



Organizational socialization of women in the Italian Army

Learning processes and proactive tactics

Women in the Italian Army

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine the organizational socialization of women soldiers in the Italian Army.

Design/methodology/approach – Following an interactionist interpretation of socialization, a model was tested to determine the influence of organizational socialization tactics, proactive behaviours, supervisor support on organizational identification, and cohesion of teamwork. This study used a comparative research design. The sample consisted of 324 soldiers, 43 per cent of whom are men and 57 per cent are women.

Findings – Structural equation models showed the influences exerted by general socialization and by the acquisition of organizational values/goals on the outcomes of socialization. Multisample analysis showed gender differences. Compared to men, women seemed to set greater value on tutoring by expert colleagues. Women also seemed to value the support provided by their superiors for learning the organizational values and goals on which the degree of identification with the military structure depends.

Practical implications – These findings could add new information concerning the organizational socialization strategies (e.g. newcomers' training, tutoring/shadowing programmes) giving some guidelines for the insertion of woman newcomers in a non-traditional organization.

Originality/value – In a systemic perspective the present study explored the process of organizational socialization using the content of organizational learning. The research highlighted the gender difference regarding the socialization process in a male-dominated organization.

Keywords Women, Italy, Armed forces, Socialization, Learning organizations

Paper type Research paper



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Theoretical framework

Organizational socialization has been defined as a process by which an individual acquires the attitudes, behaviour and knowledge indispensable for him/her to participate in organizational life and feel him/herself an effective member of the organization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). The socialization process involves both individuals entering a new work setting and organizations themselves, in that the actions undertaken by the organization to facilitate the integration of new members and those performed directly by the newcomers are interdependent (Reichers, 1987), and they interact to determine the effectiveness of the process. The socialization of a newcomer should be considered a multi-determined and two-directional process, because it is influenced by numerous organizational and personal factors affecting the dynamic interaction between the person and the social setting of work of which she/he is part, producing changes in his/her response strategies (Bauer *et al.*, 1998).

From a theoretical point of view, although debate on organizational socialization has been ongoing for around 20 years, relatively few studies have addressed the topic from an interactionist perspective which jointly considers both the influence exerted by the organization on the newcomer and the latter's active role in determining the outcomes of the socialization process (Griffin *et al.*, 2000; Bauer and Taylor, 2001; Kim *et al.*, 2005). Since the 1990s, however, researchers on organizational socialization have grown increasingly interested in the behaviour adopted by newcomers to accelerate their integration (Ashford and Taylor, 1990; Bauer *et al.*, 1998; Wanberg and Krammeyer-Mueller, 2000; Bauer *et al.*, 2007; Saks *et al.*, 2007), highlighting the active role performed by the latter and the dynamic nature of the socialization process.

In an attempt to systematize the results yielded by research on organizational socialization, Saks and Ashforth (1997) have proposed a multilevel model resulting from the combination of the theories and dimensions examined in the literature. The focus of their model is on learning by newcomers, given that organizational socialization can be defined in the first place as a process of content acquisition (Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992; Bauer and Green, 1994; Chao *et al.*, 1994; Holton, 1996).

Among the antecedents of the learning process, Saks and Ashforth (1997) identify a number of interrelated "socialization factors":

- organizational factors, for instance socialization tactics and training, tutoring/shadowing programmes;
- individual factors, for instance, proactive strategies and behaviours, including an active search for information and the construction of social networks; and
- group factors, features such as support among colleagues.

Saks and Ashforth's (1997) model hypothesises that socialization factors directly influence the information acquisition process, which by reducing uncertainty enables the learning of the content typical of organizational socialization (power hierarchies, the organization's values and goals, knowledge of tasks). In its turn, the learning process produces a series of outcomes that Saks and Ashforth (1997) call "proximal" and which include, for example: clarity of role and task mastery, social integration, and social identification. However, they also hypothesise that the learning process may give rise to indirect or "distal" results, which concern the organization and the group (for example, greater cohesion among members) as well as the individual (sense of commitment to the organization and the job, and a lower incidence of stress).

The literature on organizational socialization comprises a further strand of research which examines what newcomers learn during their socialization (Feldman, 1981; Fisher, 1986; Chao *et al.*, 1994; Anakwe and Greenhouse, 1999; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2002). Although this aspect is of primary importance for the newcomer's integration and learning process, few empirical studies have set out to define and assess its features. Among them, Chao *et al.* (1994) identify the main content areas that describe the newcomer's social learning process:

- organizational politics;
- performance proficiency;
- organizational goals and values;
- technical-professional language used in the organization;
- organizational history and culture; and
- relationships with organizational members.

Finally to be pointed out is that large part of the studies on organizational socialization, with few exceptions (Chen and Klimoski, 2003), concentrate on groups of subjects of usually fully recognized within the organization. Neglected instead are the distinctive aspects of the socialization of figures non-traditional or atypical for the organization.

The research objectives

Considering that the organizational socialization has been conceptualized as a developmental process that involves different stages (Feldman, 1976) this study takes into consideration the final phase of the organizational socialization process and the related outcomes. It has two main knowledge objectives.

On the one hand, it examines the process of organizational socialization using as its core component the contents of organizational learning. It analyses the predictive role of some individual (proactivity) and organizational (socialization tactics and social support) factors in the process of social and organizational learning. In this regard, the objective is to integrate knowledge already acquired in this area (Chao *et al.*, 1994; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2005) into the general model set out below.

On the other hand, the study examines the process of socialization in subjects constituting a non-traditional and atypical component of the organization (women in the Italian army). In order to determine the distinctive features of this process of socialization, comparison is made with a corresponding group of male soldiers. Consequently, the second objective of the study is to verify hypotheses concerning the different patterns of socialization exhibited by an organization's atypical and non-traditional subjects. These general objectives are now specified in more detail.

1. Integration in a traditionally male organization

Some studies have analysed the process by which newcomers are integrated into military structures (Van Maanen, 1975; Fisher, 1985; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 1998, 2005), especially because large-sized organizations of this kind comprise numerous newcomers. In the case of this study, however, a military organization was selected mainly because of the profound organizational change undergone by the Italian Armed Forces in recent years following recruitment of female personnel into the various military corps (army, navy, air force). This development has been matched by

more general organizational change due the introduction of entirely professional military personnel (abolition of compulsory military service).

This situation enabled us to study of the socialization process in a highly hierarchical and bureaucratic organization that has had to revise some of its traditional patterns of behaviour and cultural models. Moreover, because the Italian army is a traditionally male organization, where the female presence may be considered “atypical” and “unusual”, it is important to identify possible differences between the integration of women and men in the armed services.

However, relatively few studies have analysed the process by which women are integrated into “non-usual” work settings (Card and Farrell, 1983; Holder, 1996) or into predominantly male ones (Moore and Hebrew, 1999; Dierdorff, 2006). Comparison between men and women in “non-traditional” jobs (especially blue-collar) has focused mainly on aspects related to career transition (Deaux and Ullman, 1982; Terburg *et al.*, 1982; Latack *et al.*, 1987). Holder (1996) shows that women find it difficult to gain acceptance in traditionally male work groups, regardless of their performance, mentality or level of preparation.

These meagre research results cannot be used to formulate specific hypothesis on the gender differences expected. Consequently, by means of multi-sample confirmatory analysis an attempt will be made to identify and describe certain characteristics differentiating between the socialization processes of females (atypical organizational component) and males (traditional organizational component).

2. A systemic approach to study of the socialization process

To date, only a handful of studies (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2005) have analysed socialization from a systemic perspective. Attention has usually focused on either the inputs (socialization tactics, support figures) and outcomes (e.g. social integration, commitment) of the process, or on the specific learning content which influences the behavioural patterns of newcomers. The aim of this study is to use a dynamic model to show the interrelations among the factors facilitating the integration of newcomers (presence of socialization agents, organizational socialization tactics versus proactive behaviours of single individuals), specific learning contents concerning the various aspects of organizational life, and the outcomes of the socialization process.

Specifically, drawing on Saks and Ashforth’s (1997) model, this study seeks to identify the weights of organizational socialization tactics (tutoring/mentoring, granting time before important tasks are assigned to newcomers, on-the-job shadowing) and newcomer proactive behaviour (general socializing, sensemaking) in determining the learning of content (organizational politics, organizational goal and values).

It also seeks to establish how the acquisition of specific contents may influence the outcomes of socialization in terms of cohesion and trust within the work group, and organizational identification (see Figure 1).

3. Attention to learning organizational content

Pratt (1998) states that the internalization of the organization’s values, culture and goals is necessary for the development of high levels of organizational identification. By focusing on possible “socialization agents” (Miller and Jablin, 1991) – that is, those actors whose presence and intermediation facilitate newcomer integration – our model analysed the strategic importance of superiors in positively influencing the outcome of

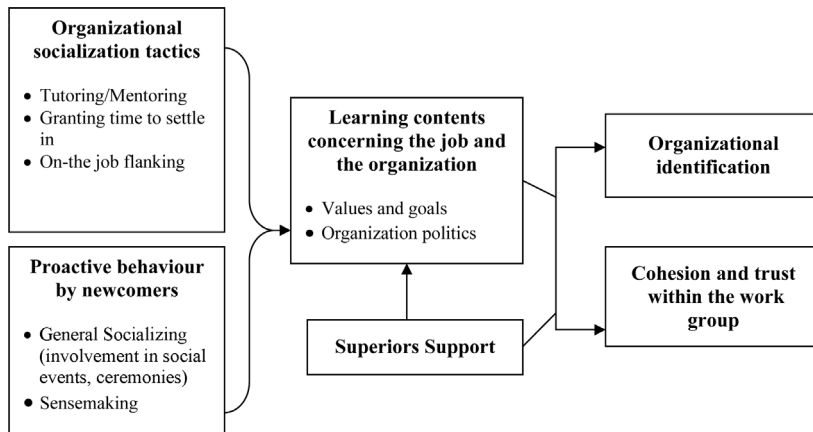


Figure 1.
Model of the variables studied

the socialization process (a factor instead not considered by Saks and Ashforth's (1997) model). The influence of socialization agents, and in particular of supervisors (who usually explain the organization's practices to newcomers, the tasks of the role that they are about to occupy, and introduce them to organizational life, extending their relational networks in the workplace, as well as acting as role models (Fisher, 1985; Miller and Jablin, 1991)) suggests that the organization's management can perform an important role in promoting commitment to the organization's goals and values system.

4. Psychometric analysis of Chao et al.'s (1994) scale

A further aim of this study is to test the validity of the scale devised by Chao *et al.* (1994). Selected in particular were the dimensions relative to: language, organizational goal and values, politics and performance proficiency. In previous studies (Bauer *et al.*, 1998; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2005), this scale has raised difficulties for two main reasons:

- (1) from the statistical point of view, because of the overlap among the dimensions; and
- (2) from the conceptual point of view, because of the applicability/adaptability of some of its sub-dimensions (for instance, knowledge of the organization's language or history), which are considered not completely generalizable, and not always relevant to description of the wide diversity of organizational situations.

Nevertheless, the scale was used in this study because of the relevance of certain dimensions (e.g., goal and values, politics, language) to the military context. Consider, for instance, how the use of military jargon facilitates the organizational integration of new recruits, or how the sharing of the same values system performs an important role.

Method

Sample, research setting and data collection

The research was commissioned by the Italian Strategic Military Studies Centre (CeMiSS) in order to analyse the socialization process in the Italian Army during a

period of intraorganizational change. The military installations where the survey was conducted were selected according to the number of women present who had already gained work experience “in the field”, and who had therefore completed their training some time previously. Within these military bases all the women soldiers recently enlisted (during the past two years) were interviewed. And at the same military bases, interviews were conducted with a sample of male subjects with the same characteristics (with hierarchical levels comparable to those of the women).

The analysis was conducted on two groups of subjects: the first consisted of 195 women soldiers; the second of 129 male soldiers. In total, the sample comprised 324 subjects.

The average age of the women was 24.2 (SD = 3.4), while that of the men was 25.7 (SD = 4.6). In regard to organizational tenure (length of service with the organization), the women had belonged to the organization for around two years on average, and the men for around four-and-a-half years. These differences were mainly due to the fact that the enlistment of women into the Armed Forces has been permitted in Italy only recently.

In regard to other characteristics, members of both samples had worked before joining the Armed Forces (specifically 81 per cent of the women and 78 per cent of the men). Education level was slightly higher among the women than among the men. In fact, 17 per cent of the women, against around 26 per cent of the men, declared that they possessed only a elementary/lower-secondary school certificate (69 per cent of the women and 62 per cent of the men had the high-school certificate; 14 per cent of the women and 12 per cent of the men had a degree diploma).

Measures

Tactics of organizational socialization. Preliminary analysis of the specific context identified the following highly institutionalized tactics activated by the Military Corps when new recruits were allocated to their units:

- on-the-job shadowing by a veteran;
- granting of time for newcomers to settle in before being assigned responsible tasks; and
- placement of the newcomer under the supervision of a more expert soldier, who gave instruction and help, and introduced the newcomer to the other members.

Given the distinctive nature of the organizational structure, three items were constructed in order to identify the Army’s socialization tactics based on the transfer of detailed information or shadowing by a veteran (e.g. “The new recruit is placed under the supervision of a more expert soldier tasked with instructing, assisting, introducing him/her to the other members”) (Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Proactive behaviours. The proactive behaviours analysed related to two factors (among those identified by Ashford and Black, 1996): sensemaking (information and feedback seeking) and general socializing (the propensity to take part in formal and informal social events involving the organization: ceremonies, dinners, etc.). The proactive behaviours were investigated by means of an inventory consisting of nine items taken from Ashford and Black (1996) (Likert scale from 1 = never to 5 = always):

- feedback seeking ($\alpha = 0.70$) (e.g. “Soliciting criticism and constructive appraisal from my supervisor”);
- information seeking ($\alpha = 0.68$) (e.g. “Trying to learn the important politics and procedures in the military organization”); and
- general socializing ($\alpha = 0.76$) (e.g. “Taking part in social events to meet people – ceremonies, parades”).

Learning content. The following were chosen from the six factors identified by Chao *et al.* (1994): organizational values and goals; performance proficiency; and organizational politics. These factors were selected in light of the results of interviews conducted prior to the research which emphasised the importance of these factors rather than others like, for instance, knowledge of the history of the military corps, which has never been cited as a topic connected with the socialization process. Language was added to these factors because of its influence (given the frequent use of acronyms and abbreviations) in determining the quality of communication flows within the organization. The inventory consisted of 13 items based on Chao *et al.*'s (1994) questionnaire, and it measured the military personnel's knowledge in regard to the following contents: the organization's goals and values ($\alpha = 0.73$) (e.g. “I understand the goals of my organization”), organizational politics ($\alpha = 0.70$) (e.g. “I have a good understanding of the motives behind the actions of other people in my army unit”); performance proficiency ($\alpha = 0.77$) (e.g. “I have learned how to successfully perform my job in an efficient manner”); organizational language ($\alpha = 0.72$) (e.g. “I understand the specific meanings of words and jargon used in my army unit”) (Likert scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree).

Perception of support ($\alpha = 0.81$)

We adapted only three items from the perceived organizational support (POS) (Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) by replacing the word organization with the term supervisor, consisting of three statements (range from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) designed to measure the support received from superiors (e.g. “Help is available from my supervisor when I have a problem”).

Socialization outcomes. The following indicators were examined as possible outcomes of positive socialization: the level of organizational identification; and the climate of cohesion and trust within the work group:

- *Organizational identification* ($\alpha = 0.78$). Five items from Mael and Ashforth's (1992) scale were used to measure identification with the organization (e.g. “When I talk about my organization I usually say “we” rather than “they””) (Likert scale from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree).
- *Cohesion and trust in the operational team* ($\alpha = 0.91$) We constructed eight items to measure reciprocal support, mutual confidence, and the climate in the work group (e.g. “During the most risky missions I can always rely on the people whom I am working with”) (Likert scale from 1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree).

Statistical methods

The aim of our analysis was twofold. First, we were interested in testing the validity of the reduced version of Chao's scale. A subset of items from the original version of the

scale was selected and subjected to a confirmatory factor analysis. The items were selected according to the results of previous studies (Chao *et al.*, 1994). Second, we were interested in evaluating whether the empirical data were consistent with the systemic model of socialization. In particular, we wanted to test, using a multigroup analysis, whether there was a difference between the male group and the female group in the systemic model. Both the analyses were conducted on pairwise correlation matrices of the variables represented by the models. All the analyses were performed using LISREL software (Jöreskog and Sörbom, 1993). Following the recommendations of Hu and Bentler (1999), we evaluated model fit using the non-normed fit index (NNFI), root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI) along with the standard chi-square statistic[1].

Results

Validity of the reduced version of the Chao's scale

To test the validity of the reduced version of the scale, we performed a confirmatory factor analysis on a subset of items. All the selected items were associated with the dimensions of the scale (goal and values, language, politics, performance and proficiency). The chi-square test for the model was significant ($\chi^2(59, n = 310) = 152.82, p < 0.01$), and the fit indices indicated a good fit (NNFI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96) but a poor RMSEA = 0.11. The result confirmed the partial validity of the reduced version of the scale (see Figure 2).

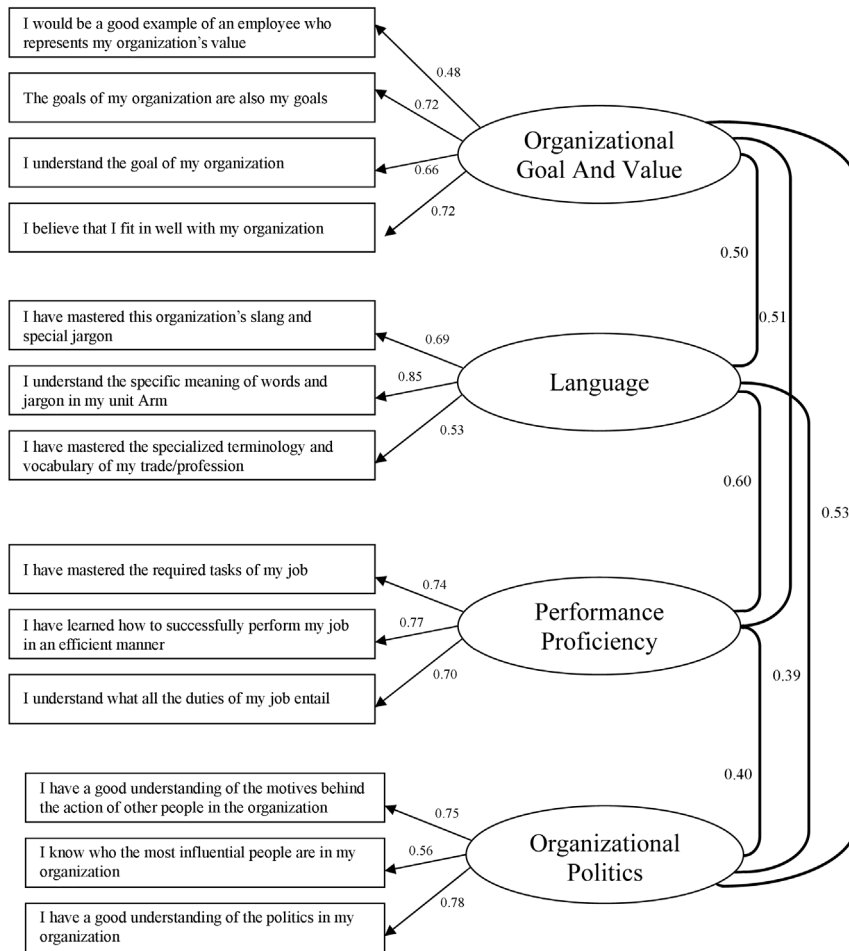
Testing gender effect for the systemic model of socialization

The correlation matrix for the total sample is given in Table I. The analysis shows that, with regard to the socialization tactics employed by the organization, the job-shadowing of newcomers by a veteran seems to be moderately correlated with learning content involving the sharing of the values/goals of organizational politics. On the other hand, the data also testify that feedback-seeking by newcomers is not strongly correlated with learning of the values and rules of power structures. These findings may be partly explained by the distinctive nature of the organization. It is likely, in fact, that the strongly hierarchical nature of the armed forces and their strictly regulated relationships with superiors dissuade newcomers from seeking feedback. For this reason the structure of the model did not comprise these two variables.

To test the complete structure of the relationships, including estimation of the unique variance explained by each hypothetical link, we evaluated the correlation matrix using structural equation modelling for observed variables (path analysis).

The first step was a base model (Figure 3) reported on the total sample. The chi-square test for this model was significant ($\chi^2(30, n = 324) = 0.78, p < 0.01$), and the fit indices indicated a moderately good fit (NNFI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.071, CFI = 0.96).

We also tested a revised model eliminating all non-significant paths in the model. In particular, we removed the non-significant path between information seeking and goals and values and the path between information seeking and politics. The final result was a more parsimonious model (Figure 4) which yielded an increase in model fit and which was as follows: on one hand, cohesion and trust was expected to be directly affected by superiors support, goals and values and politics. On the other hand, organizational identification was expected to be directly affected by goals and values



Note: $p < 0.01$

Figure 2. Confirmatory factor analysis for item assessing the learning content in the socialization

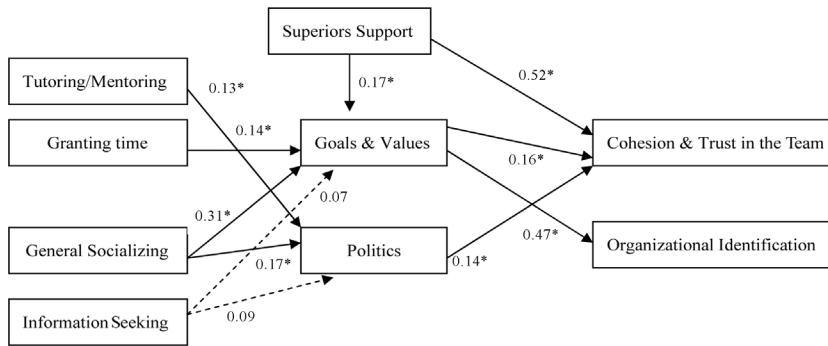
only. Moreover, cohesion and trust was indirectly affected by supervisor support, tutoring, concession time, and general socializing, and the dimension organizational identification was indirectly affected by supervisors support, concession time, and general socializing. Although the chi-square test for the revised model was significant ($\chi^2(23, n = 324) = 56.07, p < 0.01$), the model demonstrated a good fit with the data (NNFI = 0.961, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.968), meeting Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommended cut-off for RMSEA, NNFI and CFI.

Although the time taken to integrate into the organization differs greatly between the two samples, the difference found in the socialization process does not seem to depend on this factor. Preliminary analysis showed that "organizational tenure" did not influence the structure of the model. In particular, it had no influence on either proactive behaviours (CR = 0.08)[2] or on the two learning contents: values/goals

Table I.
Means, deviation
standards, and
correlations (total sample)

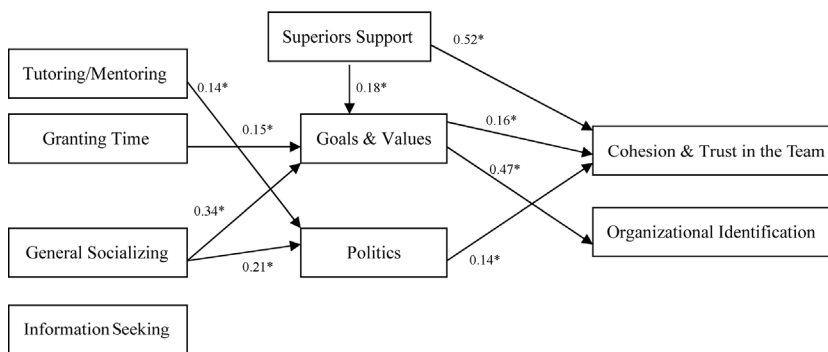
| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 |
|-----------------------------------|-------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Age | 24.86 | 1.06 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Gender | | | -18** | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3. Tutoring/mentoring | 3.22 | 1.16 | 0.11** | 0.01 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4. Granting time | 3.09 | 1.16 | 0.19** | -0.07 | 0.46** | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5. On-the job shadowing | 3.08 | 1.14 | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.36** | 0.38** | | | | | | | | | |
| 6. Information seeking | 3.34 | 0.85 | 0.23** | -0.01 | 0.22** | 0.23** | 0.16** | (0.67) | | | | | | | |
| 7. Feedback seeking | 2.91 | 0.86 | 0.21** | -0.02 | 0.08 | 0.03 | 0.07 | 0.23** | (0.67) | | | | | | |
| 8. General socializing | 2.89 | 1.02 | 0.26** | 0.062 | 0.24** | 0.18** | 0.20** | 0.48** | 0.18** | (0.74) | | | | | |
| 9. Superiors support | 3.10 | 0.83 | 0.18** | -0.025 | 0.47** | 0.50** | 0.43** | 0.25** | 0.07 | 0.31** | (0.77) | | | | |
| 10. Goals and values | 3.52 | 0.89 | 0.20** | 0.02 | 0.23** | 0.29** | 0.13* | 0.29** | 0.13* | 0.42** | 0.35** | (0.73) | | | |
| 11. Organizational politics | 3.52 | 0.89 | 0.04 | -0.10* | 0.19** | 0.15** | 0.13* | 0.20** | 0.13* | 0.24** | 0.20** | 0.38** | (0.72) | | |
| 12. Organizational identification | 3.47 | 0.87 | 0.30** | 0.05 | 0.19** | 0.22** | 0.13* | 0.39** | 0.23** | 0.31** | 0.20** | 0.47** | 0.13* | (0.78) | |
| 13. Cohesion and trust in team | 3.29 | 0.89 | 0.13* | -0.13* | 0.39** | 0.40** | 0.36** | 0.23** | 0.08 | 0.32** | 0.59** | 0.39** | 0.30** | 0.25** | (0.91) |

Notes: $n = 324$, values in parentheses represent the reliability (Cronbach's alpha); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$



Note: * $p < 0.05$

Figure 3. Base model



Note: * $p < 0.05$

Figure 4. Parsimonious general model

(CR = 1.11) and politics (CR = 1.33). This evidence is borne out by the findings of other studies. Although attitudes and opinions regarding the new organizational context are formed relatively early, during the first months after entry, they are stable in time (Bauer and Green, 1994; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 1998; Klein and Weaver, 2000).

Multigroup analysis

To test the hypothesis that the relations between the variables in the model differed between the male and the female groups, we used SEM multigroup analysis. The correlation matrices, means, and standard deviations for all the measures are presented in Tables II and III, separately for each group. Examination of these bivariate correlations shows that in both groups there is a quite close positive correlation between general socializing and acquisition of the organization's goals and values, which in turn correlates strongly with cohesion and trust within the work group, and identification with the organization. By contrast, the correlational analysis suggests that the difference between men and women in the relation between the tutoring provided by the military organization and the degree of identification with it, the

Table II.
Means, standard
deviations, and
correlations (female
sample)

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Tutoring/mentoring | 3.20 | 1.22 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Granting time | 3.19 | 1.19 | 0.43** | | | | | | | | |
| 3. General socializing | 2.82 | 1.03 | 0.24** | 0.23** | | | | | | | |
| 4. Information seeking | 3.36 | 0.87 | 0.15 | 0.24** | 0.42** | (0.68) | | | | | |
| 5. Superiors support | 3.13 | 0.82 | 0.53** | 0.50** | 0.28** | 0.23** | (0.81) | | | | |
| 6. Goals and values | 3.49 | 0.94 | 0.13 | 0.32** | 0.39** | 0.28** | 0.29** | (0.73) | | | |
| 7. Organizational politics | 3.63 | 0.87 | 0.10 | 0.15 | 0.27** | 0.17* | 0.18* | 0.28** | (0.70) | | |
| 8. Cohesion and trust in the operational team | 3.42 | 0.87 | 0.37** | 0.43** | 0.32** | 0.26** | 0.59** | 0.42** | 0.27** | (0.91) | |
| 9. Organizational identification | 3.40 | 0.89 | 0.05 | 0.19* | 0.20* | 0.38** | 0.15 | 0.43** | 0.09 | 0.32** | (0.78) |

Notes: $n = 180$; values in parentheses represent the reliability (Cronbach's alpha); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

| | M | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---|------|------|--------|--------|--------|--------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| 1. Tutoring/mentoring | 3.23 | 1.11 | | | | | | | | | |
| 2. Granting time | 3.02 | 1.14 | 0.49** | | | | | | | | |
| 3. General socializing | 2.95 | 1.01 | 0.23** | 0.14* | | | | | | | |
| 4. Information seeking | 3.33 | 0.84 | 0.29** | 0.22** | (0.73) | | | | | | |
| 5. Superiors support | 3.09 | 0.84 | 0.41** | 0.50** | 0.34** | 0.26** | | | | | |
| 6. Goals and values | 3.54 | 0.86 | 0.32** | 0.28** | 0.43** | 0.29** | 0.40** | (0.71) | | | |
| 7. Organizational politics | 3.44 | 0.82 | 0.27** | 0.15* | 0.23** | 0.23** | 0.223** | 0.47** | (0.74) | | |
| 8. Cohesion and trust in the operational team | 3.18 | 0.90 | 0.41** | 0.37** | 0.34** | 0.21** | 0.59** | 0.37** | 0.30** | (0.90) | |
| 9. Organizational identification | 3.50 | 0.86 | 0.30** | 0.24** | 0.39** | 0.40** | 0.24** | 0.50** | 0.17* | 0.22** | (0.78) |

Notes: $n = 144$; values in parentheses represent the reliability (Cronbach's alpha); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Table III.
Means, standard deviations, and correlations (male sample)

sharing of goals/values, and knowledge of organizational politics. In fact, whereas in the male group these dimensions do not correlate with each other, they do so positively in the female group.

A multigroup analysis testing for gender differences demonstrated that significant differences did exist ($\chi^2(46, n = 324) = 110.13, p < 0.001$). The structural coefficients for each of the two gender groups are presented in Figures 5 and 6. The first important finding of these analyses is that the relation between goals and values and cohesion and trust in the team is positive and significant in the male group, but diminishes in magnitude and significance in the female group. The second important finding is that the relation between tutoring/mentoring and politics is not statistically significant in the male group, but is significant and positive in the female one. Finally, the relation between politics and cohesion and trust is again not statistically significant in the male group, but becomes significant and positive in the female group, although the magnitude of the relation remains relatively weak (0.15). No other statistically significant differences emerged in the pattern of relationships in the two groups.

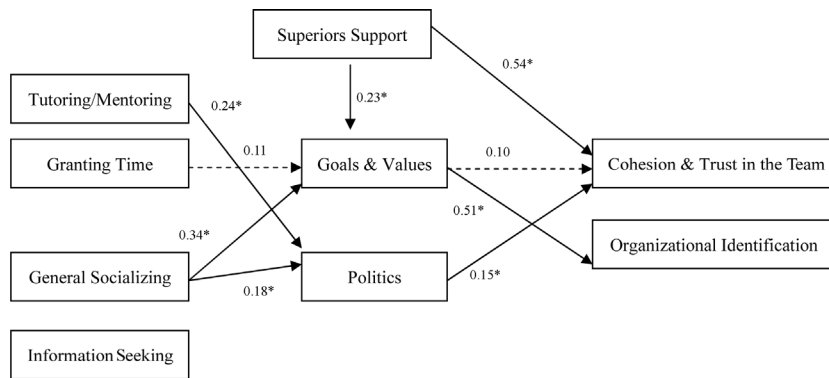


Figure 5.
Multigroup analysis: the socialization process model in the male sample

Note: * $p < 0.05$

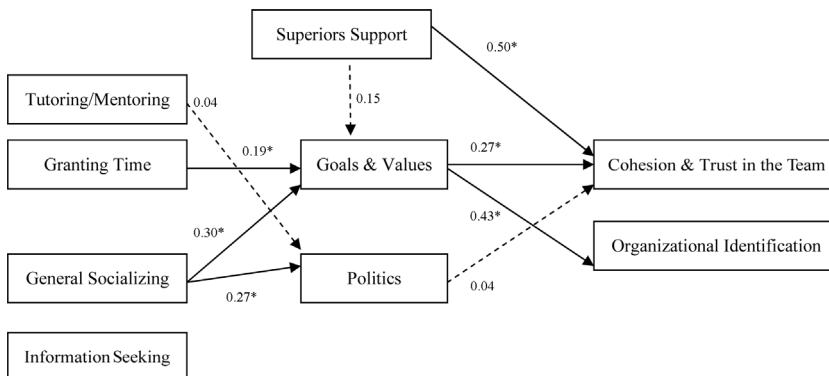


Figure 6.
Multigroup analysis: the socialization process model in the female sample

Note: * $p < 0.05$

Discussion

1. *The content of socialization*

Numerous studies have emphasised the central importance of analysing the content of learning in order to identify the factors that may engender a positive and enduring socialization process (Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992; Chao *et al.*, 1994; Anakwe and Greenhouse, 1999; Klein and Weaver, 2000; Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2002; Hart and Miller, 2005). Chao *et al.* (1994) point out that, among the six content areas that they specify, some (e.g. language, the values system, and organizational politics) are better able than others to foster the integration of newcomers. Criticisms have been made of the instrument devised by Chao *et al.* (1994) on the grounds that it measures only the extent to which newcomers receive particular information, but is not concerned with the specific contents transmitted and their usability (Hart and Miller, 2005). Nevertheless, we decided to use the instrument to verify its reliability further in light of criticisms concerning the overlap among the dimensions investigated (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2005). The results demonstrated a coherent factor structure of the scale and a satisfactory level of reliability.

2. *The structural equations model*

Analysis revealed relations among variables that seemingly confirm some of the results obtained in previous studies by Chatman (1991), Morrison (2002), and Kozlowski and Bell (2003). These authors have shown, in fact, that proactive behaviours intended to construct social relations (e.g. attending ceremonies) facilitate learning and the internalization of the organization's values, and knowledge of its politics. Likewise, the model tested on the overall sample showed that learning processes in the Italian armed forces are fostered mainly by newcomers' active participation in social events, rather than by the structured socialization tactics activated by the organization.

Moreover, the results seem to bear out the hypothesis that the socialization contexts favouring the effective integration of newcomers are not only those directly regulated by the organization's management (job training programmes, etc.), but they are also "non-structured" and more informal ones: for instance, meetings outside work and ceremonies (Chao, 1997). It is likely that these social encounters aid understanding of the dynamics and explicit and implicit norms that regulate social life and distinguish the organization, helping define its identity.

However, contrary to what we hypothesised, an active search for information besides that "officially" furnished by the organization did not affect the acquisition of learning contents. This result can be explained in terms of the organizational context. As suggested by Holder (1996), in a context characterized by a high levels of uncertainty, and where a request for information may incur very high "social costs", behaviour intended to obtain "extra" information is regarded as pointless. Instead, indirect tactics regarded as less risky were preferred.

For this reason, an explanation of the above findings may reside in the close degree of control exercised by the army over its soldiers – control which extends beyond work to include free time (the conduct of soldiers is constantly supervised). The acquisition and exchange of information may therefore be behaviour which is not openly declared in order not to disrupt the status quo and to maintain the appearance that the organization regulates the flow and quality of the information that members are allowed to acquire.

With regard to learning content, the results highlight the crucial importance of the internalization and sharing of the organization's goals and values for effective socialization (Bauer *et al.*, 1998). If one considers the sample as a whole, this aspect is important for the creation of a positive work climate within the work team, and for the development of a sense of involvement in the military corps.

3. *Multisample gender comparison*

Multigroup analysis revealed a number of differences among the factors positively influencing the socialization process for men versus women. First, although superiors were important for both sexes in forming a cohesive work climate, only for the women did support from superiors also affect their learning of the army's values and goals. This is important because research has found that a propensity by superiors to furnish information to newcomers correlates with greater knowledge about the organization by the latter (Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992). The role of superiors as "agents of socialization" (Miller and Jablin, 1991) is particularly significant in the female sample because, especially in the initial period, superiors may be vigilant in preventing discrimination by male colleagues, and may have been much more willing to assist the female recruits than the male ones.

The second difference between the genders concerns the two socialization tactics most frequently used by the armed forces: granting time for recruits to settle in, and tutoring by more expert colleagues. It would seem, in fact, that support by superiors for learning the power relations and the hierarchical structure regulating military life (organizational politics) were important only for the women. This finding may be explained by the difficulty encountered by women in integrating – especially during the first few months – into an unfamiliar work setting, where besides learning the work they had to find the most suitable channels of access to veterans, so that they could understand the work ethos and avoid discrimination (Kirchmeyer, 1995). The fact that the organization had institutional means to favour such contacts probably helped the women to integrate and enhanced their self-efficacy (Bauer and Green, 1994). By contrast, the male recruits apparently did not encounter this difficulty of integration. Hence a close relationship with veterans was probably not significantly beneficial for their socialization, given that they could presumably rely on other means: for example relationships with other male recruits, or simply, as suggested by the model, a margin of time sufficient to acquire the competence and information required to perform the tasks assigned to them in the future.

A further difference to be stressed concerns the differing weights assumed by learning and sharing the organization's values/goals in determining cohesion and trust within work teams. Whilst for the men, knowledge of these goals and values helped create a harmonious work climate, for the women that climate was fostered mostly by the more or less direct intervention of superiors, and to a lesser extent by knowledge of the organization's rules and hierarchical structures. It is almost as if, in order to create a peaceful work climate, the women relied on the formal support provided by superiors, and on more formal aspects, such as respect for the rules and hierarchies legitimating their presence; whereas the men considered elements intrinsic to the values and identity system as more important. This finding that women require the support of supervisors can be interpreted in light of Holder (1996), who shows that women find it difficult to gain acceptance in traditionally male work groups, regardless of their performance, mentality or level of preparation.

4. *Future research*

In this study, the proactive behaviours of the newcomers (specifically, the propensity to take part in social events/ceremonies) importantly conditioned learning of the content that regulates military life (acquisition of the organization's values/goals, and knowledge of organizational norms). In this regard, it would be useful to identify more precisely the factors most influential on the emergence of such behaviours, and to test, for example, whether the use of further organizational socialization tactics (at the moment not often adopted by the armed forces) can facilitate it.

Also to be noted is that the socialization tactics employed by the organization were not sufficient to explain and to predict the newcomers' learning process. It would accordingly be interesting to extend the analysis to include further social dimensions – for example the support provided by colleagues (Saks and Ashforth, 1997) – to determine their weight and heuristic relevance. As proposed by Wesson and Gogus (2005), this would increase knowledge about socialization processes, and improve understanding of learning processes. With regard to the role as “agents of socialization” performed by superiors, our research has demonstrated their importance in achieving effective integration into work groups. This finding should prompt the military institutions to take action for the qualitative improvement of social contacts between superiors and troops (especially of males), given that the descriptive analysis showed that male newcomers perceived support by their superiors as only adequate.

Finally, this study suggests that gender is important to consider for understanding the socialization process in a male-dominated organization. It would therefore be interesting to verify the results obtained here in other organizational settings characterized by gender disparities (in the distribution of power; in the gender composition) in jobs such as the military, the police, firefighting, etc.

Potential limitations

One of the shortcomings of the research was the period of time spent by the sample in the organization. The study was carried out on a group of soldiers who had worked for the Army for three years on average. This long time-span meant that a certain percentage of the sample subjects were analysed when they had reached the stage of adjustment and even of stabilization (according to Nicholson's (1987) transitional cycle). Necessary as a consequence is a longitudinal study which highlights any distinctive features of the various stages (especially initial entry) of the process. However, by means of this study it has been possible to show that different learning contents (domains) crucially determine the success of the socialization of men and women in traditionally male contexts. In particular, explicit salience has been given, unlike in other studies (Bauer and Green, 1998), to the specificity of the various aspects of the learning construct able to favour adaptation by the two sexes in a new social-work context.

Notes

1. The NNFI and CFI offer a way to quantify the degree of fit along a continuum. They are incremental fit indices that measure the proportionate improvement in fit by comparing a target model with a more restricted nested baseline model. In contrast RMSEA is an absolute fit index that assesses how well an a priori model reproduces the sample data. Hu and Bentler (1999) recommended that values exceeding 0.90 for the NNFI, 0.06 for the RMSEA, and 0.80 for the CFI should be used as cutoffs, representing a good fit of the data to the model.

2. The critical ratio (CR) is a test statistic calculating the statistical significance of parameter estimates. It represents the parameter estimate divided by its standard error; as such, it operates as a z-statistic distribution. Based on a level of 0.05, the test statistic should be ≥ 1.96 .

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