

Building a Strong Career Foundation Through Proactivity Behaviors: An Exploration of Organizational Socialization Experiences of Early-Career Women in Public Relations

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Abstract

Public relations research demonstrates challenges to professional advancement for women from the perspective of women who have already achieved leadership positions. There is a key demographic that is largely ignored in this line of research: early-career women (ECW). Given that the first five years of one's career journey is a critical phase for influencing future career success, this study was approached from the perspective that how women are socialized into their professional roles and organizations sets the tone for long-term professional advancement. Thirty-one in-depth interviews with ECW in public relations explored their organizational socialization experiences, revealing themes related to age insecurities, navigating complex emotions, and the role of female managers in creating positive socialization experiences. Findings also revealed that participants engaged in proactivity behaviors to effectively acclimate to their organizations and roles. These behaviors included relationship building with peers and organizational leaders, identifying advocates to make sense of culture and professional roles, and intentional confidence development as a tool for role negotiation and positive framing. Findings also emphasized the need for organizations to support and encourage young women's relationship building externally through professional associations.

Keywords: early career, organizational socialization, public relations, newcomer proactivity, career management

Executive Summary

The lack of research about early-career women (ECW) in public relations and their socialization experiences presented an opportunity to explore how they acclimate to their organizations and professional roles during the first five years of full-time employment. The overarching purpose of the study was to understand how young women self-managed their careers during the organizational socialization (OS) process. Thirty-one interviews with ECW in public relations answered two research questions: (1) How do ECW in public relations describe their organizational socialization experiences? (2) How, if at all, do ECW in public relations utilize newcomer proactivity behaviors to effectively acclimate to their organizations?

The early career phase is a pivotal phase in one's career journey that influences upper-level advancement (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; Manuel, 2003), and early career socialization experiences shape and set career expectations and influence future career aspirations in positive or negative ways (Kowtha, 2013). While past public relations research points to structural and organizational barriers to leadership advancement for women in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, 2004; Dubrowski et al., 2019; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018), little is known about how and if ECW are proactive agents in their organizational socialization experiences. This research sought to fill that gap.

Why This Research Matters to the Public Relations Profession

This research has the power to positively impact the public relations profession. First, it could help combat the leadership gender gap long-term by offering a framework for empowering young women to self-manage their career paths that lead to leadership advancement. Additionally, organizations that employ young women in public relations and related roles and position them for success and support them early on could experience more engaged employees and increased loyalty and retention.

Key Findings and Implications

ECW's socialization experiences are marked by age insecurities and complex emotions. Participants were concerned about being perceived as young in the workplace, which prevented them from advocating for themselves and asking for clarification about their roles. They experienced a range of emotions while acclimating to their organizations; the most common emotions mentioned included feeling excited, intimidated, stressed, worried, and overwhelmed. These emotions were heightened as participants grappled with shaping their professional identity that was separate from--but also had to work within--their organizational environments.

Implication

Candid discussions about emotions and the complex transition into a full-time working professional could help normalize this experience for young women and create a sense of acceptance and camaraderie in the workplace.

1.) Female managers have the power to influence a positive acclimation experience. Young women are constantly watching and learning from women managers and women in executive positions. Study participants learned to emulate their female manager's soft skills, such as speaking up effectively during meetings, which contributed to a strong career foundation. Implication: Female managers can serve as role models for young women by inviting them to sit in on phone calls or through informal discussions about leadership experiences and business operations.

2.) Intentional relationship development with organizational peers and leaders, as well as external professional networking, can position ECWs for future success. Participants developed relationships with their peers (other newcomers and young women) to have others that could empathize with their situations and to troubleshoot ideas before presenting them to managers. This peer network remained intact even as they went to work for other organizations and was used to learn about new professional opportunities. They built relationships with people in authority to gain a better understanding of the “inside workings” of the organization from a business perspective, which made them well-positioned for promotion. In terms of relationship building outside of their organizations, just five percent of participants were proactively building a professional network and explained that this is one of the most important things young professionals can do to advance in their careers; it is key for developing a professional reputation. Implication: University public relations programs and professional associations should emphasize professional relationship development as a way to earn influence and increase the likelihood of future promotions. Professional associations should work toward developing a “bridge” between the student and professional level to ensure young women don’t miss out on networking opportunities during the critical first five years of their careers.

3.) Participants advocated for themselves and intentionally developed their confidence for role negotiation and positive framing. Participants who felt siloed in certain roles practiced using a confident, assertive voice to take on different projects that were more in line with their professional aspirations. Confidence development also occurred through challenging situations that participants framed for themselves as opportunities to grow and get attention and recognition from leadership. These experiences helped them view future challenging situations in a more positive, opportunistic manner. Implications: Those educating and leading future public relations professionals should help them understand that challenge and adversity is part of the learning and professionalism process.

Building a Strong Career Foundation Through Proactivity Behaviors: An Exploration of Organizational Socialization Experiences of Early-Career Women in Public Relations

The early career phase—the first five years of full-time employment—has been characterized as a pivotal phase in one’s career journey that influences upper-level advancement (Claes & Ruiz-Quintanilla, 1998; Manuel, 2003). Although research in the public relations and strategic communication field demonstrates challenges to professional advancement for women (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, 2004; Dubrowski, McCorkindale, & Rickert, 2019; Grunig, Hon, & Toth, 2013; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018), the majority of this research is from the perspective of women who have already achieved leadership positions. There is a key demographic that is largely ignored in this line of research: early-career women (ECW). This study was approached from the perspective that how women are socialized into their professional roles and organizations sets the tone for long-term career success and advancement (Kowtha, 2013; Neill, 2007). It also recognizes that the first five years of full-time employment can contribute valuable insight for setting up young women in public relations on paths toward leadership advancement as soon as they start their careers. These insights have the potential to combat the public relations leadership gender gap long term.

This research leverages organizational socialization theory (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977) to understand how women in public relations and strategic communication acclimate to their roles and organizations during the first five years of their careers. This is an appropriate theory for use in this study because of the proposition that positive early career socialization experiences, including proactive socialization behaviors exhibited by young women, may lead to career advancement (Kowtha, 2013). Therefore, the focus of this research is not on leadership development or characteristics of successful leaders, but instead on how newcomers--early career women--adapt to their organizations through newcomer proactivity behaviors (Ashford & Black, 1996).

This research has the power to positively impact the public relations profession. While past research points to structural and organizational barriers to leadership advancement for women in public relations (Aldoory & Toth, 2002, 2004; Dubrowski et al., 2019; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018), little is known about how and if ECW are proactive agents in their organizational socialization experiences. This information could provide a framework for empowering young women to self-manage their career paths that lead to leadership advancement. Additionally, organizations that offer a supportive culture for young workers experience numerous benefits such as more engaged employees and increased loyalty and retention (LaGree et al., 2021; O’Boyle, 2021). Organizations that employ young women in public relations and related roles—and set them up for success early on—could experience more women advancing to leadership positions in the future.

Literature Review

Given that early career experiences are largely shaped by the organizational socialization process (Kowtha, 2013; Takeuchi, Takeuchi, & Jung, 2021), a review of organizational socialization literature is provided, and then narrows to focus on women’s career and socialization experiences and, specifically, women in public relations.

Organizational Socialization

Organizational socialization (OS) is defined as “the process by which an individual acquires the social knowledge and skills necessary to assume an organizational role” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1977, p. 2). It is a joint process between an organization that wants to adapt and influence its employees, and an employee that seeks to find his or her fit within the organization (Fisher, 1986). Cooper-Thomas and Andersen (2006) described it as the ways in which a new employee crosses organizational boundaries by adapting from an outsider to an integrated, effective insider. OS was initially described as “learning the ropes” (Louis, 1980, p. 230) and has been criticized as a fragmented, underdeveloped theory (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992). According to Saks & Ashforth (1997), OS research has been shaped by various theoretical perspectives including: Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) model of socialization tactics; uncertainty reduction theory where emphasis is placed on socialization tactics as a means to provide clarity and reduce anxiety (Mignerey, Rubin, & Gorden, 1995); social cognitive theory that explains that socialization occurs through learning from and interacting with others (Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1992); and cognitive theory where newcomers carefully interpret situations and engage in information seeking (Louis, 1980). OS research has also emphasized the *process* of OS in an effort to further conceptualize it. Individuals begin as newcomers and move through phases of learning and organizational adjustment (Bauer, Morrison, & Callister, 1996; Chao et al., 1994). According to Bauer et al. (1996), there are five changes that occur during this process: (1) preliminary learning that involves identifying what and from whom they need to learn, (2) learning about the organization, (3) learning to function in a workgroup, (4) learning to do the job, and (5) personal learning, where newcomers learn more about themselves.

Organizational Socialization Tactics and Outcomes

Recent research argues that OS is an important area of study because of the positive outcomes both organizations and employees experience when organizational socialization tactics are implemented (Cooper-Thomas & Andersen, 2006). These socialization tactics are two-fold: they represent the methods organizations use to help newcomers acclimate and the proactivity behaviors newcomers use to feel like accepted and valuable members.

A classification of socialization tactics organizations should use to achieve socialization success comes from Van Maanen and Schein (1979) and consists of six types: (1) collective (common learning experiences with a group); (2) formal (defined onboarding activities); (3) sequential (learning activities adhere to a process); (4) fixed (information is provided about the timing of completing activities); (5) Serial (role models and/or mentors are assigned to newcomers); and (6) investiture (experienced members provide newcomers with positive social support). Jones (1986) narrowed these tactics into three tactical groups based on their function. Contextual tactics provide newcomers with a formal training program where they learn about the organization itself and job-related skills. Social tactics offer newcomers formal support through mentors and guidance from supervisors. Content tactics refer to the specific content and timing of the socialization/onboarding program where newcomers get a sense of what is required to complete it.

It is evident that organizational socialization tactics benefit both organizations and their newcomers. Research demonstrates a positive relationship between organizational socialization tactics and performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intentions to remain (Bauer et al., 2007). It has also been linked to a decrease in employee turnover (Allen, 2006). Over time, organizational socialization tactics facilitate trust among employees and their supervisors and increase organizational commitment (Lapointe, Vandenberghe, & Boudrias,

2014). Organizational socialization tactics are also associated with increased role clarity and decreased role conflict among newcomers (Kowtha, 2018) and with newcomers' knowledge and acceptance of organizational culture (Anakwe & Greenhaus, 1999).

Organizational Newcomers and Proactivity Behaviors

As previously discussed, OS is a joint process between an organization and its new employees. This section focuses on the active role organizational newcomers play in the socialization process, which is of significant interest in the present study. Organizational newcomers have the opportunity to leverage newcomer proactivity behaviors to reduce uncertainty and create a more ideal acclimation experience that leads to increased clarity and future career success (Ashford & Black, 1996; Cooper-Thomas & Anderson, 2002, Crant, 2000; Fang, Duffy, & Shaw, 2011). In a thorough study about proactivity during organizational entry, Ashford and Black (1996) outlined four behaviors that newcomers use when they acclimate to their organizations in a proactive manner: sensemaking, relationship building, job-change negotiating, and framing. Sensemaking occurs when newcomers engage in conscious thought and information seeking to gain knowledge and learn how to act and gain influence within their new setting (Major et al., 1995). Newcomers use relationship building for social support and to understand nuanced situations. Job-change negotiating helps newcomers exert control over their work and create a better organizational fit that aligns with their professional aspirations (Gruman, Saks, & Zweib, 2006). Finally, framing is related to past psychological research that suggests that individuals engage in self-management to gain control in situations (Manz & Sims, 1980); newcomers use cognitive self-management to positively frame their situations, which can lead to an increase in their self-confidence (Ashford & Black, 1996).

Organizational Socialization and Early Career

The ways in which individuals are socialized into their chosen profession and organizations during the early career phase has long-term implications on their career trajectories. Career stages are best defined through professional tenure, or the number of years a person has been employed in a specific profession (Lynn, Cao, & Horn, 1996). In the public relations field, career stages are much less defined than those in more formalized professions such as accounting or engineering. For public relations, the early career phase can be characterized as the first five years of professional employment; during this phase, an individual first engages in tactical job tasks in an entry-level or assistant position and begins to learn and do more strategic work that might involve overseeing others, but does not involve advancing to the manager level (Parker, 2018). Many poignant socialization experiences occur during those first five years--personal growth, professional development, relationship building, and more--that shape and set career expectations and influence future career aspirations in positive or negative ways (Kowtha, 2013). In fact, business founder, author, and professor Scott Galloway claims, "your career trajectory is set in the first five years after graduation" (Galloway, 2019, para. 3). Additionally, early career professionals and graduate newcomers (those entering organizations after college graduation) experience socialization differently than experienced newcomers. For example, experienced newcomers are likely to take initiative and get creative about how their needs are met because they have past professional experience to rely on (Cooper-Thomas, Anderson, & Cash, 2012; Wanberg & Kammeyer-Mueller, 2000). Socialization experiences of graduate newcomers are also influenced by the extent to which individuals self-direct their careers and perceive their careers as being a good fit (Takeuchi et al., 2021). Although the socialization experiences during the early career phase is worthy of exploration, the majority of

this research is limited to the transition from school to work and graduate newcomers, revealing an opportunity for more research in this area.

Women, Socialization, and Career Advancement

Women often experience complexities and challenges while navigating their careers, especially related to leadership advancement. These challenges often occur because of less social support and developmental opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts (Kowtha, 2013; Lyness & Thompson, 2000). Women are also viewed stereotypically in the workplace, which often prevents them from being assigned projects critical for establishing credentials that make them viable candidates for promotion and advancement (Blau et al., 1998). More specifically, in terms of career advancement, research shows that “women receive less return on investment than men” (Forret & Dougherty, 2004, p. 423). Men tend to occupy more powerful positions in organizational settings that allow them more influence and decision-making abilities (Dreher & Cox, 2000; Powell & Mainiero, 1993).

Organizational socialization experiences are also different for women, and these experiences influence women’s success in their organizations and throughout their career journeys (Kowtha, 2013). Socialization research points to barriers to effective socialization for women including lack of access to resources and exclusion from informal learning networks (Lyness & Thompson, 2000; Prokos & Padavic, 2002). Women also have different learning styles than men which influences how they seek out information and implement proactive socialization behaviors (Gupta & Bahwe, 2007; Miller & Karakowsky, 2005). Although it is evident that women have specific socialization experiences that influence organizational advancement, a review of literature revealed that Kowtha’s (2013) study is the latest research to examine this proposition.

Women in Public Relations

Career navigation in the public relations and strategic communications career field can be particularly difficult to understand due to inconsistent conceptualizations of the field (Kiesenbauer & Zerfass, 2015) and lack of clear definitions surrounding professional roles and career paths (Berkowitz & Hristodoulakis, 1999; White et al., 1992). For women in public relations, previous research identified barriers to leadership advancement including, but not limited to, challenges of enacting influence to earn a seat at the table (Place, 2012), gendered perceptions of assertiveness by others (Dubrowski et al., 2019), and organizational culture (Kopenhaver & Abreu, 2018; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018).

In a study that examined gender discrepancies in public relations, Aldoory and Toth (2002) found that women are socialized--even at a young age--to be careful about being perceived as assertive in the workplace; study participants explained that this self-regulation of aggressiveness can keep women from advocating for promotions or salary increases. Socialization was again a theme in another study by Aldoory and Toth (2004) that explained, “socialization has constrained women’s roles as leaders... men have been socialized to be the ones giving directions and solving problems” (p. 177).

Indeed, these challenges contribute to the public relations leadership gender gap, where women are still underrepresented at the leadership level (Kopenhaver & Abreu, 2018; Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2018), holding just 20% of leadership positions (Arenstein, 2019). However, much of this research regarding women’s professional advancement in public relations comes from the perspectives of women who have already achieved leadership roles. Research about women’s early career experience in public relations is lacking. Additionally, there are just a few

public relations studies that specifically examine socialization experiences. Berkowitz and Hristodoulakis (1999) evaluated how work socialization influenced perceptions of public relations roles, but it was not rooted in socialization theory. Waymer et al.'s (2018) study used organizational socialization to frame their research on how undergraduate public relations education experiences serve as key socialization agents. Although this study involved interviews with early career public relations professionals, it was focused only on their undergraduate experience.

Given the lack of research about early-career women's (ECW) experiences in public relations, especially as it relates to organizational socialization, there is still much to learn about how these women are socialized into organizations.

RQ 1: How do ECW in public relations describe their organizational socialization experiences?

Although past research points to structural and organizational barriers to leadership advancement for women in public relations, little is known about how and if ECW are proactive agents in their organizational socialization experiences. Therefore, organizational socialization literature about newcomer proactivity behaviors is adopted to frame the second research question.

RQ 2: How, if at all, do ECW in public relations utilize newcomer proactivity behaviors to effectively acclimate to their organizations?

Method

Qualitative methodology is appropriate for exploratory research that aims to garner a conceptual understanding of personal experiences. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to allow the flexibility needed to attend to the dynamic experiences of ECW in public relations (Galleta, 2013). Interviews were guided by a 10-question discussion guide that incorporated follow-up questions and probes to deepen participants' thought processes. Interviews were conducted via phone and video calls to allow for scheduling flexibility and discussions with participants across the U.S.

Early-career women in public relations and similar fields (i.e., strategic communications, creative, marketing communications) were recruited through email to participate in the study. Early-career women are those that are in the first five years of full-time employment post-graduation. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used, which are appropriate sampling methods to ensure participants with relevant experiences were reached (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Recruitment efforts attempted to garner a sample that represents different ethnicities, geographical locations, and a variety of organizations.

Participants

A total of 31 participants were interviewed. Twenty-five were white, four were Latina/Hispanic, and two were African-American. Participants resided and worked in locations across the U.S. including the East and West coasts and the Midwest. All participants graduated from a strategic communications, public relations/advertising, or journalism university program within the past five years and were currently employed in respective fields. They worked for a variety of organizations including agency, corporate, government, and nonprofit that represented a variety of industries including fashion and retail, consumer packaged goods, engineering, and

healthcare. Organizations ranged in size from small shops (11-50 employees) to large corporations (1,000+ employees).

Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed and imported into NVivo for data management and organization purposes. This allowed both researchers to independently code all transcripts within the same software. Glaser and Strauss's (2017) constant comparative method of qualitative analysis guided the manual coding process. First, both researchers completed initial coding independently, paying careful attention to phrases, words and discussions that aligned with the stated research questions. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, even content discussed by participants that did not fit within the parameters of the theory guiding the research was not ignored. Intercoder reliability between coders was strong, with an overall Cohen's unweighted kappa coefficient of 0.86 (Lavrakas, 2012). Next, codes were organized into themes, which were identified based on the level of saturation of a topic across the majority of participants. Finally, researchers compared identified themes and evaluated them against each researcher's interview notes and post-interview memos.

Findings

RQ 1: How do ECW in public relations describe their organizational socialization experiences?

Three prominent themes emerged about ECW's socialization experiences related to age, emotions, and female managers.

Theme 1: Being Young and Being Perceived as Young Contributes to Feelings of Inadequacy

Perhaps the most prominent theme overall relates to participants' insecurities about their age. Nearly all participants described being young and inexperienced (in relation to their colleagues) as a barrier to acclimation. This feeling of inadequacy prevented many from voicing opinions during meetings or speaking up during critical matters, such as how to handle a difficult situation with a client. Concerns about age also interfered with participants' abilities to advocate for themselves, ask for clarifications about their roles and expectations, and effectively manage their workload. As one account executive with one year of experience described, "Sometimes it's a little challenging to go up and say, 'Hey, I think we should be doing this,' because when I'm young...it still feels like, why should they listen to me? I'm just this young girl who doesn't necessarily know what she's talking about." An agency account executive with two years of experience also stated, "Being fresh out of college, people just assume you're young and so that means you're not serious."

A corporate creative project manager with two years of experience shared a similar sentiment. "When I was hired I became the youngest person in the entire department and I definitely carried that with me for much too long." She expanded upon this by describing experiences with a male manager:

"By the way, I was treated specifically by my male manager who, I think he means well to this day, we'll have instances where I feel like, I call it dad mode, where he tries to almost dad me. I have to be like, 'I'm an adult... you should view me and respect me as a peer and co-worker. I'm not a kid.'"

Many conversations about feeling young also turned into discussions about what it's like being young *and* being a woman. While some participants believed that being young was a

stronger challenge than being a woman, this perception was shared among those with less than three years of experience, while participants with more than three or four years of experience recalled challenges related to being a woman in the workplace. For example, an agency junior associate in the first year of her position said, “I’d say being a woman is not really an issue. I think the main issue that I face, in terms of clients is being so junior. I don’t know where or when to speak up.” However, an agency strategist with five years of experience explained, “Young women are still figuring out the issue of sexism in the workplace.” A corporate marketing coordinator with five years of experience explained:

The problem is that women—even in communication—sometimes our voices are not heard. Younger folks, our voices are not heard or respected because the older generation or whatever has a certain way of doing things. There’s a power structure. There’s politics associated with all that. It just makes more sense for the ideas to come from you but for someone else that takes the credit. That’s been, I think, one of the biggest things that I’ve been upset about. I think that right there. I think that’s the biggest battle that I struggle with being a woman and a young woman at that.”

Theme 2: Emotions Add to the Complexity of Acclimation

Although participants were not asked directly about their emotions, all of them described emotional reactions to workplace situations and challenges making sense of their emotions while at work. Overall, participants emphasized a complex range of emotions experienced—“every human emotion that you could think of”—as they figured out how to transition into their new roles and their new workplace environments. While most participants felt excited about embarking on this new phase of life, they were also intimidated, stressed, and worried (see Table 1 for a list of emotions experienced).

Table 1
Emotions mentioned by participants

Emotion	Frequency	Mentioned by # of participants
Excited	52	18
Intimidating	26	13
Stressed	29	11
Worried	21	12
Overwhelmed	17	9
Sad	17	8

Excited

Participants referenced feeling excited when they sensed a positive culture fit with their workplace early on. These feelings made them hopeful and eager for what they could accomplish within their roles and for the organization overall. One participant explained that she was excited to work alongside all creatives in an agency and not just creatives on a specific account. It made her “excited for what I’m going to be more hands-on about in the future.” Another participant said that the first thing she felt when starting her first job was excitement. “...it was the first time I felt like I had made it and I was working in finally a real agency that’s clearly organized. They’re doing amazing work. This is awesome.”

Participants were also excited because they felt supported; their colleagues—especially their managers—were aware of their potential. They were recognized and rewarded, in a variety of ways, for demonstrating strong work ethic and commitment to client and organizational goals. For example, one participant explained that after a successful year with her company, she requested to be transferred to its New York office and her request was approved. This made her even more excited to be part of that organization and contributed to her organizational buy-in and loyalty.

Intimidated, Stressed, and Worried

Participants referenced feeling intimidated because they were young, because of how they were managed, and when needing to speak up or advocate for themselves. It was interesting to note that participants that described being intimidated by managers or leaders also described their organization’s culture as a negative one: “... my first boss was a little intimidating and she is someone that a lot of adult people were afraid of... It started to be an unhealthy culture, which is why I left, ultimately.” This participant contrasted that workplace experience with where she worked at the time of the interview. She described her current workplace as authentic, where everyone had a strong understanding of the organization’s values and mission, with women in leadership roles and mentors she looked up to.

Participants who described acclimating to their organizations as stressful connected this feeling with a lack of structure or clarity around their roles and expectations. They also lacked support from managers, had little guidance and didn’t have positive relationships with colleagues that made them feel comfortable asking for help or advice. As one participant said, “I worked 12-hour days. I didn’t know [what I was doing right or wrong] because I didn’t get reassurance unless I asked... I’m stressed out, I’m worried that I’m not doing this correctly... I was always questioning if I was doing enough or if I was doing it right.”

Perceptions of Emotional Responses

Another overwhelming sub-theme regarding emotions emerged: Participants were much more comfortable responding emotionally to situations when their managers were female, compared to when their managers were male. When these women were around female leadership, they “felt safe being emotional.” They also commented about the difference in perceptions of males’ emotional responses in comparison to females; as one respondent described, “if they (guys) were to lash out and get angry that was okay. The minute a girl cries or has a similar reaction, it was not okay.” When reflecting on her emotions and her managers’ reaction to them, an account manager for a large media corporation with three years of experience explained:

I have my first male boss right now and he's phenomenal, but it's comical because when I get a little bit emotional, he does not want to deal with it. I feel I can't show that side as much or even things like long term career conversations. My woman bosses were much more into that developing conversation and he's more into the numbers, the here, and the now.

Professional Identity

Another sub-theme relating to emotions involves participants' struggles with their professional identity. While acclimating to their organizations, they were simultaneously acclimating to their new lives and identities as working professionals. They tried to find a balance between fitting in with colleagues and preserving their character. When reflecting on her professional character, a corporate social media lead with one year of experience, commented: I feel I've started to finally find my way in that, but it was definitely emotionally challenging to fit. I was like who am I? I don't even know anymore because you have to adapt all of these personalities to work with other people.

Theme 3: Female Managers Influenced a Positive Acclimation Experience and Career Launch

It was clear that participants with a supportive female manager had a positive organizational acclimation experience that appeared to influence a positive career launch. More specifically, a participant explained that her manager was a woman she could look up to and served as her role model. From this woman, she learned to advocate for herself and picked up on professional characteristics that created "honestly the best basis of my career I could ask for."

Participants explained that observing women in leadership roles helped them understand professional characteristics to emulate early on in their careers. When reflecting on what she learned from her female manager, one participant said, "I've learned a lot from her, even just things as simple as how to conduct yourself with clients... It's more of learning from her actions and less of her giving advice."

Another participant explained what she learned from her boss that helped her transition into her role:

She was the one that gave me the strength to realize that I deserved more, and that if I was working, and doing the stuff then I deserved the title, too. She helped me talk through negotiations. She would invite me as a fly on the wall to her negotiations, or different things that she was doing for the company, so that I could learn hands-on, first-hand from her.

In contrast, there were a few participants that recalled never having a single woman in a leadership role to look up to. These participants reported feeling as if they were part of an organizational environment that didn't nurture their professional development. This impacted their commitment to their organizations as they consistently "job-hopped." One participant reported never having someone who would champion her growth or a woman in leadership to look up to at the three organizations she worked for, before ultimately deciding to work for herself. She explained that her creativity was hampered and she was afraid to try new things. Everywhere she worked had a "bad leadership culture" and because of this, she "realized how much you [I] *don't* want to be in leadership."

RQ 2: How, if at all, do early-career women in PR utilize newcomer proactivity behaviors to effectively acclimate to their organizations?

Participants utilized all newcomer proactivity behaviors outlined by Ashford and Black (1996). These behaviors included relationship building, sensemaking, role negotiation, and positive framing.

Overall, participants believed that proactively building relationships with colleagues was critical to understanding their organization and being successful in their roles. Participants developed relationships through “scheduling one-on-ones,” walking around the office to get to know people outside of immediate working teams and departments, and through impromptu coffee chats and lunch. These informal conversations put participants in a good position to produce quality work, work efficiently, and feel more comfortable overall. It also established a sense of trust among their colleagues. As one participant described, “... just talking to everybody really gets you in the best place with people... it just makes your work day so much more enjoyable. Regarding work relationships, I just think understanding people’s point of view and trying to understand their workflow is super key.”

Theme 1: Relationship Building with Peers and Other Newcomers

Participants purposefully developed relationships with their peers and other new employees to “band together with the people that are going to stand by you.” They felt as if they were going through similar life experiences and were able to empathize with each other during challenges, which ultimately facilitated a more positive socialization experience. Even when participants reported having a workplace culture that was less than ideal, they were still able to rely on their peers to compare experiences and troubleshoot responding to difficulties.

Theme 2: Relationship Building with Leaders

Most participants reported the need to develop strong relationships with their supervisors and other leadership in order to earn influence and be in a better position for promotion. Participants felt that these relationships gave them an inside view of the workings of the organization from a business perspective (e.g., strategic planning conversations, growth opportunities, etc.). Having this knowledge allowed participants to identify opportunities to be involved with projects that would help them stand out as potential future leaders. Relationship development with leaders also resulted in trust; participants were able to take on more responsibility and make decisions in a more autonomous way. One participant described this as a two-way street:

It’s my manager’s job to be invested in me, but I always want to ask about her. I always want to be a friend to her and ask about her career, too. It’s a two-way street, just building that trust. This is something I’ve had to learn, too--not getting so heads-down in your work that you’re not interacting with new people or not putting yourself out there... just always take every opportunity to network within your organization.

Theme 3: External Relationship Building is Lacking

Perhaps the most surprising thing we learned from participants was their lack of relationship building outside of their organizations. While this study is centered on socialization experiences specific to organizational acclimation, external networking contributes to successful organizational acclimation because it allows for enhanced perspective of job roles and career fields. Only six of the 31 participants (5%) were proactively building professional relationships outside of their organizations. Those six participants developed new, external relationships through professional associations such as AAF, PRSA, Social Media Club, and female-specific professional groups. An African American participant said that she participated in professional networking calls over Zoom with other Black editors and PR professionals. She said that she’s

been pursuing this type of mentorship specifically from people who have been in the industry for 10-20 years so she can have key people to turn to for advice and guidance. Other participants active in external networking said it was key to their professional growth and how they learned of new career opportunities within the strategic communications field. One participant said that external networking was her way of building her professional reputation as a “go-getter.” She explained, “That’s number one. Your relationship is everything... interpersonal relationships, the relationship with your mind, the reality is, your reputation precedes you. I honestly can’t even make it more simplistic than that. Relationship building is important.”

Participants who weren’t building external relationships had a variety of reasons for not doing so. Many reported working long hours and not being able to leave work in time to go to professional development events. They felt drained from work and so the last thing they wanted to do with their spare time was attend something related to work. Some also said that being involved in professional associations wasn’t valued by their company or they weren’t encouraged to get involved. Participants that worked for larger organizations (100+ employees) said that their organization offered enough professional development opportunities internally that they didn’t feel the need to seek out external opportunities. Finally, many participants also held the view that external networking was only valuable when they were seeking new jobs. For example, one participant said she didn’t feel the need to network because “I’m honestly happy right now where I’m at.”

Theme 4: Sensemaking Through Advocates

Participants gained information about their organizations and made sense of their specific roles and job responsibilities by identifying advocates and relying on their organizational and professional knowledge and wisdom. Participants explained that they proactively identified people in their organizations that they could rely on and trust to give them a sense of direction and clarity around their roles and tasks, which significantly contributed to positive acclimation experiences. They referred to these individuals as advocates. Advocates helped newcomers make sense of their roles and tasks and helped them learn the ins and outs of the office culture. One participant explained how she identified her advocate, another woman who had been at the organization longer and had more professional experience:

It seems [name redacted] really understands the entire business... it looks like she has a direct influence [on decisions]. Just observing her, her confidence was probably the main thing that I saw and was like, she looks like she knows what she’s doing. She pushes back internally if she feels a certain way. That was something that took me a really long time to feel comfortable to do.

It was also interesting to hear numerous stories about participants’ advocates leaving the organization. When this happened, participants felt lost and let down. For example, “I had somebody who would have been able to vocalize their support for me at a pretty high level, just gone. I’m like, ‘oh great, I don’t know who I’ll turn to now.’” In these situations, if participants couldn’t find someone else to rely on as their advocate, they would leave the organization for other job opportunities.

Theme 5: Advocating and Confidence Development as Tools for Role Negotiation and Positive Framing

Participants’ experiences showed that learning to advocate for themselves and developing confidence worked hand-in-hand for role negotiation and to positively frame challenging situations. Participants learned to advocate for themselves by building up their confidence and

finding their voices, which means that they identified opportunities to voice their opinions and suggestions in a professional, assertive manner to those in positions of authority.

In particular, participants advocated for the vision they had for their roles. They did this because they were concerned about being “pigeonholed” and “siloed” in roles that were too specific and didn’t allow room for professional growth. They also voiced concerns about the importance of doing this as young women because young women are often more apprehensive toward assertiveness than men. As one participant explained:

I just learned that I had to really advocate for myself and that I had to be very intentional and mindful of [it]...what to say yes to... that was a really good lesson for me to learn to set those boundaries in the workplace early... learning to speak up for yourself and go after the things that you really want to go after... I think a lot of people know that women struggle in that way as far as being given the note taker role pretty often.

Nearly all participants described situations in which they had to self-manage their insecurities. While only a few described this as imposter syndrome, others recognized that feeling insecure seemed to be a “normal” experience when acclimating to life as a working professional. To combat insecurities, they intentionally worked on developing confidence. In fact, “confidence” (and related words e.g., confident, confidently) were mentioned within this context by 90% (n = 28) of participants 138 times. Participants associated confidence development with speaking up, leadership opportunities, problem-solving, professional advancement, and more (see Table 2). Participants explained that one of the best ways to develop confidence was through opportunities to lead projects and initiatives. This gave participants a “confident base” and put them in a good position to anticipate future positive and meaningful work experiences where they can “really shine.” As one participant described, “especially as a young woman, it gives you the confidence coming in to say, ‘I know what I’m talking about. I know how to speak confidently about this.’”

Although participants described it as an uncomfortable experience, opportunities to present ideas in front of leadership or clients and responding to questions and feedback helped to develop confidence, leading to more positive acclimation experiences. Participants also explained that putting themselves in uncomfortable and new situations (such as leading an intern or a project for the first time) and sometimes even failing and learning from your failure, was one of the best ways to develop confidence. “I get confidence from failing and then doing it right the next time, but I definitely don’t get confidence from failure itself.”

Table 2

A synthesis of participants’ discussions about confidence as a tool for positive framing

Developing confidence	What confidence looks like
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- Speaking up for yourself
 - Learning from failures
 - Presenting ideas
 - Being comfortable in uncomfortable situations
 - Seeking out and engaging in leadership opportunities
 - Always learning
 - Anticipating professional advancement
 - Accepting leadership opportunities
 - Understanding your strengths and weaknesses/knowing who you are
 - Mastery of adaptability/flexibility
 - Initiating change
 - Negotiating
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Discussion

This research leveraged organizational socialization theory and was approached from the perspective that empowering young women to self-manage their careers and understand how to be proactive during the first five years of full-time employment could help combat the public relations leadership gap long term. Therefore, this study contributes to organizational socialization theory by calling attention to early career socialization experiences as a means for future career advancement. While past OS research examined the unique experiences of graduate newcomers (Takeuchi et al., 2021) and experienced newcomers (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2012), the early career stage has been relatively ignored, and so have ECW in public relations and similar fields, until this present study.

Results revealed that, among ECW, emotions play a more prominent role during the socialization process than previously recognized in OS research. ECWs used emotions, intentionally and unintentionally, to adapt to new and uncertain situations. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) described this as emotion-focused coping. Duhacheck (2005) expanded on past emotional coping models to develop a multidimensional model of coping. The model explains emotional and cognitive antecedents of coping behaviors and coping consequences that parallels, to an extent, what ECWs in this study experienced when adapting to their organizations and starting their professional journeys. For example, ECWs wanted to gain control over and feel confident in uncertain situations, which prompted them to rely on peers and advocates for emotional support coping and allowed them to engage in rational and positive thinking to make sense of their surroundings.

Results also revealed that confidence and self-efficacy are outcomes of proactivity behaviors that help individuals perform their jobs better and function within organizations more efficiently, which is consistent with past research (Bauer et al., 2007; Gruman et al., 2006; Jones, 1986; Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Additionally, it is alarming that the majority of participants were not actively engaging in professional networking outside of their organizations. Waymer et al. (2018) found that young professionals in public relations desired a larger network of professionals and more quality networking opportunities, but “lacked the social savvy to land

their first jobs” (p. 126) which led the authors to recommend more pre-professional socialization in public relations university programs.

Effective mentorship and role modeling were also important for effective acclimation, again consistent with past OS research (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Ostroff & Kozlowski, 1993). However, current OS processes and models don’t include mentorship as a defined component. It is also evident that for young women, female mentors are effective agents of socialization; this presents an opportunity for future theorizing on woman-centric OS processes. Public relations-specific research also emphasizes the influential role mentorship plays in professional and leadership development and career accomplishments (Erzikova & Martinelli, 2020; Neill, 2007). A white paper on mentorship best practices from The Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations (n.d.) outlines specific activities that occur during the mentorship experience. One of these activities that many participants in this study discussed that was instrumental in helping them find a confident voice and articulate their expertise is coaching. Some ECWs were coached by informal and formal mentors on how to request to lead certain projects or renegotiate the tasks associated with their roles. This coaching helped ECWs earn influence from those in positions of authority who had the power to promote and advance them. Additionally, findings from a study of millennial employees at public relations agencies found that the coaching component of their relationships with supervisors and managers can help them feel empowered, and, as one respondent stated, “allow me more room to use my talents effectively” (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012, p. 235). However, the study also found that this type of coaching from management is often lacking in these types of relationships. Perhaps future research could fine-tune our understanding of concepts related to mentorship, socialization, and career advancement, as well as highlight the support managers and leaders might need to develop effective coaching techniques.

This research contributes to the practice of public relations by offering a framework for how young women in the field can proactively self-manage their career trajectories through intentional relationship building and confidence development. It also highlights early-career experiences such as dealing with insecurities and personal, emotional responses to situations that could be normalized through professional development. Professional associations such as Public Relations Society of America, through its New Pros group, could offer professional development opportunities for young women that offer specific strategies for proactive career self-management, applying this study’s findings. However, given that the majority of this study’s participants were not taking advantage of opportunities through professional associations, those who manage ECW should encourage this and work toward developing a culture that supports professional development.

Moreover, by illuminating the lack of focus on external networking by ECW, this study offers an opportunity for employers to support membership in these professional associations as a means to promote early-career professional development and retain their next generation of employees. By taking ownership of their ongoing education and development through these

organizations, ECW will be more self-aware of their strengths, which in turn helps them be more adaptable in navigating workplace challenges (LaGree et al., 2020). Study participants who engaged in external networking with professional organizations described a clearer understanding of their job roles and the career field. Additionally, by cultivating professional relationships outside of their current organization, ECW develop a sense of community within the public relations industry. This can enhance employees' confidence and motivation, which in turn has a positive impact on productivity (Gallicano et al., 2012). Conversely, ECW who were not involved with professional associations described a lack of support from their employer, feeling undervalued, and being generally stressed. Therefore, public relations employers should invest both time and financial (dues) support so that their early-career employees feel valued, and thus more likely to be engaged and retained by the organization. This specific type of support promotes a positive culture, which is particularly critical for women during their first five years in the public relations industry.

Directions for Future Research and Limitations

Although this study offers an in-depth look into the proactivity behaviors of ECW, it also reveals areas for further exploration. First, future research should specifically address why young women--and perhaps men--are reluctant to engage in professional relationship building outside of their organizations; as one participant explained, actively developing one's professional reputation is essential during the early career stage. Fang, Duffy, and Shaw's (2011) social capital model of organizational socialization could be applied to explore how early-career professionals can develop and leverage professional relationships to advance in their careers. Future research could also take a closer look at the role of emotions during the socialization experiences of early-career public relations professionals through the lens of emotional intelligence. For example, LaGree, Olsen, and Tefertiller (2020), in a study of journalism and mass communication students, found a positive relationship between emotional intelligence and the ability to engage in career self-management. Additionally, it is evident that advocates, mentors and role models can be effective socialization agents for those early in their careers. While past research offers relevant insights about mentorship in public relations (Erzikova & Martinelli, 2020; Neill, 2007) a longitudinal study that examines the long-term impact of mentorship on leadership advancement would clarify its role in addressing the public relations leadership gender gap.

As with all research, this study has several limitations. First, the small sample size does not allow for generalizability. The sample is also largely Caucasian; a more diverse sample would reveal how ethnicity affects women's socialization experiences. Interviews were conducted remotely; in-person interviews would have allowed researchers to better attend to facial expressions and non-verbal cues. Finally, organizational socialization is a very broad theoretical perspective and this study only applied the newcomer proactivity component. Future research should explore how organizational socialization tactics, such as onboarding procedures

and formalized training, might facilitate successful socialization experiences for young women in public relations.

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