

Buerkner, Jonas Franz

## Article

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# Understanding the Impact of Future Social Self-Concepts on Newcomer Adjustment

Jonas Franz Buerkner

*Technische Universität München*

## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impacts of future social self-concepts on newcomer short-term adjustment. Employing a qualitative longitudinal design based on interviews, this work aims to uncover how the shape of identities before and three weeks after entry, as well as the identity processes between them, impact adjustment success. This is important because adjustment is a precursor for job outcomes, such as performance, satisfaction, and intentions to remain. In the first part, the relevance of identities for job outcomes is carved out and major theoretical contributions to identity and socialization are identified and presented. The thesis then discusses a fitting methodology for studying identity and describes key methodological choices. Three newcomers participated in the narrative-based interviews. The first interview was conducted shortly before the second interview three weeks after organizational entry. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded employing an abductive coding procedure. The results support the view that identity plays a key role in newcomer socialization and illustrate currently discussed identity processes. The complexity of self-concept phenomena involved in newcomer socialization calls for further research efforts.

**Keywords:** Newcomer socialization; Newcomer adjustment; Self-concept; Possible selves; Identity partnership.

## 1. Introduction

Imagining our future is a capability unique to the human species. From today's psychological point of view, imagination is our capacity to leave the present behind. Our capability to imagine the future 'as it could be' complements our ability to experience the present 'as it is'. Imagining oneself in the future marks a specific type of imagination: that of future 'possible selves'. This thesis examines future possible selves in the context of newcomer socialization in organizations.

From a theoretical point of view, two main research conversations matter. First, the way newcomers imagine themselves in the future organization is described by the 'future social self-concept'. The self-concept is the cognitive component of the self. It is "a knowledge representation that contains knowledge about us, including our beliefs about our personality traits, physical characteristics, abilities, values, goals, and roles, as well as the knowledge that we exist as individuals" (Stangor, Jhangiani, & Tarry, 2014, p. 21). These cognitive components of the current self are linked to those of the future self. They include fears, hopes, dreams and possibilities directed to ourselves in the future. The newcomer thinking "I could be a team leader in organization ABC" is in fact exploring their possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Because possible selves link self-concept and motivation, they

are critical to understanding how newcomer socialization efforts are incentivized (de Place & Brunot, 2019).

Second, newcomer socialization literature has conceived adjustment as the key factor impacting job outcomes, such as performance, satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Adjustment is defined as the newcomer's ability to transition toward becoming an organizational insider (Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). Although research has progressed in both fields separately, knowledge about the links between the two is still in its infancy. Scholars seeking to fill this gap will contribute to understanding how newcomer future social self-concepts in the organization will impact their success on the job. Because most studies explore the impacts on newcomer mid-term adjustment, little is known about adjustment shortly after the newcomer's entry. However, short-term adjustment success is important for understanding longer-term follow-on consequences for the success of newcomer socialization.

Importantly, future selves often must undergo a 'reality check' once the newcomer begins integrating into the organization. 'Reality checking' will determine the degree of overlap between the future possible self before entry—i.e., how the newcomer had imagined him- or herself in the new job—and the self he or she experiences after having entered the orga-

nization. The self is constructed by several features, such as structure, complexity, and clarity. I suggest that these characteristics will individually affect adjustment as they are scrutinized in the process of ‘reality checking’.

Furthermore, one relevant research trajectory in this realm is how the self-concept determines how effectively individual and organizational socialization efforts impact newcomer adjustment.

From a practical standpoint, this contribution is paramount, as workers continue to switch jobs frequently. US labor market data shows that individuals change jobs on average 12.3 times in their first 34 years at work. Interestingly, most of those changes occur in the first 6 years in the labor market (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Hence, this work aims to provide guidance for businesses and newcomers alike targeted toward successful adjustment in the socialization process.

In essence, I aim to shed light on the interconnection of newcomer’s imagination of themselves in the organization, and their adjustment to the future firm. The puzzle I am trying to illuminate is the following: *“What is the impact of future social self-concepts on newcomer short-term adjustment?”*.

## 2. Theory

### 2.1. Newcomer Socialization

#### 2.1.1. The Core Model of Newcomer Adjustment

Entering a new organization is often accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Berger and Calabrese’s (1975) ‘Uncertainty Reduction Theory’ (URT) is illustrative of the processes underlying first encounters among strangers—such as when a newcomer joins an organization. Uncertainty is defined as being faced with multiple possible behaviors of both the other person and oneself (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). According to URT, newcomers are faced with high levels of uncertainty when entering an organization. The authors theorize that the effort of the newcomer to reduce the level of uncertainty is the core driver of interactions with other members of the organization. Hence, the newcomer seeks to predict the others’ likely actions to react appropriately. To effectively do so, the others’ response alternatives need to be minimized to the most likely actions. Here is where the process of uncertainty reduction comes into play: to generate accurate predictions of the other’s action, information is sought and consequently uncertainty reduced.

With ongoing interaction, typically the accuracy of predictions about the situations increases. Berger and Calabrese (1975) describe this way of reducing uncertainty as ‘predictive’. Additionally, they identified ‘explanatory’ processes as a second form of uncertainty reduction—the individual’s attempts to explain the other’s behavior retroactively. Linking these insights back to the newcomer socialization process, both predictive and explanatory uncertainty reduction

are likely to be at play. A newcomer aiming to anticipate a coworker’s contribution in a meeting to respond appropriately engages in predictive uncertainty reduction. Alternatively, retroactive uncertainty reduction may consist of the newcomer explaining to him- or herself after the meeting why the coworker acted the way he or she did.

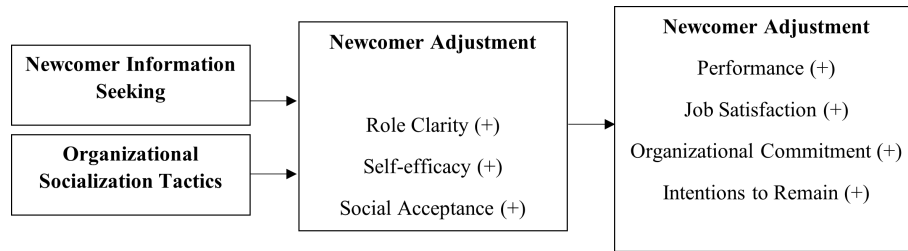
While uncertainty reduction theory is conducive to understanding the dynamics of individual interaction situations, a higher-level framework is imperative to grasping newcomer socialization processes at large. Generally, “organizational socialization refers to the process by which newcomers make the transition from being organizational outsiders to being insiders” (Bauer et al., 2007). For assessing the success of the socialization process, theorists and practitioners alike rely on job outcome variables. These include the positive outcomes of newcomer performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intentions to remain, and the negative outcome of intentions to quit. Accordingly, the focus has been put into researching the relationships of outcome variables and their causal constructs. These efforts have produced two main strings of research. First, organizational socialization tactics emphasize the role of the organization in facilitating newcomer adjustment. Second, newcomer proactivity or information seeking underscores the relevance of newcomer personality traits and behavior in supporting adjustment. Newcomer adjustment in turn connects those antecedents to the job outcome variables of interest (Bauer et al., 2007; Figure 1).

In their meta-analytic review, the authors conceptualize newcomer adjustment as a multifaceted construct consisting of the dimensions of (1) role clarity, (2) self-efficacy, and (3) social acceptance. This typology is grounded in theoretical insights of prior socialization research. Feldman (1981) first described adjustment as a threefold concept, including (1) role definition – “an implicit or explicit agreement with the work group on what tasks one is to perform and what the priorities and time allocation for those tasks is to be” (p. 380), (2) initiation to the task – “the extent to which the individual feels competent and treated as a full work partner” (p. 380), and (3) initiation to the group – “the extent to which the individual feels trusted by coworkers and accepted personally by them” (p. 380). One of the core tenets of this concept is that a newcomer may need to resolve multiple demands to facilitate adjustment in the new organization.

#### 2.1.2. Newcomer Information Seeking

Newcomer information seeking is understood as being necessitated by the newcomer’s perception of not receiving enough or inadequate information from the organization. URT suggests that if this happens, newcomers experience uncertainty. “This uncertainty is reflected in the levels of role ambiguity and role conflict which newcomers experience” (Miller & Jablin, 1991, p. 93). Langer, Blank, and Chanowitz (1978) opened an elucidating perspective on information seeking as interpersonal interaction leading to “mindless” or “mindful” behavior. They proposed that when the participants know the structure of communication due

<sup>1</sup> The data described is part of a longitudinal survey of “individuals born in the latter years of the baby boom (1957 - 1964)”



**Figure 1:** Current Model of Newcomer Adjustment

Note. From *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(3), pp. 707–721, by Bauer et al. (2007)

to previous similar experiences, they may behave in a more “mindless” fashion. That is, they may overlook relevant details. On the contrary, when prior knowledge of the communication situation does not exist – such as if one of the participants is a newcomer to the organization – they are likely to behave in a more “mindful” fashion.

Such prior knowledge is often stored in “scripts”. A script is understood as “a hypothesized cognitive structure that when activated organizes comprehension of event-based situations” (Abelson, 1981, p. 717). As such, a script offers an “expectation bundle” – it provides guidance toward making the ‘right’ inference from the situation (Abelson, 1981). Importantly, newcomers during organizational entry, usually lack scripts for a variety of organizational interactions – for instance, for weekly meetings. They must therefore engage in “mindful” processing and more intentional information seeking (Miller & Jablin, 1991). This implies that newcomers are likely to actively seek out the information most relevant to their organizational adjustment.

Miller & Jablin identify five main factors affecting newcomer information-seeking behavior: (1) perception of uncertainty, (2) perception of social cost, (3) type of information, (4) key sources of information, and (5) individual differences and contextual factors.

First, as touched upon, uncertainty plays a substantial role in understanding newcomer information seeking. To conclude, Berger and Calabrese (1975) posit in their URT seminal work, that information-seeking behavior increases with the level of uncertainty.

Second, social costs imply that individuals involved in interaction consciously weigh up rewards and costs of social exchange. According to Roloff (1981), social exchange includes individuals mutually and voluntarily transferring objects or activities. Miller and Jablin (1991) specify these exchanges to include “resources that may be cognitive, affective, or material in nature” (p. 95). Newcomers may perceive high social costs for information seeking, for instance, when they fear to ask their supervisor for information that they think incumbents would see as trivial. As a consequence, newcomers may abstain from information seeking if social costs are perceived as too high.

Third, the sources of information are relevant to information-seeking behavior. Supervisors and co-workers are considered the main sources of information for the newcomer. Hanser

and Muchinsky (1978) suggest that the sources of information differ in terms of their psychological distance from newcomers “Generally the informativeness of the sources increased as they moved from psychologically distant (i.e., the formal organization) to psychologically nearer sources (i.e., personal thoughts and feelings)” (p. 49). Interestingly, the authors discovered that supervisors are rated as psychologically closer, and thus more informative sources of information to newcomers.

Fourth, the content of information, i.e., the type of information sought, is an important factor affecting information seeking. Miller and Jablin (1991) develop a typology of information types, condensing previous typologies into three categories: (1) referent, (2) appraisal, and (3) relational information. Referent information refers to what is required to function on the job. Appraisal information is sought to assess the degree of functioning successfully on the job. Finally, relational information tells the newcomer about the nature of relationships with others. It appears logical to suspect that depending on which type of information is required, the newcomer may approach the interaction situation differently.

Finally, individual differences and contextual factors may also impact how newcomers seek information. Miller and Jablin (1991) posit that newcomers’ self-esteem, tolerance for ambiguity, cognitive complexity, self-efficacy, and prior experience may direct their information seeking.

Morrison (1993) offers another useful approach addressing the impacts of information seeking on socialization. She proposes that the socialization process consists of four newcomer’s tasks: (1) task mastery, (2) role clarification, (3) acculturation – “gaining an understanding of their organization’s culture” (p. 174), and (4) social integration. Importantly, the author theorizes that different types of information will differentially contribute to the achievement of socialization tasks. First, the findings corroborate the impact of information-seeking behavior on three dimensions of newcomer socialization tasks: task mastery, role clarity, and social integration. Second, the results indeed evidence differential influences of information types. Whereas task mastery was positively correlated to seeking technical information, role clarity was associated with referent information and performance feedback. Social integration was related to seeking normative information – insights on “the behaviors and attitudes that [the] firm values and expects” (p. 183). Interest-

ingly, the author found no influence of information seeking on acculturation. In sum, these results support the notion that information seeking – as captured in the described socialization model [Bauer et al. \(2007\)](#) – critically affects newcomer adjustment. Furthermore, it adds the perspective that information seeking is not universally effective toward adjustment. Rather, newcomers should expend efforts directed to seeking specific information to adjust successfully.

To conclude, it is noteworthy that, while current research acknowledges that newcomer individual differences play a role in information seeking and adjustment, the precise role of the self-concept remains largely unexplored. I suggest that investigating the situational-perceptual factors affecting adjustment ([Miller & Jablin, 1991](#)) provides only a superficial view. Instead, I argue that the latent construct of the self-concept will reveal a more holistic perspective of the influences on information seeking. As a consequence, a gap in research exists around the impacts of subcategories of the self-concept on newcomer information seeking. Open questions invite exploratory research along the following lines: 1) “How does the self-concept influence when newcomers seek information?”, 2) “What is the impact of the self-concept on the newcomer’s choice of information source?”, and 3) “How does the self-concept direct which specific type of information is sought?”. Exploring the links between self-concept and information seeking will benefit the conversation by opening new directions for future research to embark on.

### 2.1.3. Organizational Socialization Tactics

Next to the newcomer, the organization plays a role in facilitating newcomer adjustment. The organizational efforts targeted at integrating newcomers into the organization are summarized under the concept of organizational socialization tactics. “Socialization tactics refer to organization-driven or more or less formalized means of socializing individuals” ([Ashforth, Sluss, & Saks, 2007](#), p. 448). Early socialization researchers have coined the term “people processing” to refer to these strategies of newcomer socialization ([Van Maanen, 1978](#)). Under this terminology, contrary to research stressing the proactive role of the newcomer, the novice assumes a relatively passive role.

Socialization scholars have modeled tactics in a variety of ways. [Van Maanen and Schein \(1979\)](#) inductively derived a model of six organizational socialization tactics in bipolar dimensions (Figure 2). They argue that the tactics organizations employ range somewhere on a continuum on any of the six dimensions. Furthermore, the tactics are not considered mutually exclusive. Rather, a particular organizational tactic can be understood as the sum of scores on each of the dimensions. In their argument, the chosen tactic influences the newcomer’s role orientation.

Later research on socialization tactics has largely built upon the work by [Van Maanen and Schein \(1979\)](#). [Jones \(1986\)](#) argued that the polar outcomes on the six dimensions can be categorized into two major types of socialization tactics: He termed collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture approaches “institutionalized tactics”. At the

other end of the scale, individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and divestiture, form “individualized tactics”. According to Jones, the two prototypical tactics differ in terms of how the newcomer takes on her role in the organization. While institutionalized tactics “encourage newcomers to passively accept preset roles and thus maintain the status quo” (p. 150), individualized tactics “encourage newcomers to question the status quo and develop their own approach to their roles” ([Ashforth & Saks, 1996](#), p. 150).

Importantly, Ashforth and Saks modeled person change as a key indicator of newcomer adjustment. However, they noted that because the self is a deeply rooted concept, “socialization primarily influences what [Schein \(1971\)](#) referred to as the more labile’ self” (p. 153). Thus, an influence on the self is viewed as possible mainly on a surface level.

Crucially, while research has attempted to investigate the impacts of socialization tactics on the newcomer’s self, it has largely neglected relationships in the opposite direction. Hence, researchers would do well in exploring how the self-concept directs how a particular socialization tactic is received by the newcomer. Such efforts would contribute to exploring precisely which factors of the self-concept influence whether a chosen socialization tactic promotes newcomer adjustment. Furthermore, insights are needed on the processes by which these impacts play out.

In another vein, scholars have conceived of tactics as antecedents of newcomer information seeking ([Mignerey, Gordon, & Rubin, 1995](#)). They argue that “the type of tactic chosen by the organization to socialize the newcomer determines the extent to which information will be made available to the newcomer” (p. 58) and thus the newcomer’s information-seeking behavior. Surprisingly, scholars have not considered the self-concept in this realm. It remains yet to be explored how the newcomer’s self-concept influences when and how the newcomer seeks information in response to organizational socialization tactics.

## 2.2. Self-Concept and Identities

### 2.2.1. The Self-Concept

The self-concept is of central importance to a variety of disciplines as evidenced by the vast body of work, not only in psychology but also in neighboring disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies. Possessing a self-concept and an identity is critical to humans. It answers the fundamental question “Who am I?” and thus provides a sense of direction to human life at large. “A consistent sense of self” ([Selenko et al., 2018](#), p. 5) is needed for humans to function and effectively control the environment. The self-concept is the cognitive representation of the self that stores knowledge about us, “including our beliefs about our personality traits, physical characteristics, abilities, values, goals and roles, as well as the knowledge that we exist as individuals” ([Stangor et al., 2014](#), pp. 109-110).

The self-concept is unique and private; it is different from other selves and no one else can completely grasp how it looks like ([Oyserman, 2001](#)). “Improving oneself, knowing



Institutionalized	Individualized
Collective: Newcomers go through a common set of experiences designed to produce standardized responses to situations	Individual: Each newcomer receives unique training in isolation from others.
Formal: Newcomers are segregated from other organizational members and put through experiences tailored to newcomers.	Informal: Newcomers receive on-the-job training to learn their roles.
Sequential: Newcomers are given a clear sequence of experiences or stages they will go through	Random: The sequence of stages isn't communicated in advance.
Fixed: Newcomers are given a fixed timetable about when they will move through stages	Variable: The timing of role transitions is variable.
Serial: Newcomers observe and get training from experienced role models, who give newcomers a clear view of the experiences they will encounter in the organization	Disjunctive: Newcomers must develop their own definition of the situation and do not have more senior people to observe.
Investiture: Newcomer receive positive feedback confirming their prior identity	Divestiture: Newcomers receive negative feedback expressing organizational disapproval of their prior identity.

Figure 2: Organizational Socialization Tactics

Note. From *Research in Organizational Behavior*, pp. 209–264, by Van Maanen and Schein (1979) and *Academy of Management Journal*, 29(2), pp. 262–279, by Jones (1986)

oneself, discovering oneself, creating oneself anew, expressing oneself, taking charge of one’s self, being happy with oneself, being ashamed of oneself, are all essential self-projects, central to our understanding of what self-concept and identity are and how they work” (Oyserman, 2001, p. 499). Thus, while the self-concept is at core a cognitive concept, it is critically involved in organizing behavior, which can—but not must—in turn, be directed at the self.

Investigating how the self-concept is constructed is critical to understanding its’ workings and the implications that follow from it. Importantly, the self-concept does not exist in isolation. Rather, as posited in Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) individuals define their identities based on their social group memberships. While this central notion of SIT is largely accepted by scholars, a debate has flourished around the precise role of social identities within the framework of individual-level identities. Researchers have historically put differing emphasis on social identity as a means of purely intrapersonal differentiation vs. as a means of extending the individual-level self (Brewer,

1991).  
Turner and Oakes (1986) note that “the self-concept exists at different levels of abstraction” (p. 242), hence arguing for the latter position. Similarly, following Brewer’s (1991) conception, the social identities entail categorizing the self into social units where it becomes depersonalized. The author illustrates this approach through a schematic model: a central point representing personal identity is surrounded by concentric circles representing social identities. Going from inward circles to further outward ones, the respective social identities become tied to higher-order frames of reference. One possible application to the context of newcomer socialization could be the following example: A male biology teacher has recently joined a new school. At the center is his identity as an individual teacher. Here, he considers mainly how he as a teacher is different from his fellow colleagues in terms of his teaching experience, approaches and accomplishments, etc. The first concentric circle may represent his social identity as a teacher within his school’s department of science. The frame of reference is set by the department, and

hence he considers how he is similar to other biology teachers in his department and distinct from colleagues in physics and chemistry. Higher-order social identities could, for instance, include the school- or city-level and further extend to identifications with the nationwide teaching body or worldwide educators. I suggest that the outcomes of comparison and follow-on behaviors may differ depending on the respective level of self-definition that is currently activated. Hence, this case underlines the importance of considering different levels of social identity when evaluating newcomer socialization outcomes.

The existence of a multitude of theories on the self requires making choices on the type of self-concept approach to utilize. A useful self-concept theory should 1) provide direction for linking self-concepts to socialization outcomes in line with the research question, 2) depict the time dimension of different self-concepts in the present and future, and 3) allow depiction of the social dimension of the self as the newcomer enters into an organization. I argue that an intrapersonal identity network approach (Ramarajan, 2014) integrating the notion of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and social selves (Brewer, 1991) will be best capable to serve these purposes.

#### 2.2.2. A Multiple Identities Framework

Building on his extensive review of multiple identity research, Ramarajan (2014) provides a holistic framework of multiple identities following an intrapersonal network approach. He argues that “because preliminary evidence suggests that multiple identities shape important outcomes in organizations” (p. 590) it is important to look at those multiple identities instead of only singular or pairwise considerations. Selenko et al. (2018) explain that multiple identities are not in contrast with feeling as a single person. It is widely accepted by identity scholars that people can feel as one while possessing multiple identities (Ramarajan, 2014; Selenko et al., 2018). Because newcomers’ multiple identities are interlinked, we need to understand not just their singular identities but also other identities and their interconnectedness. This means that to understand when certain job-relevant identities are enacted we must reveal the person’s other identities and investigate the links between them. Therefore, a multiple identity framework appears most suitable in the context of newcomer socialization.

To disentangle self-concept and identities, I adopt the view of the author in defining the self-concept as the broad term to include all identities of a person, while conceptualizing identities as the more concrete term: Identities are thus more specific targets organized under the umbrella of the self-concept. These multiple identities can then be mapped in a network representation with nodes and arcs connecting the nodes. Nodes denote identities and may differ in number, importance, and meaning. The connections between them show relationships, for instance, that two identities enhance each other, are in conflict, or overlap and in which relation across time they stand, etc.

Imagine a female nurse who defines herself as a newcomer to nursing, a woman, a mother, a soccer player, and a dependable teammate. She also has a future identity as a caring nurse who takes on responsibility for her team and has an open ear for her patients. One could now map those identities in a network fashion and investigate the links between the nodes. First, you could imagine different relationships between the identities. The dependable teammate identity might have enhancing links with her soccer player, as well as her current and future nurse identities because team skills help her on the job and in the soccer club, and those, in turn, provide opportunities to improve these skills. Due to the demanding work environment with irregular working hours including night shifts she might lack time for her family. Hence, because the expression of her nurse-identity limits the extent to which she can express her mother-identity (she cannot bring her small children to work) these identities are conflicting. Moreover, her now newcomer-self and future nurse-self will be related temporally. Whereas some of the aspects or meanings of her current self are likely to be included in her future self, some aspects may be rather aspirational.

#### 2.2.3. Possible Selves

In this vein, possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) are a useful concept to encompass these thoughts about possibilities and potentials in the future. Markus & Nurius propose: “an individual’s repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats. Possible selves provide the specific, self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction to these dynamics” (1986, p. 954).

Markus and Nurius (1986) further elaborate on important properties of possible selves: Linking back to the consideration of the social self, the plethora of possible selves is portrayed as a product of social comparison. The individual may derive possible selves building on the realization that “What others are now, I could become” (1986, p. 954). As these cognitive forms represent future selves, they reflect self-images that often have not been previously experienced by the individual. In other words, while building possible selves, the individual does not simultaneously consider whether they would become reality.

Through their aspirational nature, possible selves can act as “incentives for future behavior” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). Possible selves are understood as the link between self-concept and motivation (de Place & Brunot, 2019). According to de Place and Brunot, as such, possible selves can guide behavior by selecting suitable action plans and spurring efforts in achieving those possible selves. However, the authors further argue that not all possible selves equally motivate and encourage behavior. Instead, they show that the effectiveness of possible selves in motivating and initiating behavior depends on a range of different factors. For instance, Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006), identify that possible selves are not equally effective toward behavior because the “self is multidimensional and includes multiple potentially competing goals” (p. 188). In their reasoning, possible selves

may not effectively guide action due to conflict with other parts of the self-concept. Additionally, and perhaps least contested, the salience and ease with which a possible self can be accessed determine its self-regulatory effectiveness (de Place & Brunot, 2019). In this vein, the social context cueing a possible self, i.e., making it salient, also plays an important role because cued information is more likely to affect judgment and decision-making (Oyserman et al., 2006).

Because the newcomer initially lacks a current self-concept in the organization, possible selves are likely to substantially direct the newcomer's experience in the initial entry phase. How might possible selves guide behavior in workplace entry depending on the characteristics outlined? Strauss, Griffin, and Parker (2012) argue that future-oriented work selves allow individuals to be ambitious, take risks, and think creatively about their possibilities. Building on these arguments, the authors link future work selves to proactive career decision-making behavior. In the socialization context, too, I contend that those future work selves can incite proactivity, for instance, in encouraging the newcomer to seek information. Furthermore, it is likely that whether or not the work context of the particular organization cues certain possible work selves, will direct their salience and in turn their impact on behavior. Similarly, the newcomer's possible selves may be less effective if the action plans derived from it seem unlikely to be achieved within the context of the organization. In particular, I suggest that in this case the newcomer's endurance in following the goals derived from possible selves will be undermined.

Moreover, as the newcomer builds up his or her current self in the organization, the proposed reality-checking mechanism comes into play. There, it is suggested that in an intrapersonal comparison the overlap of possible and current self is scrutinized. The outcomes of this comparison are suggested to steer the newcomer's future behavior toward reaching possible self-relevant goals.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Context

Management literature articulates the pressing need for addressing anomalies and surprising events with adequate theory (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). Scholars have identified abductive reasoning as a fruitful approach in theoretically explaining the increasingly rapid changes to organizations and social contexts (Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). Hansen (2008) states that abduction forms explanatory hypotheses, and thus is contemporarily seen as the driving force in much-needed theory creation in organizational and management research. The author further distinguishes abduction from an inductive approach: "While abduction is more of a leap than induction, induction is actually a stronger form of inference" (Hansen, 2008, p. 4).

According to Sætre and Van de Ven (2021), the process of theory creation involves three steps. It starts with an abductive step aimed at developing "ideas or hunches" (Sætre &

Van de Ven, 2021, p. 3) to explain incomplete observations, puzzles, or anomalies. Next, deduction serves to create a theory based on the discovered hunches, and finally, induction allows for testing and verification of the theory.

In newcomer socialization, a key puzzle yet to be solved is how similar future social selves can lead to opposing adjustment outcomes, depending on a wide range of factors yet to be discovered. Seeking to solve this puzzle, hunches are formed abductively and attempts are made at deductive theory creation and inductive testing. While the scope of this bachelor's thesis certainly does not allow for a holistic abductive study, it should nevertheless be emphasized that an abductive approach has impacted some of the methodological choices of this thesis. For instance, whereas inductive coding for data analysis would encompass deriving codes from data only, here codes are created both from data and from theory.

Next to the research method, the design choice is a key decision affecting the ability to gain relevant research insights. Previously, scholars from multiple perspectives have relied on both qualitative and quantitative methods to study self-concept and identity (Ramarajan, 2014). Because the self-concept is a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon, which needs to be interpreted in context, this thesis adopts a qualitative design based on interviews. Also, inherently due to the nature of the self-concept as a latent variable, this thesis had to rely on self-report data for gaining insights. In particular, possible selves and their impact on behavior during newcomer socialization are best investigated using a qualitative design.

Furthermore, the real-world complexity of the investigated phenomena calls for original data collection in field research. Also, because theory on the links between self-concept and short-term newcomer adjustment is relatively nascent, a qualitative interview approach appears to be a good methodological fit (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). In particular, Edmondson and McManus (2007) state that for qualitative approaches to nascent theory, relatively open-ended research questions are typically explored using rather open-ended data collection methods. This approach furthers knowledge by interpreting the rich open-ended qualitative findings for meaning (Edmondson & McManus, 2007).

#### 3.2. Data Collection

##### 3.2.1. Theoretical Sampling

To best investigate emerging theory, theoretical sampling appears to be a useful approach to data collection (Draucker, Martsof, Ross, & Rusk, 2007). According to Draucker et al. (2007), theoretical sampling is "the process of data collection directed by evolving theory rather than by predetermined population dimensions" (p. 1137). Hence, sampling decisions are primarily guided by the research question under investigation.

When selecting the sample to explore self-concept and newcomer short-term adjustment, I considered findings from my review of the literature in both fields. For instance, past work experience might impact adjustment outcomes and is



typically controlled for (Ashforth et al., 2007). Hence, because past similar roles might critically guide role adjustment in the new organizational context, efforts were made at obtaining a sample with comparable prior work experience. Specifically, the sample includes three newcomers, all of age 22, at entry-level positions, who typically have little to no previous work experience in the specific field of work.

Insights on the proposed links between self-concept and adjustment would benefit from generalizable findings to establish strong theoretical connections. In my view, a central trade-off within the frame of resources afforded by a bachelor's thesis lies between the chosen depth and breadth of elaboration. The strength of this work lies in its deep real-life accounts while limiting the volume of cases investigated and thus curbing generalizability. Increased resources, for instance, multiple trained investigators, a longer time frame, and access to larger samples would promote more generalizable results and come closer to theoretical saturation.

### 3.2.2. Procedure

This thesis adopts a longitudinal design consisting of two interviews. They were conducted shortly before entering the organization and at three weeks tenure in the organization. Longitudinal designs are useful for investigating changes in variables across time. As outlined above, the newcomer enters the organization with future possible selves for the job, and during initial socialization starts building present identities in the organization. Because this thesis is interested in the interplay of incoming self and self in socialization, as well as the processes between them, measuring both concepts at the same point in time is not appropriate as it would introduce hindsight bias.

Conversely, the key methodological strength of using this type of design with two separate interviews at different points in time is that it effectively eliminates the influence of hindsight bias. Roese and Vohs (2012) define this type of bias as the "belief that an event is more predictable after it becomes known than it was before it became known." (p. 411). It involves being unable to recall uncertainty before a past event and thus disturbs appraisal of these events (Roese & Vohs, 2012). For instance, if both self-concepts were measured at three weeks tenure and the newcomer reports positive adjustment outcomes, he or she might conclude that it was very likely all along that adjustment would be positive. This might involve stressing his or her abilities and fit for the position—which were clear from the onset—and ignoring the uncertainties almost inevitably involved in crafting present identities in the new organization. On the other hand, the newcomer would be likely to also overestimate the chances of negative adjustment outcomes in hindsight.

Based on my literature review on both self-concept and newcomer adjustment, I created two interview protocols targeted at uncovering the links between the two fields (see Appendices 1 and 2). Specifically, the interviews were aimed at elucidating the nature of the newcomers' self-concept and socialization context and recalling critical incidents important for newcomer adjustment outcomes. Interviews were

designed to trace newcomers throughout their organizational entry phase. Whereas the pre-entry interview looked at the newcomer's future self-concept for the coming entry phase, the post-entry interview examined the present self-concept three weeks later. Additionally, the second interview was aimed at finding self-reports of 1) organizational socialization tactics, 2) newcomer proactivity, and 3) adjustment outcomes in line with the core model of newcomer adjustment (Bauer et al., 2007). Similar structuring of the self-concept questions in both interviews allowed for increased comparability of the two, as important for examining the suggested 'reality checking' mechanism.

The interview protocols created made use of narrative methods of inquiry. Researchers interested in personality have relied on and developed narrative identity methods—methods aimed at eliciting the story of one's self as it is subjectively constructed across time (Adler et al., 2017). According to Adler et al. (2017), "narratives of personal experiences are dynamically reconstructed representations of events [...] [and] are deeply idiographic" (p. 520). Because the present research is rather exploratory, narrative methods appear to be well suited (Adler et al., 2017). The authors further highlight a few key points to consider when employing narrative methods: First, narrative methods are suited for finding meaning in investigating data. Second, narratives depict identity in that they show how the individual makes sense of the surroundings and experiences, which is strongly correlated with the perception of who he or she is, and hence the self-concept. In essence, "narrative methods are particularly well situated to examine meaning-making processes that concern the self." (Adler et al., 2017, p. 520).

Hence, the interviews utilized semi-structured interviews employing narrative methods. Inspiration was obtained from Atkinson's (2002) contribution on the Life Story Interview (LSI) as a narrative method. Designing the study material thus involved creating narrative questions and narrative prompts. While a narrative question is an open-ended inquiry about a story regarding its explicit, implicit, and structural aspects (Adler et al., 2017), narrative prompts are a strong tool for bringing participants into 'story-telling mode'. Prompts nudge participants into mentally recalling specific critical incidents, promising to yield informative insights. A narrative prompt in the present study takes, for instance, the following form:

*"Please describe a scene, special moment, or event that is symbolic of a beginning in a new organization. Please describe this scene in detail. What happened, when and where did it happen, who was there? What were you thinking and feeling? Also, please describe why this particular moment stands out and what it reveals about you as a person."*  
(see Appendices 1-3 for Study Material)

At the start of each interview, the introduction was read out to the participant verbatim, to make sure that he or she felt well-informed, and to establish that the situation needed

to be taken seriously (Hermanowicz, 2002). During the interviews, emphasis was put on achieving flow throughout the conversation to facilitate detailed narration and the finding of meaningful data. Moreover, a key concern was to establish similar conditions to maximize the extent to which the results can be intersubjectively reproduced. Two of the three participants were interviewed in person, one using video-calling. Because the interviews were being performed during the Covid19 pandemic, with mandatory social distancing requirements, the choice of interview mode was left to the participants to ensure they would feel comfortable in the interview situation. While before conducting the interviews, uncertainty surrounded the point of whether participants would “open up” to equal degrees in in-person and online interviewing, these concerns turned out to be unwarranted, as both variants produced comparably rich accounts.

During all face-to-face interviews, a neutral location was chosen, and in video calls, it was, for instance, made sure that a neutral virtual background was displayed. The interviewer attempted to take an eager, genuinely interested, impartial stance throughout the entire interview process. These considerations informed the preparation for interviews and were key factors involved in minimizing bias—such as through verbal and nonverbal cues including posture, voice pitch, and fluency of speech.

Interviews lasted between 50 and 80 minutes and were conducted in German. They were audio-recorded and transcribed word-for-word. Additionally, the transcripts attempt to capture speaking breaks and signals of contemplation (“Uhhh”, “ahhh”, “hmmm”, etc). I argue that these cues help data evaluation as they signify when the interviewees engage in effortful reflection. Because inquiries about deeply rooted, personal phenomena such as the self-concept typically pose “difficult questions” to the participants, the mentioned cues can serve as signposts to self-relevant revelations.

Additionally, to further reduce the potential influence of biases in interviewing, participants were asked to fill out the Twenty Statement Test (TST) prior to the first interview for cross-validation (see Appendix 3) (Baumann, Mitchell, & Hodges Persell, 1989).

### 3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed following qualitative content analysis approaches developed by Mayring (2000). Inferences were made from transcribed data only, which included the spoken word with speaking breaks. Following Mayring, inductive and deductive data analysis utilizes different coding procedures. Because this thesis takes an abductive research approach, both inductive and deductive coding were used to draw conclusions. While Mayring states that both processes are based on the formulated research question, he also highlights some key differences between the two. Inductive analysis appeared useful where little prior theory could guide coding, for instance, when looking at individual newcomer entry expectations in the first interview or identity processes in the second interview. On the other hand, deduction was used when theory was readily available and could

guide coding decisions. For example, newcomer adjustment appeared suitable for deductive coding, because a comprehensive model was available (Bauer et al., 2007).

First, for inductive coding, according to Mayring (2000), codes were iteratively derived from the interview transcripts. Codes were obtained directly from data and later revised, summarized, and cross-checked for redundancies. Through subsequent iterations, these codes became increasingly structured hierarchically and could be summarized into higher-order categories. After roughly 30% of the material, the emergent categories were again revised and coding was finalized.

Second, deductive coding is based on defining aspects and categories to analyze based on the research question under investigation (Mayring, 2000). Again, a stepwise process was followed to arrive at codes fitting to the higher-order categories. Codes were deduced from data with the theoretical categories in mind and later cross-checked and summarized so that they would explain the categories to the best possible extent. Again, revision took place when roughly 30% of the material was coded. Out of inductive and deductive coding techniques, a comprehensive coding scheme emerged (see Appendix 4).

Finally, TST responses were used as background information to validate interview results.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Pre-Entry

#### 4.1.1. The Self-Concept

Centrally, interviewees revealed rich accounts of their self-concept, including their social selves, and general personality traits. Participant names were pseudonymized using name occurrence distributions of the participants' years of birth to ensure confidentiality. I will refer to the participants as Taylor, Jacob, and Naomi.

**Taylor.** said that he is open, willing to help, and peace-loving. Taylor placed importance on making an impression on others, enjoyed being in groups, and particularly appreciated the valuation and interest of other group members.

**Jacob.** identified as being agreeable, spontaneous, creative, flexible, good at improvising, perfectionist, and open.

**Naomi.** Most prominent were Naomi's accounts of her lack of self-confidence and self-doubt with 13 occurrences. The following quote highlights this aspect: *“But sometimes as I said, I doubt my abilities. And then I would not see myself as the first contact person if there is anything that needs to be solved now or so in a .... If there is a problem and you need a solution for it.”* Additionally, Naomi said that she is conscientious, structured (and talented at organizing) agreeable, extraverted, creative, willing to help, and peace-loving. Naomi placed importance on making an impression on others, enjoyed being in groups, and appreciated the valuation and interest of other group members.

#### 4.1.2. Uncertainty

Participants further described feelings of uncertainty regarding three categories: purpose and orientation uncertainty, social uncertainty, and task and role uncertainty.

All participants expressed that they did not know central information regarding their task and role and were uncertain about those aspects in the future organization. This is not surprising as all newcomers are in entry-level positions and have limited previous similar role experiences. Taylor reported considering being provided a certain degree of task and role freedom as a valid strategy for resolving task and role uncertainty proactively.

Social uncertainty also mattered to participants. All reported feelings of uncertainty about their future social environment, in particular regarding harmony in working with colleagues. As only Naomi worked from home, she reported feeling uncertain about the nature of interactions with colleagues restricted to a purely virtual setting. Interestingly, whereas she stressed the potential difficulties resulting from online interactions, she also considered it an advantage not to have to face colleagues in real life as she reported a significant lack of self-confidence and self-doubts (*see Self-Concept*). Taylor and Naomi stated that they placed a high value on their supervisor expressing interest in working together; consistent with their expressed importance for being valued and shown outside interest (*see Self-Concept*).

Only Taylor explicitly reported requiring purpose and orientation information to resolve his uncertainty regarding those aspects. This especially mattered to him as he considers being provided these insights as an expression of appreciation and valuation for his work:

*"Yes, but that definitely makes a difference, how valued I think my work is and how I think they treat interns there or how they deal with interns, whether that's just cheap labor for them or whether that's potential later employees for them, that they like to take good care of so they have a good image of the company"*

#### 4.1.3. The Organization

The newcomers considered several aspects of their future organization. First, participants all supported the notion of gaining support for their entry into the new organization. Being supported in understanding job tasks and roles in the face of the new environment played a key role for newcomers. Jacob explained the role of individual support in two polar scenarios: *"Either you're just... you're just taken by the hand, and you're just shown what you have to do or you're just completely thrown in at the deep end and you just have to see that you can swim somehow yourself or you just can't get it together at all."* Next to general support in entering the organization, all three newcomers stressed that it is important to them that the organization would tolerate their initial mistakes and consider their learning progress individually. The following quote from Jacob illustrates this point: *"So... it's absolutely justified, so it's always a question of how much puppy protection you have overall. So, you're new, you don't have any experience yet, you have time to learn the whole*

*thing, that's about it. And depending on how well this puppy protection simply works, the better it is."*

Naomi underscored that she highly values social support as she repeatedly mentioned potential shared after-work experiences. Furthermore, she considered social support a possibility for mitigating her shyness in social interaction.

Taylor imagined possible learnings from his team, including, for instance, orientation for future job choices.

Next to that, Taylor and Naomi articulated that they imagined engaging in comparisons with other organizational members and perceiving differences between other interns of their age and other colleagues, which would affect their interactions with them.

#### 4.1.4. The Individual

On the individual level, too, insights relevant to newcomer adjustment were obtained. Regarding the imagined role, Naomi articulated the wish to develop self-confidence and assertiveness in the new organization. Also, she imagined playing the role of a communicator and mediator, as well as a reliable colleague. Furthermore, she, and in particular also Taylor, mentioned that they find it important that they perceive their work as being valued by the organization. Jacob had clear valence for his imagined role: enjoying working with people, and being supported while doing so, and negative valence for inadequate support. While imagining initially missing orientation, he also had clear conceptions of becoming productive on the job and pictured missing routine and strategies for building up routine. He imagined following colleagues' demands initially, but had a strong vision for taking on responsibility, as illustrated in the following: *"... Until I eventually get into a position where I can explain to other people what they can do best and how, because I have simply gained competence behind it."* Furthermore, participant two articulated having pronounced demands on himself:

Naomi imagined not being proactive, Jacob could picture himself proactively looking for tasks after his initial entry. Taylor gave a detailed account of his proactivity fluctuating depending on how he feels received:

*"In the past, I myself have noticed that it depends very much on how I feel received. That doesn't mean that I'm always waiting for someone else to welcome me. But if I notice that someone is not at all interested in dealing with me or in who I actually am and what I actually do here, then I don't feel like making an effort to say "Hello, here I am". But on the contrary, when I notice that people are also interested, then I love to slide into new groups and discover new groups. But somehow... I find it very different, depending on how the mindset is. ... So, in one scenario I also have a real desire uh, myself ... no idea, to change the group, to do something different, to do new things, to establish new things in the group and so on and in the other scenario just not so."*

Furthermore, Jacob mentioned multiple paths through which he might learn the job, including learning by following experienced colleagues, experimenting with tasks, and learning by pretending to know ("Fake it, till you make it."). He also stressed considering adaptive capabilities, for instance, to handle novelty, manage expectations, balance different task demands, or adapt to a high workload.

All newcomers stated that they anticipated the new job, with Naomi also reporting feeling frightened in the face of novelty.

#### 4.1.5. Background Information

Newcomers reported job-related information to the extent that they knew what could be expected. Unsurprisingly, job tasks varied as the participants entered different jobs at various organizations. All stated the overarching goals or purposes of the organization. Taylor reported possessing most previous knowledge as compared to the other interviewees. Taylor and Jacob carried out their jobs in person, while Naomi worked from home during the first three weeks.

Next to general job information, newcomers also reported their imaginations and valences for the first day in the organization. Overall, participants stated that they would miss orientation, feel nervous, and imagine scenarios of failure. Tied to these possibilities were behavioral strategies newcomers imagined adopting on the first day. In particular, all newcomers placed importance on preparing well for their entry day. Also, newcomers planned to counter nervousness by seeking distraction and social support and evaluated options for self-regulation regarding imaginations of failure. Furthermore, Jacob already pictured that he could find orientation on the job due to the limited complexity of tasks combined with his ability for developing routine for job tasks.

### 4.2. Post-Entry

#### 4.2.1. The Self-Concept

**Personality Traits and Social Self.** Participants provided accounts of their self-concept and social self.

**Taylor.** reported being adaptable, for instance, in accepting inadequate information provided by the organization and evaluated this personality trait as too pronounced. He showed tendencies to justify his lack of questioning for relevant information. Associated with this aspect, he stated that he aims at avoiding a negative impression as being too "intrusive" when asking for information.

**Jacob.** noted being encouraging with colleagues, for instance, checking on their wellbeing, or providing considerate gestures. Furthermore, he described possessing a social team identity in metaphorical terms:

*Sums it up pretty well actually, "Part of the ship, part of the crew." Because it just works best when we all work together when we all effectively pull together. As trite as that may sound now. But if we simply pay attention to each other and, um, pay attention to what the other people are doing and what's happening there, then it all just works*

*best, because it's a very social interaction, where you simply have to work with people. And then just not that it's impossible that you just don't work together with them, with your fellow human beings, because that just causes problems.*

He also reported identifying as an egoistic altruist. With this concept, he described helping colleagues to maximize his enjoyment of work and learning outcomes. He stated making colleagues enjoy their work because he enjoys working along and interacting with satisfied colleagues. He also mentioned that this personality aspect would affect his choices of relationships with colleagues. Additionally, Jacob perceived a social hierarchy within his hierarchical level in the organization, according to their job experience. He reported behaving differently toward those categories of people—for example, helping colleagues with less experience, while approaching experienced "mentor" colleagues for his learning progress,

**Naomi.** reflected being extraverted, agreeable, and willing to help. She also stressed having a creative side, which she mentioned utilizing for generating suggestions for improving job performance. She mentioned that her supervisor had confirmed this personality aspect to her.

**Identity Processes.** The newcomers described a variety of identity processes, encompassing identity aspirations, possibilities, and implementations of pre-entry wished identities.

**Taylor.** reported being dependent on consideration by his colleagues. He stressed the importance of being given attention and time from colleagues – for instance, being explained his tasks in detail and being provided background information. He mentioned that the amount of consideration given would determine his motivation to acquire task-relevant learnings. Taylor said that he wished pre-entry to take on responsibility and be proactive in asking for task-relevant information. He assessed having been only partially successful in implementing his desired identity.

**Jacob.** described enjoying being himself on the job and feeling completed through his job, exemplified by the following quote:

*I, I am effectively me again. I can work with people again. I'm getting to know a bunch of new people again, I can just. I'm meeting new people every day. I can talk to a bunch of new people again. I can be around people again. I can just be with people again! So that's, I've noticed what I was missing before, that I'm just back in a room with a lot of people, and I can talk to a lot of people.*

He stated being able to enact a part of his identity again on the current job, that he previously could not. Associated with this, he stressed repeatedly a need to be in control over his job, job routines, outcomes, and interactions. The newcomer mentioned being proud of being independent. Regarding performing tasks delegated to him, he outlined the importance of being given reasons for individual task assignments. On the contrary, Jacob expressed disliking being



given orders that deprive him of his freedom of choice on how to perform tasks. He stated finding it challenging to handle situations where he is facing outside factors out of his control, for instance, the Covid19 pandemic limiting his possibilities to interact with people on the job. Participant two also mentioned enjoying being in control not only of his own but also of other's outcomes. He reported liking to influence colleagues to make them perform better at their tasks. Along with being in control he described feeling less uncertain and capable to act as opposed to previous feelings of surrendering to outside factors.

Moreover, Jacob stated that he desired an identity as an assertive authority being able to "yell at colleagues to do their work better". His motivation for this wished identity connects to his desire to improve job performance and dealing with people appropriately: he described colleagues' mistakes in the bigger picture including their follow-on effects, such as delays in performance and treating customers unkindly and disrespectfully. Finally, he assessed hierarchical structures to be blocking the enactment of this desired identity.

**Naomi.** said that it is central to her that she has become more self-confident:

*Yeah. So, I feel more confident as I said. And like I said, yeah, and honestly, when this job is done, I just look forward to more jobs because I'm always learning new things. So now I don't feel so scared or anything. I feel more like "YOLO experience is good like that." Hm. But I really think it's always my self-concept, in the beginning, I worry too much, I think too much or, or sometimes in the beginning... Oh yeah, what I also noticed is in the beginning I thought about messages a thousand times before... so I thought about the message carefully before I sent it. And then, in retrospect, I thought to myself, "Oh no, that comes across badly, what will they think of me? They're definitely going to think I'm rude." But now I just send messages like that, and I think to myself like that and when I think about it I think to myself like "oh no, it doesn't matter how it should come across". Yeah, and I just try to worry less now. Exactly.*

In this realm, she mentioned being able to increasingly tolerate her own mistakes. She also mentioned using downward comparison to increase self-confidence and implementing individual regulation for self-doubts.

#### 4.2.2. Newcomer Adjustment

**Adjustment Cues.** Participants frequently gave cues about the success of their socialization experience. Newcomers often described adjusting as feeling at home and having arrived and reflecting less about what to do and how.

**Taylor.** displayed uncertainty regarding his adjustment success. For him, the freedom of structuring his workday relatively independently was key to feeling at home in the organization. He stated that initial adjustment was not very difficult because the division deals with a wide variety of tasks

that do not require specialized previous knowledge. Furthermore, he again stressed the importance of being individually considered by colleagues for feeling at home in the organization and questioned colleagues' efforts in introducing him. Conversely, he cued that his initial entry experience was mediocre and that he felt neglected by his supervisor. Associated with the perceived ease of initial entry and his supervisor's absence in the first two weeks, newcomer two described having neglected key learnings that became apparent when interacting with his supervisor in week three.

**Jacob.** gave positive cues about his adjustment outcomes. He reported feeling socially accepted and welcome and stated that he enjoyed getting to know colleagues more deeply. While he initially felt overwhelmed and confused, he evaluated it as chiefly important for feeling at home that he understood the structure and functioning of the organization after three to four days. His associated valence was positive, as he felt more motivated and clearer about his job and tasks:

*And, on the other hand, it was also simply easier, simply because the work as a whole felt more gripping. Because you know exactly, I'm doing exactly this now. Then this happens, and then that happens. That you understood the individual work steps.*

Jacob also understood his job within the larger organizational structure, from which he could derive purpose and orientation.

**Naomi.** also gave signs of positive adjustment. The newcomer felt initially overwhelmed by the amount of information but felt motivated to start learning for her progress. While she was initially neglected by her supervisor, she perceived his later apologies and promises of support as credible. Thus, after initial difficulties, she felt well supported by her supervisor and reported that this helped her feel more at ease, comfortable, and at home in the organization. This coincided with feeling at home starting in her third week in the organization. She stated that she felt socially accepted within her team. The newcomer associated being at home in the organization with feeling secure and self-confident. She felt effective at learning her tasks and role, perceiving decreasing dependence on others to explain tasks to her. Furthermore, she enjoyed being in contact with customers and had a positive valence for the job enjoying working in the organization. Finally, a positive comforting valence was reported regarding the fact that she entered the organization together with other newcomers. She felt that she would not be the only one to make mistakes and that individual mistakes would not attract as much attention.

**Role Clarity.**

**Taylor.** appeared to be unsure about his role: while stating that he knew his role – as rather a role assigned to him from the outside organizational environment – he displayed uncertainty regarding various role aspects. For instance, he was not sure whether his role clarity mattered for him feeling at home in the organization and did not know how he

acquired his role. He described his role as encompassing the performance of simple, individual supportive tasks, while not understanding the purpose of his work in the organizational framework. The newcomer reported being dependent on colleagues to provide tasks and expressed a negative valence toward his role. He stated that he took over a predetermined role, which he had little influence in shaping, and was uncertain regarding his future valence toward his role.

**Jacob.** on the other hand, could relatively easily recall aspects of his role, including dealing with people and making them feel comfortable while doing so. He perceived having freedom over the development of his role and had a positive valence for notion. Understanding his role in the organizational structure appeared important to the newcomer. While reporting that he initially did not understand the structures, he later grasped important structures relevant to his role. Finally, structure embedding his role was important because it provided orientation.

**Naomi.** was certain about her role in being a reliable partner and being fast at executing tasks.

*Self-Efficacy.*

**Taylor.** stressed that he did not feel demanded on the job. He said he contributed small parts of information for colleagues but that this did not challenge him in his skillset. He stated having tried to take on more challenging tasks but found it difficult to do so. The newcomer mentioned that he was passively waiting for colleagues to approach him rather than be proactive in searching for adequate tasks and that his proactivity depended on being given more challenging tasks.

**Jacob.** found it not very difficult to perform his tasks, and said that they require attention and motivation. The novice stated that he knew which tasks he particularly enjoyed performing and managed to make his job performance a habit. He adopted individualized approaches to dealing with his customers and viewed this as a key aspect of learning his job. Coupled with his “*sure-fire success*” performing main job tasks, he mentioned that he could deal with other tasks and contribute to organizational structure. The newcomer imagined optimizing processes, contributing to structures, and making a difference through his work. Regarding his proactivity in learning the job, he stated that he would engage in “*learning by doing*” and proactively look for more experienced colleagues for obtaining job-relevant information. He mentioned that he got praise for his work and started taking on responsibility for other colleagues after one to one and a half weeks. Colleagues relied on him and approached him when they encountered any problems and he stated that he engaged as a problem-solver in these instances. Furthermore, Jacob said that he approached problems proactively and was perceived as a considerate colleague interested in his coworkers’ needs and problems. In line with taking on responsibility, the newcomer reported keeping an overview over his team. He felt joyfully surprised and valued for being able to take on responsibility. The newcomer felt increasingly capable of handling difficult, unexpected situations.

**Naomi.** reported that she felt hard to replace and motivated to distinguish herself from other colleagues and learn her tasks quickly. She said that she compared positively with other interns and felt confident despite initial self-doubts. The newcomer identified strongly as a fast and disciplined learner and was also perceived as such by her colleagues, which she thinks they view positively. She said that she was diligent at learning the tasks on her own starting in her first week and that this helped her gain orientation in the organization. She received repeated praise for her work from colleagues. The newcomer dared to try challenging tasks, which she felt helped her build up self-confidence. For instance, she outlined taking on customer calls in her first week at work—a challenging situation associated with social uncertainty for her, which she said she mastered using a variety of acquired techniques. Moreover, Naomi stated picking her work times so that colleagues were available for her to proactively approach. She also reported providing possible solutions for problems, which impressed her colleagues. Taking on more challenging tasks was perceived as enjoyable and appreciative. She felt valued for taking on responsibility for other colleagues, too, and could imagine performing a leading role in the future.

*Social Acceptance.*

**Taylor.** reported that feeling accepted by colleagues was associated with reflecting less about his actions. While he stated that he became less reflexive throughout his entry phase, he gave mixed signs of social acceptance and described feelings of separation when working: “*On the social level?... hmmm...Difficult.... well,.... it's just rather ... well, it's an open-plan office. But so, the work itself is already yes ....very, very separate.*” He noted that little collaboration took place and that he usually performed delegated tasks alone. His work was not part of discussions in team meetings, which revolved around overarching topics, which he felt he was not contributing to. Regarding the social atmosphere, the newcomer said that he got along well with open colleagues and that the work topics are generally suited for starting conversations with other coworkers. He noted that he perceived differences between interns and permanent employees, which he said both have separate group dynamics. However, he noted that the general atmosphere was harmonious and collegial, where he felt he could talk about beyond-work topics and felt hierarchies were unimportant.

**Jacob.** gave no more specific cues regarding his social acceptance, beyond feeling accepted and welcome as he got to know his colleagues better (*see Adjustment Cues*).

**Naomi.** reported that her mistakes were tolerated and that others knew who she is and what she does and felt valued by them in those aspects. While she enjoyed being seen as competent, she also wanted to avoid making a too strong or arrogant impression. A sense of belonging fostered by her supervisor and a large-scale organizational meeting was recalled. The newcomer felt more confident feeling as part of the organization. Social support from another intern also

played a role for her: the other intern admitted her own mistakes, which helped the participant feel accepted in making mistakes herself and encouraged her learning experience. The intern provided multiple functions for her: she took over aspects that her supervisor had neglected, buffered her uncertainties and insecurities when approaching her supervisor by being readily approachable in place of her supervisor. She also enjoyed the close contact with her and felt that they got well along. The newcomer described a difference when interacting with colleagues of her age and older colleagues, but also stated that this difference did not matter a lot and that she could get along with both perceived categories. A positive valence of feeling more at ease was reported regarding her many similar-age colleagues. The general work atmosphere was described as harmonious and on eyes-sight and reflected as contributing to her motivation to learn and feeling at ease with less need for reflection. Naomi said that she gets along well with her supervisor and another working student she has contact with.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1. Adjustment Outcomes and Identity Work

#### 5.1.1. Naomi's Identity Partnerships and Identity Work

Naomi gave clear signs of positive adjustment outcomes with high role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance. I suggest that the identity work she performed during the three weeks under investigation played a key role in reaching these advantageous results. She provided insights into interactions with incumbents that helped her in her initial socialization experience. She described that another intern took over socialization tasks normally expected by her supervisor and provided a variety of functions for her: She reported that the incumbent acted humbly—admitting her own mistakes and insecurities—and that this helped her relate and feel secure about making mistakes herself. Because she stressed enjoying interacting on eyes sight, I suggest that the humble behavior of her colleague made the newcomer consider the incumbent as a more likely partner to open up to and discuss her organizational identity with. Furthermore, the implicit message to the newcomer was likely targeted (whether intentionally or not) at boosting the newcomer's self-confidence, which she said she had doubts about pre-entry. Her colleague is described as her first approachable point of access for issues at work:

*Exactly, so the intern, of course, she doesn't always have so much to do. That's why she said I can always ask her and then I ask her and if she can't help me or if she doesn't know because she's still new, then she says, "Ask the supervisor." or something. And then I do that and then it gets sorted out. And that's exactly. So first I always go to her. And then if she can't help me, then I go to him. And still, it's very relaxed.*

Naomi's enjoyment of talking about non-work topics and frequently being on calls with her colleague hints that the interaction was not only focused on work and task structure but also involved overarching concerns, for instance about her identity in the firm.

Coupled with the interaction, the newcomer described a feeling of belongingness or identification with the organization. Identification is a key predictor of socialization success because it predicts contributions to the team and team performance (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Thus, the newcomer's identification with the organization is likely to constitute one reason for her successful adjustment.

The depth of exchange between the incumbent and the newcomer points to discussing the processes underlying interactions leading to identification and adjustment success. While it is impossible to ascertain the precise contents of interaction, it is plausible to suspect that her peer communicated a lot of relevant information "in narrative form, that is, as event-driven stories, myths, and folklore that vividly highlight both positive and negative cultural cues in action" (Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2008, p. 7). Because these narratives are so engaging and relatable, the authors suggest that they provide memorable background and (tacit) knowledge upon which newcomer identification can be built.

Processes such as the one described are also part of the scholarly conversation seeking to gain missing knowledge on how newcomers obtain identity resources in organizations. It is currently debated how newcomers and incumbents interact to exchange identity resources important for newcomer socialization. Cooper, Rockmann, Moteabbed, and Thatcher (2021) make a point for identity partnerships—"a relationship in which identity resources are exchanged between an incumbent team member and a team newcomer" (p. 2).

Judging by the rich descriptions of Naomi's interaction with the incumbent, she might likely be describing an identity partnership in Cooper's (2021) sense, which is outlined in the following. An identity partnership is a dyadic level concept, which is made up of one newcomer and one incumbent for mutual exchange of identity resources to satisfy identity needs. While there are partnerships with which all identity needs can be satisfied, it is likely that newcomers and incumbents may seek multiple identity partnerships that each satisfy individual identity needs. The identity resources are twofold: team identity cues, which transmit information of descriptive and normative nature about the team identity, and acceptance cues, which convey a sense of belonging. The partnership may be initiated either by the newcomer or the incumbent. On the one hand, because newcomers enter teams generally lacking a team-based identity, they may experience identity ambiguity. "Identity ambiguity in a new team is likely to trigger two specific identity needs—uncertainty reduction and belonging" (p. 11). Individuals may seek information to understand how they fit into the social system and to grasp their team identity. Next to that, newcomers want to feel belonging to people around them and feel like organizational insiders, as opposed to outsiders. Thus, the experience of identity ambiguity may trigger the

**Table 1:** Overview of Newcomer Self-Concepts, Identity Processes, and Adjustment Outcomes

	<b>Taylor</b>	<b>Jacob</b>	<b>Naomi</b>
<b>Pre-Entry Self-Concept</b>	Importance of Making an Impression	Agreeableness	Importance of Making an Impression
		Spontaneity	
	Enjoying Being in Groups	Creativity	Enjoying Being in Groups
	Being Oneself in Groups	Flexibility	Importance of Outside Interest and Valuation
		Improvisation	
	Importance of Outside Interest and Valuation	Perfectionism	Conscientiousness
	Willingness to Help	Openness	Structuredness
<b>Post-Entry Self-Concept</b>			Lack of Self-Confidence, Self-Doubt
	Peace-Loving Openness		Agreeableness
			Extraversion
			Creativity
			Willingness to Help
			Peace-Loving
<b>Identity Work</b>	Adaptability	Encouraging Colleagues	Extraversion
	Lack of Social Team Identity	Social Team Identity	Agreeableness
		Egoistic Altruist	Willingness to Help
		Categorization into Experience Level	Creativity
<b>Adjustment</b>	Dependence on Consideration	Being Oneself Again	Increasing Self-Confidence
	Wished Pre-Identity: Taking on Responsibility	Wished Identity: Assertive Authority	
<b>• Role Clarity</b>	Low	High	High
<b>• Self-Efficacy</b>	Low	High	High
<b>• Social Acceptance</b>	Low – Medium	Probably High	High

newcomer to proactively seek information and resources including team identity and acceptance cues. On the other hand, incumbents usually possess a team-based identity and thus have different identity needs. Those who strongly identify with the team are likely to proactively approach newcomers to initiate an identity partnership. “Because strong identifiers value their connection to the team, they feel that they belong to that team and will seek out positive interpersonal relationships with team members—including the newcomer—to maintain that feeling of belonging within the team” (p.

13). While strong identifiers (*integrators*) are likely to support newcomers in the socialization process, incumbents who strongly disidentify with the team (*gremlins*) search for confirmation for their negative team identities in the newcomer and may be detrimental to newcomer socialization.

From the data, the degree of identity ambiguity experienced by the newcomer can only be roughly approximated. Naomi signaled to feel lost and neglected by her supervisor initially, although this may alternatively just be a sign of task and role uncertainty: “Because I mean, seriously, if



*there hadn't been an intern, that would have been really bad. None of us would have known what we were supposed to do."* Moreover, precisely which identity resources the incumbent sought from the newcomer is not apparent from the data. However, it appears unlikely that the incumbent had strong team disidentification, as Naomi did not report any cues of anti-team identity on the part of the intern. Rather, one possible explanation for the described integrative potential of the incumbent is that she recently has been a newcomer in the team herself, allowing her to empathize with Naomi's socialization needs. Furthermore, Naomi's positive valence toward colleagues of a similar age may have further simplified the initiation and development of the partnership.

Thus, who made the initiating step for the identity partnership is not clear, but I suggest that this is also not very important – what matters in the realm of the research question is the adjustment success resulting out of the identity partnership. Naomi not only reported feeling more at ease and self-confident having built the partnership, but she even took the incumbent as a role model for her future development in the firm—a possible self providing an incentive to take on a leading role with responsibility for other interns in the future. The perspective of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), in particular, future-oriented work selves (Strauss et al., 2012) allowing newcomers to be ambitious and take risks is significant in this respect. Specifically, I suggest that the ability to take risks aids in identifying role aspects and developing one's role and that a certain self-confidence is a prerequisite to engage in risk-taking behavior. Naomi reported that the partnership helped her feel more self-confident. Hence, the formation of the identity partnership may not only have contributed to the formation of a future possible work self but also supported its enactment by lowering self-confidence barriers.

This example points at an important aspect of identification in teams and the construction of identity partnerships: the need to not only consider newcomer's identity needs but also further interpersonal and communicational factors. For example, Naomi preferred colleagues of a similar age and enjoyed being in frequent exchange with the incumbent, including topics that exceed the work context. Next to that, it is imaginable that other interpersonal factors played a role in the development of the partnership.

Naomi also described that her supervisor signaled to her a feeling of belongingness to the organization: *"He was so, so confident and also so really... he made us feel like we're all friends, so even though he's my supervisor. He makes us feel like we can all still be very, very close to each other or communicate with each other."* Naomi might thus be pointing at another identity partnership with her supervisor, mostly for obtaining acceptance cues. The point in time that her supervisor provided these cues also coincides with when she reported feeling at home in the organization—a strong indication of adjustment success.

Taken together, next to the identity needs satisfied in the two identity partnerships, Naomi's increases in self-confidence facilitated by the relationships appear to have

supported adjustment in another way. Self-confidence boosts allowed Naomi to explore identity aspects she would otherwise not have dared to. Thus, the identity partnerships also supported her in performing identity work: constructing and altering her identity over time (Bataille & Vough, 2020).

#### 5.1.2. Taylor's Possible Self, Identity Work, and Reality Checking

*Hm... So, I wanted to be like that... so... I just wanted to be, um, someone who just cares a lot that people show you something, so I ask a lot. is interested... Um...maybe even asks if he can be part of things where he actually would not be there um.... partly I have implemented it that way, but partly not because I noticed when just people have no desire to deal with additional things. Umm but just want to do their thing, want to do their work. Um, yes, then it just felt a bit out of place and that's why I just partly put it back, so to speak. Uhm...So... yeah... that would actually be my role...*

Taylor gave negative signs of his adjustment success, as he stated not understanding his role in the larger frame of the organization, felt little demanded in his tasks, and perceived separation from his colleagues. However, Taylor did possess a wished identity of taking on responsibility and being proactive before entering but said he was largely unsuccessful in implementing it. This observation raises the question: why did Taylor's possible self before entering not perform well as an incentive for proactive behavior to facilitate adjustment?

Two perspectives appear useful in explaining Taylor's identity processes: possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and identity work (Bataille & Vough, 2020).

First, scholars have argued that the effectiveness of possible selves to function as incentives depends on a wide variety of factors. Critically, Taylor's organizational context is unlikely to have cued proactivity and taking responsibility, as he said he is viewed in the preformed role of the "typical intern": *"Yes, and that is actually how one imagines an internship in the classic sense, a bit of internship work if you want to say it pejoratively. Yes, so my position in the company is intern."* In this role, he said he was expected to perform small supportive jobs that he felt little demanded with. Due to the contrary role orientation, Taylor's organization does not make his possible self salient, which in turn diminishes its likelihood of impacting his behavior (de Place & Brunot, 2019).

Second, Taylor may not have seen identity opportunities that could have made him engage in identity work. Bataille and Vough (2020) conceptualize that newcomers respond to identity opportunities and threats with identity work. According to Bataille and Vough (2020), identity opportunities trigger identity work that makes the individual grow to achieve a desired identity. However, Taylor described scarce identity opportunities in taking on responsibility and becoming proactive. He only mentioned one task assignment that was challenging to him where he felt more responsible. Next to that, the lack of role flexibility may pose another barrier to his performance of identity work. Given his "preformed" role, he may have assessed it unlikely that he could implement his

identity within the context of the organization. Moreover, as he described depending on outside valuation and consideration by his colleagues, he may also have required this feedback with regard to his identity work. I suggest that missing affirmation in the process of identity work has posed another obstacle to successful identity work toward his desired identity.

Finally, the sum of processes described may be understood as Taylor engaging in reality-checking with a negative outcome: the perceived gap between wished and actual identity disincantizing identity work.

### 5.1.3. Jacob's Fulfillment of an Identity

Jacob stated that he perceived a sense of completeness through his job. He said that he could be himself again and that he could not fulfill his identity of working with and helping people previously due to external circumstances. I suggest that Jacob's case chiefly underscores the importance of work for identity processes. Work "offers an important place to learn about what one is able to do; which is fundamental to enhancing self-efficacy" (Selenko et al., 2018, p. 2). Jacob thus managed to use work in alignment with his identity to explore how he could advance his skillset to better implement his identity in the organization. The identity itself may have served as a key motivator in this process (Selenko et al., 2018).

### 5.2. Limitations

Because research is interested in newcomers of all ages, positions, and career stages, the sample in itself might allow for only limited generalizability to the entire population. Future research would do well to explore identity processes with larger samples more representative of the population of newcomers. However, the sample was built under the resource constraints inherent in a bachelor's thesis and thus did not allow for investigating a larger-sized sample. Larger samples could be explored with multiple trained investigators. Furthermore, the research question guided sampling decisions in an important way: by studying student newcomers, previous job experience is not likely to impact findings.

Next to sampling, the interview itself carries aspects worth discussing in the realm of methodological limitations. As stated by Alvesson (2003) a certain interpretation of the interview situation on part of the participant always takes place: "Intensive interpretation of what the researcher is after – before, during, and perhaps after the interview (before a repeat interview) – and the forming of work assumptions of what the entire exercise is about and how specific themes addressed should be understood guide interviewee responses" (p. 19). Thus, despite extensive efforts to ensure questions are clear and easily understandable, it cannot be avoided that there exists a certain range of different interpretations and that answers vary based on that.

Furthermore, social desirability issues are inherent to interview situations. Hence, participants might base their replies on what they think is socially acceptable instead of

on their "true" thoughts. The interviewer paid particular attention to minor cues exposing answers biased by social desirability.

Regarding the interview technique, efforts were made at avoiding priming participants (see Section 3.2.2). One potential limitation in this respect could be that newcomers understand key concepts differently than scholars typically define them. Alternatively, could defining terms scientifically also bias participants' responses? Here, the definitions of key concepts such as the self-concept were withheld until participants asked for a clear definition, or the facilitator felt it was necessary to define terms during the flow of the interview. In future research with larger samples, scholars could experiment with explaining terms in researchers' definitions, using a definition put in context ("This is how researchers define the self-concept"), or using no definition at all.

Finally, data analysis could also bear potential limitations. In particular, coding decisions were performed by a single investigator. Employing multiple coders with diverse perspectives could serve to uncover more aspects of the data.

### 5.3. Summary and Outlook

In sum, the accounts of the three newcomers Taylor, Jacob, and Naomi provide informative insights into identity processes in the organizational entry phase and how they affect short-term adjustment. The participants significantly differed in their identity work processes and adjustment outcomes and thus provide a background against which to discuss (un)successful adjustment processes. The newcomers' identity processes illustrate current research on identity partnerships (Cooper et al., 2021) and identity work (Bataille & Vough, 2020) and designate avenues for future research.

As underlined by Cooper et al. (2021), "our understanding of how newcomers come to define their own identity vis-à-vis the team is still relatively unknown" (p. 3). Identity partnerships as proposed by the authors are one possible path through which newcomers come to build their identity in the team, however, key questions remain. While identity partnerships are also a form of association of individuals, they serve different purposes than, for instance, a friendship or romantic partnership. Scholars would do well in exploring more precisely how identity partnerships differ from associations of individuals not meant for the exchange of identity resources within organizations and what this means for newcomer adjustment. This work provides some cues of success factors of identity partnerships, yet this can only be the beginning. Researchers should thoroughly explore which concepts determine whether identity partnerships become successful guides of newcomer adjustment.

While factors influencing the initiation of identity partnerships are cautiously suggested (Cooper et al., 2021), future research should also investigate how identity partnerships develop based on interpersonal factors. Furthermore, there is a gap in knowledge regarding the dynamics that follow after a mutual exchange of identity resources. If both partners' identity needs are satisfied, does the partnership

lose its core purpose and consequently dissolve? Alternatively, when do partners decide to continue investing in their partnership? One suggestion may be that when initial demands are satisfied, partners may still expect having to satisfy identity needs in the future and thus engage in farsighted behavior to continue the partnership.

Another aspect worth exploring is how multiple identity partnerships may interact. As outlined by Cooper et al. (2021), identity partnerships may provide complementary identity resources—could there conversely also be competition for the provision of the same or similar identity resources for the newcomer? For example, one could imagine that an *integrator* (with strong team identification) and a *grem-lin* (with strong team disidentification) both build an identity partnership with the newcomer. While both may seek to provide the newcomer with identity and acceptance cues, they apparently may want to satisfy competing interests and needs from the relationship. Which dynamics would follow such competitive scenarios? Could they even lead to larger-scale detrimental outcomes, such as endangering the overarching team identity or igniting team conflict?

Additionally, research has largely focused on investigating identity work on individual identities. Yet, identity researchers have theorized that individuals possess multiple identities and that they relate to one another (Bataille & Vough, 2020; Ramarajan, 2014). Hence, it needs to be studied how identity work on a single identity influences other identities. Beyond that, could identity work alter multiple identities at the same time? What could be the implications of such processes, depending on the relationship between the identities being changed?

From a practical perspective, this work highlights aspects of newcomer adjustment relevant to both incoming newcomer and socializing organization. First, newcomers could monitor their identity needs more closely to help them more effectively take steps toward satisfying them. Second, organizations need to recognize that newcomer adjustment success, and consequently job success factors important to the organization, critically depend on newcomer identity processes. Raising awareness for the importance of newcomers' identity needs could aid the organization in best meeting these needs with fitting identity partnerships enabling newcomer identity work. Thinking beyond, organizations could take efforts to develop more structured approaches to managing individual identities and embedding them into standardized management processes. With the precise design and implementation yet to discuss, could there be a way toward an integrated "Identity Management System"?

Finally, it remains to be stressed that the self-concept is central to a wide array of fields not just in organizational research, but also in psychology at large. Great strides have been made at unveiling the various roles of the self-concept, yet the quest for discovery has just begun. The sheer complexity inherent in self-concept research will continue to challenge scholars in advancing theory toward solving a key puzzle: *Understanding the Impact of Future Social Self-Concepts on Newcomer Adjustment*.

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