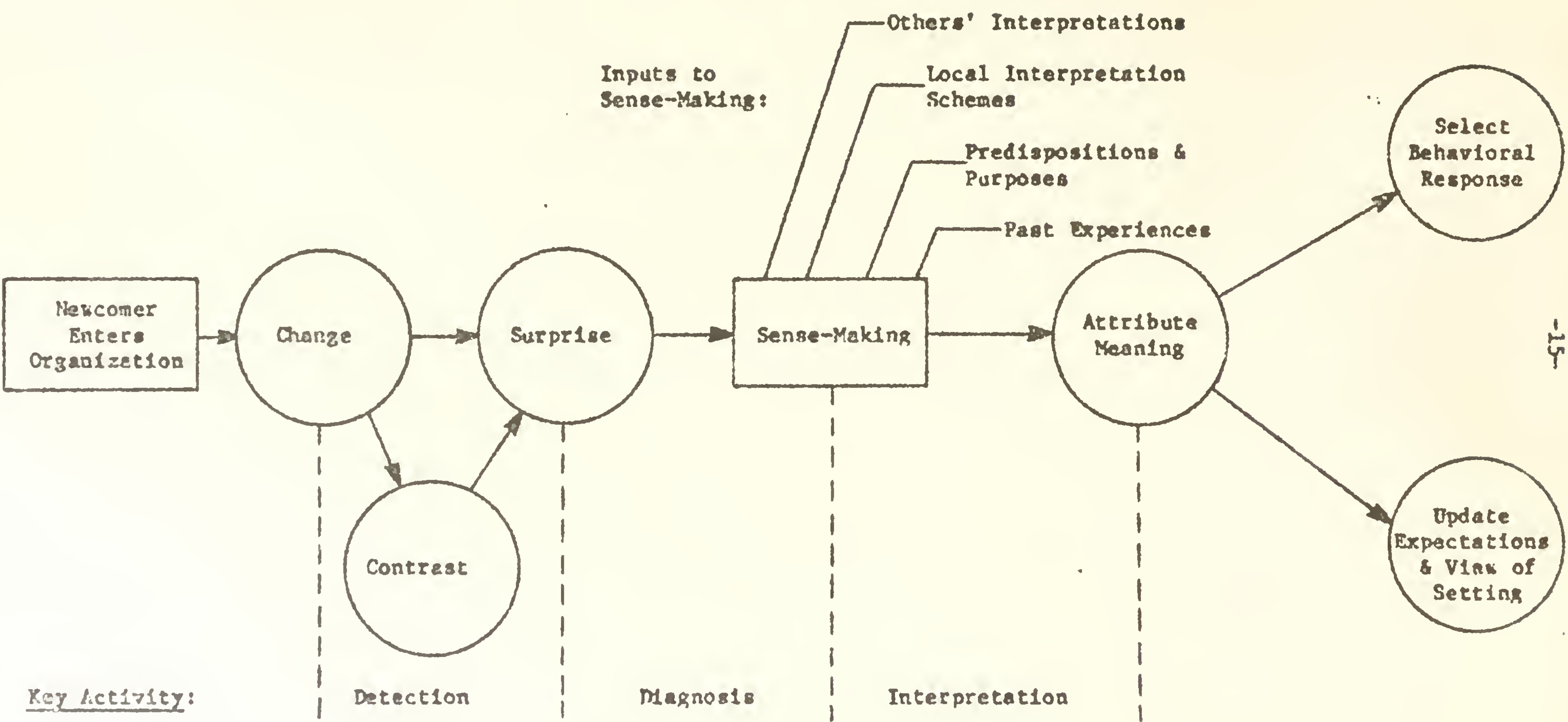
How Newcomers Cope with Transition: Sense-Making. Let us take a closer look at the sense-making process by which individuals cope with surprises. Recently, a framework describing the processes by which individuals detect and interpret surprises has been developed (Louis, 1978). The framework suggests that sense-making can be viewed as a cycle. The sequence of events over time is as follows: 1) individuals form unconscious and conscious predictions, anticipations, or expectations about future events; 2) individuals experience events which may be discrepant from predictions, experienced as surprises; 3) discrepant events, or surprises, trigger a need for explanation, or post-diction, through which interpretations of discrepancies are developed; that is, meaning is attributed to surprises; 4) based on attributed meanings, any necessary behavioral responses to the immediate situation are selected; 5) also based on attributed meanings, understandings of actors, actions, and settings are updated and predictions about future experiences in the setting are revised. At that point the cycle has begun again (Louis, 1978). The cycle as described includes only the more rational elements in sense-making. It is meant to represent general stages in understanding one's experience, rather than the literal process by which all individuals respond to each experience. It is crucial to note that

meaning is attributed to surprise as an output of the sense-making process, rather than arising concurrently with perception or detection of differences.

The framework (Louis, 1978) further suggests that individuals make sense of, or attribute meaning to, surprises based on four types of input: 1) their past experiences with similar surprises and situations; 2) general personal/personality characteristics including predispositions to attribute causality to self, others, fate, etc. (e.g., locus of control (Rotter, 1966) and anomie (McClosky & Schaar, 1963)), as well as individual's orienting purposes in the situation and in general; 3) interpretive schemes, i.e., internalizations of context-specific dictionaries of meaning which "...structure routine interpretations and conduct within an institutional area" (Berger & Luckman, 1968, p. 138); 4) information and interpretations from others in the situation. Figure II summarizes the framework and presents it in relation to the features of transition described earlier in the section.

In order to assess the special needs of newcomers during sense-making, we compare their situation in general with that of insiders. There are three important ways in which the experiences of newcomers differ from those of insiders. In the first place, insiders normally know what to expect in and of the situation. For the most part, little is surprising or needs to be made sense of. Secondly, when surprises do arise (e.g., not getting an expected raise), the insider usually has sufficient history in the setting to interpret them more accurately, or make sense based more on relevant knowledge of the immediate situation. An insider probably knows, for instance, whether the denied raise is

FIGURE II. SENSE-MAKING IN NEWCOMERS' TRANSITIONS.



due to company-wide budget cuts or is related to his/her performance, and whether it is an indication of how the future may unfold or a temporary situation. Thirdly, when surprises arise and sense-making is necessary, the insider usually has other insiders who can serve as sounding boards to "check out" their perceptions and interpretations with.

The comparison of newcomer and insider experiences suggests that two types of input to sense-making shown in Figure II may be problematic for newcomers: local interpratation schemes and others' interpretations. Concerning the former, newcomers probably do not have adequate history in the setting to appreciate as fully as insiders might why and how surprises have arisen. With time and experience in the new setting, they may come to understand how to interpret actions of superiors and others, and what meanings to attach to events and outcomes in the work setting. According to Berger and Luckman (1968), during early stages in a new setting, newcomers internalize dictionaries of meaning used by members of the setting. At the outset, however, newcomers typically are unfamiliar with the meaning dictionaries for the new setting. In addition, they are usually unaware of <u>both</u> their need to understand setting specific meaning dictionaries, or interpretation schemes, and the fact that they are unfamiliar with them.

As a result, newcomers often attach meanings to action, events, and surprises in the new setting using interpretation schemes developed through their experiences in other setting. Based on these, inappropriate and dysfunctional interpretations may be produced. For example, what it means to "take initiative" or "put in a hard day's work" in a

school situation may be quite different from its meaning in a work setting. In essence, this constitutes a variation on the kind of surprise that arises when unconscious job related expectations are unmet. Similarly, one's understanding of why a superior responds in a particularly harsh manner may be inadequate. Overpersonalized attributions may result in the absence of knowledge about how that superior typically behaves toward other subordinates, or without relevant background information about, for instance, the superior's recent divorce, lack of promotion, or reduction in scope of authority and responsibility.

Meanings attached may err in several ways. Newcomers may attribute permanence or stability to temporary situations, or vice versa (Weiner, 1974). As well, newcomers may see themselves as the source or cause of events when external factors are responsible for outcomes (Weiner).

The dysfunctional effects of such interpretational errors can be seen by tracing how responses chosen are influenced by meanings attributed in situations. In a series of studies by Weiner and his associates, subjects attributing events to stable causes changed behavior more often than did subjects attributing events to unstable or temporary causes (e.g., the boss is always like this versus he/she is going through a rough, but temporary period). In laboratory experiments, shifts in subjects' affect were more likely to result from personal, or internal, attributions than from external attributions (e.g., the boss doesn't like me versus the boss treats everyone harshly). While further work is needed to assess the extent to which Weiner's findings hold in organizational settings, it seems obvious that individuals select responses to events at least in part on the basis of the meaning

they attach to them. Decisions to stay or leave organizations, feelings of commitment or alienation would appear to follow from sense made by newcomers of early job experiences.

Returning to the general situation newcomers face, we have seen that the lack of setting-specific interpretation schemes, or meaning dictionaries, may lead both to surprise itself and to misinterpretation (relative to interpretations based on broad historical knowledge of the situation) of surprise during sense-making.

The second type of input to sense-making problematic for newcomers is information and interpretations of others in the situation. In comparison to the situation of insiders, newcomers probably have not developed relationships with others in the setting with whom they could test their perceptions and interpretations. Such reality-testing is seen as an important input to sense-making. In light of the picture developed here, it seems particularly important for newcomers to have insiders who might serve as sounding boards and guide them to important background information for assigning meaning to events and surprises.

These relationships might also facilitate the newcomer's acquisition of the local meaning dictionary or interpretation scheme. Finally, information may come through insider-newcomer relationships that averts and/or precipitates surprises. Insiders are seen as a potentially rich source of assistance to newcomers in diagnosing and interpreting the myriad surprises that may arise during their transitions into new settings. Insiders are already "on board"; presumably, they are equipped with richer historical and current interpretive perspectives than the newcomer alone possesses.

The framework presented here suggests that sense made of surprises by newcomers may be inadequate in the absence of relevant information about organizational, interpersonal, and personal histories provided by others in the setting. Inputs to sense-making from sources in the organization balance the inputs provided by the newcomer (i.e., previous experiences and personality predispositions) which are likely to be inadequate in the new setting. Until newcomers develop accurate internal maps of the setting, until they appreciate local meanings, it is important that they have information available for amending internal cognitive maps and for attaching meaning to such surprises as may arise during early job experiences.

Implications for Organizational Entry Practices

Previous research has favored strategies for managing newcomer transitions into work organizations that provide individuals with more accurate (realistic) initial expectations, through a Realistic Job Preview. In contrast, strategies developed from the framework presented here take as given the near inevitability that newcomers will experience some unmet expectations, or surprise, when entering a setting that is substantially different from the newcomer's previous setting and from his/her general experiences in organizations. Strategies based on the present framework would aim to intervene in the newcomer's cycle as sense is made of surprises, given that some surprise is natural to major transitions.

What this means at the practical level is that, at a minimum, certain secrecy norms, the "sink or swim" learn on your own philosophy,

and sanctions against information sharing among office members are dysfunctional for newcomers and for their employeeing organizations as well. Each of these restricts possible sources of relevant information available to newcomers.

On the other hand, fostering links between newcomers and their insider peers or non-supervisor superiors can be beneficial. Possible programs range from the most informal (e.g., the superior's suggestion that co-worker insiders lunch with the newcomer every so often to answer questions and see how he/she is doing), to fully institutionalized structures (e.g., formal buddy systems in which insiders volunteer and receive skills training in acting as guides for a new member over a 6 to 12 month period). Group or individually oriented practices are feasible. Informal sponsor and mentor links between junior and senior members offer other models of relationships through which information, perceptions, and perspectives of events in the organization can be exchanged.

Another potential aid for newcomers is the appraisal process. Timely formal and informal feedback from superiors to newcomers about their performance can possibly: 1) reduce the stress-producing uncertainty of "not knowing how you're doing," in response to which newcomers are likely to supply their own estimates; 2) replace what are often inaccurate self-appraisals with data from superiors before inaccuracies become entrenched judgments which guide the newcomer's subsequent assessments of equity in the situation. An early appraisal could be used to provide newcomers with an understanding of the process and criteria of performance evaluation. With such first-hand

knowledge, the newcomer can be expected to make more reality-based self-assessments; in addition, he/she is better equipped to interpret other events related to evaluation, clearly a crucial area in one's early organizational life. In essence, an early appraisal can be treated as a collaborative sense-making session in which the superior helps the newcomer try on a portion of an important insider's interpretive scheme. Although it is anticipated that some fallout, or surprise, may be produced, it should be easier according to this perspective for the newcomer to cope with surprise arising in an early appraisal than with the elaborated surprise expected to arise after 6 months of experience and assumption building.

Finally, there are implications for newcomers themselves, and for those who help prepare them to select and enter organizations. It would be beneficial for newcomers to enter organizations with an understanding of: why it is likely they may experience surprises during the transition period; why they as newcomers may be relatively ill-equipped to make accurate sense of surprises arising during early job experiences; and how they might proactively seek information from insiders at work to supplement their own inadequate internal interpretive schemes. To achieve that end, college curricula and placement activities could as a matter of course provide students with a preview of typical transition experiences and ways to manage them. First steps in that direction are already visible at some schools. Harvard, for instance, offers a second year MBA elective in which individuals anticipate and practice managing options and stresses they may face in new organizational settings. And at Berkeley, placement office programs attempt to enlighten graduating MBAs

about what likely lies ahead and what others before them have reported experiencing.

The implications for practice were based on the thesis that newcomers are ill-equipped to make sense of the myriad surprises that potentially accompany an entry into a new organization. It has been proposed here that entry practices be designed to enhance new members' understandings of their experiences in and of new organizational settings. Structures and processes such as the ones suggested above should be created to provide newcomers with insiders' situation specific interpretations and setting specific interpretive schemes. The insiders' view can supplement and balance natural inadequacies in newcomers' sense-making tendencies, and can hasten the development of more adequate long-term self-sufficient functioning. Furthermore, it is likely that supplementing newcomers' sense-making will facilitate accuracy in newcomers' interpretations of their immediate experiences, on the basis of which individuals choose affective and behavioral responses to early experiences on the job and in the organization.

FOOTNOTE

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