

The Socialization of First Entering Students: An Exploratory Study at South African University

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Received: 23 March 2021 • Accepted: 25 May 2021

Abstract: The current study explored first-year student experiences in receiving social support and its relation to their ability to adapt to university philosophy. The study's main aim was to identify expectations and experiences of first entering students in the Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Public Administration degree programs in an institution of higher learning in the North West Province, South Africa. The study explored the Newcomer Experience Model by operationalizing expectations, experiences, surprises, and how students make sense of the university environment. The research used a mixed-methods approach utilizing a repeated-measures survey design, as the same questionnaire, was administered twice, and interviews. The study found that when newcomers encounter a new behavior setting, they experience a surprise, and they must make sense of surprising events in the setting. First entering students enter the university with unrealistic expectations, and the university does not meet their expectations. Instead, the study has confirmed current thinking in socialization research.

Key-Words: higher education; educational experiences; socialization; sense-making; first-year student.

1. Introduction

The first year is best exemplified as a transitional period that bridges the gap between students' previous identities and new learning contexts (Awang,

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Kutty & Ahmad, 2014). The meaning of transition varies with the context in which the term is used. Transition is best viewed as a process-oriented phenomenon within the educational field that involves individual responses to change (Awang et al., 2014).

Recent findings indicate that learning environments (LE) have gained research attention in recent years, partly due to perceived links to students' academic performance, especially in Higher Education (HE). LE comprises diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures within which learning occurs (Ibem, Alagbe & Owoseni, 2017). In the transition from secondary to tertiary education, first-year students experience stress due to the academic, cultural, and social environment they must adapt to (De Coninck, Matthijs & Luyten, 2019).

Studies conducted by the Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa (2012) found that tertiary education is undergoing dynamic transformation. The new terrain in tertiary education has seen institutions merge or transform into so-called comprehensive institutions. This new outlook on higher education has made the socialization of students an important area of study. The Department of Higher Education and Training in South Africa (2012) study highlighted that, in contemporary South Africa, institutions of higher learning also attracted an increasing number of adult learners who had to balance work and class attendance. This, together with growing numbers of international students, and greater ethnic diversity, pose further problems for the socialization and related academic adjustment of first-time entering students.

The rationale behind the study is that when newcomers enter new behavior settings, they experience what was first described by Hughes (1958) as a *reality shock* and later as *a surprise* by Louis (1980). As a result, newcomers in organizations must search for interpretative schemes that allow them to define the expectations of others and orient their behavior accordingly (Louis, 1980).

According to Pillay (2011), most students enter first-year higher education environments ill-equipped and ill-prepared for what awaits them, partly due to lack of facilities, overcrowding, and the curriculum students follow in high schools.

The highest drop-out rate from higher education occurs in the first academic year, mostly during the first six months, when students are still in the transition phase (Nakasa, 2003; Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007). Several authors believe that the challenges students face are due to the gap between school and university that exists because of the inequalities that still exist in the South African secondary school system (Hay & Marais, 2004; Scott et al., 2007).

This study investigated how first-year students, who face many challenges in a tertiary environment, make sense of and interpret an

unfamiliar environment. This study attempted to identify key issues in the socialization process of first-year students to identify new directions in socialization research in higher education settings.

2. Research Problem

The socialization of first entering students has taken a different direction with the changing landscape in South African higher education. Blair (2017) highlights that, while a focus of attention in the literature has been attached to active learning and problem-based learning (PBL) to engage students, this has not gone so far as to examine the implications of adjustment of students in the first year. An early study by Bargel (2015) indicated that first-year students had difficulties meeting academic demands, preparing for exams effectively and planning their studies in advance. Robbins, Lauver, Davis, Langley, and Carlstrom (2004) observed that first-year students experienced adjustment problems when entering higher education settings.

The approach to the current study is therefore new to studies of socialization of students in South Africa, as previous studies, for example, Foxcroft and Stumpfer (2005), Kivuli (2006), Pillay (2011), do not address the *surprises* (or challenges) that new students experience, and the methods and strategies that they use to make sense of academic, social and political aspects of a university setting.

3. Literature Review

The term socialization has a history of varied use and various definitions of the term exist (Thomas, Jinks & Jack, 2015). Dimitriadou, Pizirtidou and Lavdaniti (2013) suggest that the term generally refers to the processes by which people selectively acquire their personal values and attitudes, identify interests and develop skills and knowledge base.

Louis (1980) highlighted that earlier studies in socialization concentrated on four themes, namely: (1) general characteristics of organizational socialization, (2) stages of socialization, (3) content of socialization, and (4) characteristics and effects of socialization practices.

Research by Jablin (1982) suggested that, although each of these stages is somewhat different from the others when combined, they advocate that the assimilation of newcomers characteristically proceeds through three primary phases: 1) some form of anticipatory socialization; 2) an encounter phase, which includes the organization entry period and reality, and 3) a metamorphosis stage during which the newcomer acquires socially appropriate attitudes and behaviors, resolves internal and external role conflicts and commences efforts to individualize his or her place within an organization.

Louis (1978) studies how Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates are socialized when they enter new organizational settings. In this research, she developed a theoretical framework that describes underlying mechanisms by which “sense is made of confusion in the often foreign world of the newcomer to a new group context” (Louis 1978, xiii).

Mudhovozi (2012) researched first-year students' social and academic experiences at a university in Zimbabwe. The study used a qualitative design to get an in-depth picture of student experience and challenges. The main findings were that first-year students experienced different social and academic adjustment challenges. As a result, students tended to rely on social networks and a positive frame of mind to deal with any challenges they might experience.

This concurs with various studies on retention and throughput rates in higher education in Southern Africa (Olani, 2009; Pillay, 2011; Robbins et al., 2004).

4. Theoretical Framework

Theoretical perspectives on “surprise and sensemaking” among newcomers to organizations (Louis, 1980) are used in this study. Louis’ model emerged from the turnover and socialization literature in business and is helpful in exploring how newcomers, such as first-year college students, cope with transitions and reconcile the surprising misalignment of expectations and actual experiences.

Louis’ (1980) model considers the expectations newcomers bring to a new organizational context and according to Harper and Newman (2016), in higher education, this would entail what students expect college to be like, how they expect to be treated, and the relationship and outcomes they expect in exchange for their academic effort, time away from family, and financial investment. Louis (1980) explains that unrealistic and unmet expectations often lead to transition turbulence and high departure rates.

The following is a discussion of the conceptualization of the original Louis (1980) model, which is explored in the study.

4.1. Features of Louis’ (1980) Surprise and sense-making model

a) Change

Louis (1980) defines change as an objective difference between a new and an old setting. The author suggests that the newness of the changed situation requires an individual's adjustment. The more elements differ in a new situation, compared to a past or known situation, the more a newcomer has to cope.

b) Contrast

The second feature is a contrast which is personally, rather than publicly noticed and “is not, for the most part, knowable in advance” (Louis, 1980, p.236).

For instance, in a university setting, first-year students may be carrying old roles of teaching and learning which they experienced in the high school environment. On arrival at the university, students are likely to experience surprises or challenges’ pertaining to how work is taught and what is expected of them in terms of academic work.

c) Surprises (challenges)

The third feature is noted as *surprises or challenges* (from herein referred to as surprises) that need to be made sense of. Surprises are the difference between previous experience and present reality and the individual’s reaction to the new truth (reality). Surprises may take several forms. They may be positive or negative and require adaptation from the newcomer. Surprises may be pleasant or unpleasant, but they require that newcomers adapt to a given situation. They are therefore required to be flexible.

Weick (1995) developed original ideas about sense-making in organizations. Sensemaking is a social process of making sense through communication of the circumstances in which people collectively find themselves.

5. Materials and Methods

5.1. Study objectives

The objectives of this research are as follows:

- To investigate the expectations of first-time entering students in a university setting.
- To determine if first-time entering students’ experiences are met in academic life.
- To explore how first-time entering students make sense of surprises in the new setting.
- To determine if socialization processes will predict students’ first time, positive or negative adjustment to the university setting.

5.2. Methodology

The study was conducted at the North West University (Mahikeng Campus), situated in Mahikeng, North West Province in South Africa. It is a rural-based university with eight faculties that are diverse socially, economically, racially, culturally, and linguistically. Students from the School of Management Sciences were the targeted population for the study. The two

faculties were selected based on the underlying fact that the researchers hail from that School. The study used a mixed-methods approach utilizing a repeated-measures survey design, as the same questionnaire was administered twice.

The questionnaire also used open-ended questions to elicit more in-depth information from participants. This is consistent with a mixed-methods approach, or triangulation. The sample was first-year students entering the Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Public Administration degree programs at the North West University. Stratified random sampling was used as it is appropriate for the study.

A subset of individuals was chosen from the designated population such that both female and male students had an equal chance of being selected during the sampling procedure. Using this method, this study investigated the participants' views, beliefs and opinions on the factors implicit in students' socialization and added to the statistical descriptions of the study.

5.3. Data collection tool

The data collection tool was based on the socialization measure from Louis (1980). The questionnaire was developed based on change, contrast, surprises, and a sense-making framework. However, they were piloted on a group of first-year students to evaluate readability, face-validity and relevance. Piloting entailed the identification of problematic items. For instance, any ambiguous or poorly worded questions were deleted from the questionnaire. In addition, two self-administered questionnaires were completed by the participants.

A quasi-experimental pre-test/ post-test study was conducted involving two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the first semester dealt with biographical information and their expectations. The second questionnaire, which dealt with the remaining aspects, was administered at the beginning of the second semester.

5.4. Data analysis

5.4.1. Quantitative data

The following quantitative techniques were used to analyze the data.

- The preliminary analysis involved the calculation of frequency distributions to describe the sample. T-test analysis was conducted to determine if there were any significant differences between male and female participants on major variables of the study. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences Version 26 (SPSS 26) was used for statistical analysis.
- Correlation analysis was conducted to investigate associations between socialization factors and the dependent variable of university adjustment.

The questionnaire used a five-point Likert scale to explore Expectations, experiences, surprises, and sense-making.

5.4.2. Qualitative data

Thematic Content analysis was used to analyze if the data elicited from the open-ended questions to facilitate comments about the student's feelings. This involved scrutinizing the data to elicit several distinct themes.

5.5. Reliability and validity

This study utilized a random sampling method to examine how the students' experiences, socialization, surprises and sense-making vary according to the characteristics of the sub-samples. This will enable the levels of congruence or disjunction between the responses of the various sub-groups to be charted (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017). A random stratified sample is a valuable blend of randomization and categorization, thereby enabling both a quantitative and qualitative piece of research to be undertaken. Quantitative research can use statistical analysis, while qualitative research can target those groups in institutions or clusters of participants who might be approached to participate in the research (Cohen et al., 2017). The survey is based on Louis (1980) socialization measure, was piloted to ensure poor, or ambiguous, questions are removed.

5.6. Bias

Random sampling reduces sampling bias as every element in the population has a chance of being selected (Terre Blanche et al., 2008). As the questionnaire is self-reported, and there was a covering letter, administrator bias was reduced.

5.7. Participants

Participants were 43 first entering students (21 males, 22 females) entering students in the Faculty of Commerce and Management at the North West University (Mahikeng campus) in the first semester. The participants were registered Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) (12 participants) and Bachelor of Public Administration (BPA) (31 participants). The original participants were 47, and 4 participants had to be discarded from the study because they did not return the second questionnaire at the beginning of the second semester.

The age distribution is summarised in Table 1.

Age range	Number of students	Percentage
15-19	10	23.26
20-24	11	25.59

25-29	8	18.60
30-34	6	13.96
35-39	1	2.32
40-44	2	4.65
45-49	1	2.32
50-54	3	6.98
55-59	1	2.32
TOTAL	43	100

Table 1. Age in Years of New Students intake (N=43)

6. Results

The discussion on the results will be grouped under the following: namely, expectations, experiences and surprises.

6.1. Expectations

Students anticipated spending an average of 26 hours and expected to obtain a second class and complete their degree in three years.

Respondents were expected to evaluate their performance as “good” (3 on a five-point scale), to be evaluated as “good” by fellow students and professors/lecturers. Participants expected “some” (3 on a five-point scale) social support from other new students, returning students (those that have been at North West University a semester or longer). “A great deal” of social support (5 on a five-point scale) was expected from Professors/lecturers, family in the first semester.

Students are expected to develop new perspectives (new ways of thinking) and learn what is expected of them. They were also “very confident” that they would be successful students. Participants expected their personal values to change and have “a large impact” on the Department of Industrial Psychology and the School of Management and Commerce. Students expected to draw “some” and “quite a bit” of experience from their previous and present employer. The status of North West University (NWU) was rated “quite a bit” (4) and “very much” (5) (on the five-point scale)

Older students expected to take more years to complete their degree program than younger students. Older students expected some social support from returning students and Professors/Lecturers more than younger students. Older students expected to draw more from their previous employment experiences and present employment

6.2. Experiences

The obtained means, medians and modes were typically in the 3 and 4 range and the standard deviations were highly variable in magnitude across items, with most being relatively small. Overall, these findings suggest that

the experiences of the first entering students after one semester were highly similar. On a four-point scale, students reported spending an average of 20 hours per week on their academic studies and obtaining a pass mark of 3 (second class). Bachelor's degree requirements were expected to be completed in 4 years.

Participants evaluated their performance as "good" and expected their fellow students and Professors/Lectures to have evaluated them a "no" as "good" (3 on a five-point scale)

Participants developed new perspectives (new ways of thinking (, learned what was expected of them. They had confidence that they were successful as students in the first semester. However, the student's personal values changed due to their studies at North West University (items were rated 4 on a five-point scale).

The prestige/status of North West University was rated on average 3 on a five-point scale.

Female students expected more social support than male students. BPA students evaluated their own performance better than the BCom students and were evaluated better by their Professors/ lecturers.

BPA students had more impact on the department of Industrial Psychology than B. Com students. BPA students drew less upon their own experience (see Table 2).

Item	BCom	BPA	Df	T
Experiences				
Fellow students' evaluation	2.4	3.0	24.99	-2.25*
Evaluation of own performance	2.2	2.7	30.31	-2.23*
Impact on Industrial Psychology department	2.6	3.2	18.21	-2.16*
Draw upon employment experiences	3.5	2.8	40.77	2.23*

Table 2. Items on which there were significant Program (BCom, BPA) Differences in responses. *p

Part-time students were expected to complete their degree program in 4 years while full-time students expected 3 years, and full-time students also expected their personal values to change more than part-time students. Part-time students were more interested in topics in Industrial Psychology, and expected to draw from their present and previous employment experiences. In addition, part-time students were more interested in topics in Public Administration more than full-time students (see Table 3).

Item	Fulltime	Part-time	df	T
Years to complete degree programme	3.6	4.3	25.55	-2.59*
Personal value will change	3.3	3.8	31.03	-2.41*
Interest in topics in Public Administration	3.4	4.2	40.37	-2.59*
Draw upon previous and present employment experiences	2.5	33	31.61	-2.19*

Table 3. Items on which there were significant attendance (Part-time and Fulltime) differences in Responses

6.3. Comparison of Expectations and Experiences

Matched t-tests were computed to compare the differences between the expectations and actual experiences of first entering students after one semester of study at the University. Only differences that reach the .05 level of significance are reported here. (See Table 4).

Item	Expectations	Experiences	Matched t
Hours per week	26.0	20.0	2.19*
Marks /grades you will attain	2.8	3.1	-2.15*
Evaluation of own difficulty	3.4	2.9	2.46**
Personal experience of first semester	3.0	2.5	2.46**
Social support from new	3.2	3.6	-2.88**
Social support from returning students	3.0	2.5	2.66**
Learn new skills	4.3	4.0	2.05*
Develop new perspective	4.2	3.8	3.10**
Learn what is expected	4.3	3.9	2.73**
Personal values will change	4.1	3.6	2.69**
Department impact on School of Commerce and Management	3.6	2.9	3.15**
Rated status of North West University	3.8	3.6	2.50**

Table 4. Items rated expectations and actual experiences. *p<01 Note: df= 42 in all cases

Students expected to spend more hours on their studies than they actually did. Students obtained more grades/ marks than they expected. However, they were evaluated less by their professors/lecturers than they expected.

The first semester was less complicated than they expected. Participants received more social support from other new students than expected and received less social support from returning students. In addition, students reported that they learned fewer technical skills and developed fewer new perspectives (new ways of thinking).

The new entering students experienced learning less about what is expected of them, and their personal values changed less. Participants reported having less impact on the Industrial Psychology department and School of Commerce and Management. Additionally, the status of the North West University declined after one semester.

6.4. Surprises

Each surprise was rated on a five-point scale ranging from “very unpleasant” (1), to “very pleasant”.

The obtained means, mediums, modes were in the 3 range, while the standard deviations were quite large in magnitude.

Regarding the surprising aspects of registration, most students were surprised by the long tedious and tiresome registration process.

Students expressed the following typical negative comments:

“Tiresome, confusing and inconveniencing”

“It’s tedious, long and sometimes a wrecking process” “It’s even worse after lunch, when Deans come after their chosen time with disregard of how long the students were kept waiting”

“Indifference from administrative officials”

Students also expressed positive comments about the registration process. The “registration process” is a way of “getting to know the campus”. Students did find Deans and Head of Departments helpful. Some were surprised by the way the registration was computerized.

Overall, students expressed negative feelings about the registration process. As a result, the standard deviations were large.

75 %t of the students found the course load to be heavy and tedious. They were mainly surprised by the low marks /grades they obtained in tests and assignments and the strict marking/grading by Professors/lecturers.

Typical comments were:

“Unavailability of text and references books but too many assignments”

“Each lecturer wanted his work yesterday, well done”

First year students had mixed feelings about Professors and lectures at the university. Some felt that Professors and lectures were helpful and duty conscious and willing to help with academic challenges of first entering students.

Typical comments were:

“very fact to allow interaction with university demands”

“Some lectures gave a lot of work thinking that we are doing that course only”

“Lecturers were friendly and always willing to work”

First entering students cited the lack of social and academic support from other fellow students.

Typical comments were:

“Very selfish regarding information and outright unsociable”

“Their performance was not good as I expected”

Students also expressed positive comments like: *“kind in all respect, very cooperative and helpful”* *“I noticed some students were full of vigour, courage and were goal directed”*

Overall this surprise rated as “Very unpleasant” on a (five-point scale).

Students had mixed feelings about the semester system because it was their first exposure to the system at the university.

Typical negative comments were: *“adjusting to the system”* *“I never thought one semester is such a serious matter in the university”*

“I had no idea of what the semester was all about before coming to North West University.

As a result, I came to find it rather surprising to see how the classes had shrank towards the examinations”

“It did not cater for slow learners because its short”

Typical positive comments were: *“that was a good system since I had to pull up my socks during the course of the semester in order to be allowed to write examinations”*

First-year students expressed more negative than positive comments about older students (students who have been at North West University for more than one semester).

The typical comments were:

“They were not better than new students, i.e., in courses they repeated”,
“most of them were not welcoming”.

“My fellow students who were repeating Industrial Psychology 105 did not seem to be familiar with the course”

New students, namely also expressed the following positive comments: *“They acted kind to us, helping us how to write assignments, how to study in groups and encouraged us a lot”, “Most of them were helpful and they even helped me choosing the relevant courses”*

Approximately 60 percent of the first entering students expressed negative feelings about the accommodation situation in the Mafikeng/Mmabatho area. Students were surprised by the scarcity of accommodation, unreasonable rental charged students, and the university authorities not adequately addressing the problem.

Some respondents, especially the part-time students were not worried because they owned, rented or stayed with their parents.

Typical comments were: *“the residents are suspicious of North West University students and accommodation is scarce”*.

“The way house owner’s exploits rentals.” “High rent even in dilapidated houses”

Participants also expressed positive comments like: *“I never had an accommodation problem since am a resident here. But with others from outside, it was really terrible until such time that the residence and hostel were opened”*

Overall the surprise was rated as “very unpleasant” (1 on a five-point scale). Almost 50 percent of respondents did not attend the Orientation program. Overall, the respondents were satisfied with the orientation program, with some reservations about the period being too short.

Students expressed the following comments:

“Too short and hurried”

Too short and not properly planned”

First-year students were also asked how they surprised themselves at the end of the first semester. Respondents were happy that they managed to cope with the demanding coursework and pass the first semester. Overall the respondents expressed positive comments. First-year students had mixed feeling about the first semester. Typical students’ comments were: *“How easy is it to fail”, “that if you don’t pass the semester tests, you cannot be able to write the examinations”, and “too much work”*

Overall the students were surprised by the course work, strict marking, and a lack of prescribed books. T-test of surprise items was administered to calculate significant differences between male and female students, and only significant items were reported (see Table 5).

Item	Male	Female	T
Expectations:			
Learn new technical skills	4.1	4.6	2.23*
Personal values will change	4.8	4.4	-2.37*
Experiences:			
Social support from new students	3.3	3.9	-2.19*
Surprises			
Accommodation in Mafikeng/Mmabatho area	2.1	3.4	-2.69*

Table 5. T-test results. * $p < 0.01$ Note: $df = 41$ in all cases

7. Discussion

Even if first entering students come to university with different educational, social, and academic backgrounds, they typically share some realistic expectations about university. For example, when they entered their first semester, the students have generally high expectations that often were not fully confirmed after one semester. Other research has also shown that newcomers' expectations are lowered after entering a new organization (Wanous, 1980; Mayeza, 1988).

Newcomers entering organizations may experience a reality shock (Hughes, 1958), or a surprise (Louis, 1980) when their assumptions about how people interpret and respond to actions or events do not conform with those that prevail in the new context.

The present results have shown that new students experienced other surprises after one semester at university. Surprises made it possible for new students to make sense of their new environment. "Surprises seem to be an inevitable part of the experience of entering (in the sense of joining) an unfamiliar organizational setting" (Louis, 1980).

First entering students in the School of Commerce and Management did find a number of different events helpful in adjusting to the university. The orientation programme, which the Student Career Guidance Centre organizes, was helpful. Some first entering students, especially part-time students, do not use this valuable resource. Most students did not study Mathematics, and Physical Sciences at high school. This tends to pose coping challenges with courses that are qualitative in nature (e.g. Statistics).

Older students and part-time students found subsequent meetings with Professors/lectures to be helpful after registration.

BPA students were more concerned with the accommodation situation in the university town. This may be because BPA students attend part-time and are primarily employed in public service and State-owned enterprises.

In a previous study by Mayeza (1988), it was not surprising to find students identifying themselves with other new students and faculty in their speciality area, and one semester not enough to make newcomers feel part of the university.

8. Conclusion

New students experience adjustment challenges in higher education. This study shed light on in the challenges that first-time entering students experience in a traditional university environment.

The research attempted to address the fact that current trends of assimilation strategies in higher education in South Africa warrant a different conceptual framework for research on the socialization of students. This study contributed to the existing approaches, models and frameworks of socializing newcomers in new behavior settings in a tertiary environment.

There are clear differences between those who had academically seamless first-year experiences and those who encountered academic turbulence. The former did not reflect on many experiences that exemplified Louis' (1980) five forms of surprise, whereas students in the latter group did (albeit to varying degrees and sometimes not all five). The early strugglers expected university to be academically less challenging.

It is recommended to help first-year students overcome challenges that threaten their academic goals in the first year and beyond to reach the same level of importance as other dimensions of university success by making the socialization process accessible to students. The research findings of this study suggest that greater focus needs to be attached to supporting students in the first year of their studies.

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