

Navigating vulnerability in elite organizational socialization: Insights on new politicians' use of reputational behaviors

human relations

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DOI: 10.1177/00187267261447841

journals.sagepub.com/home/hum



Helena D Cooper-Thomas 

Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand

Jo Silvester 

Loughborough University, UK

James Greenslade-Yeats 

Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand

Abstract

Elites have significant influence on their institutions and therefore whether elite newcomers sink or swim has important ramifications for many stakeholders, including elites' colleagues, organizations, and wider society. And yet 'sinking' seems to be relatively common outcome for elite newcomers, whose high failure rates might suggest a sub-par socialization process. Given this problem, surprisingly little research has investigated how elite newcomers experience and respond to socialization. We address this lack of research through a qualitative study of elite newcomers, specifically new politicians entering a national legislature for the first time. Drawing on interviews and archival data, we illuminate the complex and at times ruthless process of elite newcomer socialization. Specifically, we identify four new socialization challenges that impact elite newcomers and suggest how these can develop socialization tactics theory. We identify reputational vulnerability as a novel motivator, caused by these challenges and compelling elite newcomers to respond. Finally, we reveal a range of protect and promote reputational behaviors elite newcomers use to respond in order to establish and maintain their elite position.

Corresponding author:

Helena D Cooper-Thomas, Department of Management, Technology & Organisation, Auckland University of Technology (AUT), 120 Mayoral Drive, Auckland CBD 1010, New Zealand.

Email: helena.cooper.thomas@aut.ac.nz

Keywords

organizational socialization, onboarding, newcomer, elite, politics, parliamentarians

Starting a new job is rarely straightforward. Organizational newcomers must learn not only how to perform their formally prescribed roles but also how to establish themselves in the informal social order of their new workplace (Ellis et al., 2015). While junior-level newcomers receive structured onboarding programs that help with this process of adjustment (Bauer et al., 2025; Saks and Gruman, 2012; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979), those entering at elite levels are typically left to figure things out for themselves (Byford et al., 2017). Presumably, this *laissez-faire* approach to elite socialization derives from the assumption that elite newcomers already possess the requisite skills and knowledge to successfully adjust. Yet this assumption may be misguided, with the limited extant research underscoring the hazards of entering organizations as an elite newcomer, even when apparently competent. For example, CEOs who receive the most business awards also have the highest ultimate failure rates (Graffin et al., 2013).

Elites perform senior, prominent roles that influence key decisions and outcomes for organizations (Dexter, 1970/2012; Odendahl and Shaw, 2002). These roles occur in the public and private sectors and include chairpersons, board members, professional service firm partners, senior physicians and, as in the present study, politicians (Caprara and Silvester, 2018; Empson, 2018; Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2016; Freidson, 1985; Schmidt, 2021). Elites attain their roles through appointment, nomination, or election, benefiting from their social or hierarchical rank or their exceptional skill or expertise, and having both influence over and accountability for decisions (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Dexter, 1970/2012). Drawing on this previous research on elites, we define elite newcomers as those entering a new context and starting a senior-level role with a high degree of influence and accountability (Dexter, 1970/2012; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021).

Studies of corporate executives suggest elites have a unique socialization experience marked by limited time and resources. For example, CEOs are typically expected to perform immediately because of their rank or expertise (Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2016; Zhang, 2008), which contrasts the experiences of non-elite newcomers, such as business apprentices (Montani et al., 2019), military recruits (Cooper-Thomas and Anderson, 2002), or graduates entering professional services firms (Morrison, 2002), who are typically given time and structured support to come up to speed. An additional socialization challenge for elites relates to their social context. Whereas non-elite newcomers experience socialization in a supportive environment with camaraderie from peer newcomers and mentoring from supervisors and senior colleagues (Ellis et al., 2015; Klein and Heuser, 2008), elite newcomers lack these social resources. Instead, the minimal evidence on elites' socialization suggests a greater likelihood of experiencing interpersonal tensions, whether through misunderstanding stakeholders' expectations (Dai et al., 2011) or competition with peers who are 'jousting for the topmost roles' (Conger and Fishel, 2007: 444). In sum, prior research implies that elites experience a more taxing and unforgiving socialization process due to their prominence and influence relative to other types of newcomers (Ciampa, 2016; Dai et al., 2011; Fee and Hadlock, 2004; Graffin et al., 2013; Solarino & Aguinis, 2021).

Despite the high value of elites and the unique hazards they encounter as newcomers, there is surprisingly little research on their socialization, beyond studies highlighting their high early turnover and, by extension, failure (Yi et al., 2020; Zhang, 2008). Relatedly, existing theories of organizational socialization tactics and newcomer proactive behavior overlook the possibility that elite newcomers may have different experiences and responses to socialization. In turn, this lack of theoretical understanding hinders scholars' ability to provide guidance that improves elite newcomers' prospects for success (Lewin, 1952). Against this background, the motivation for the present study is to advance socialization theories by examining the unique socialization experiences of elite newcomers. Specifically, we ask: *what challenges do elite newcomers experience during socialization, and why and how do they respond to those challenges?*

In addressing this question, we make novel contributions to elite newcomer socialization research. Our first contribution is elucidating the precarious socialization context faced by elite newcomers, which contrasts markedly with the structured experiences of junior-level newcomers (Bauer et al., 2025). Specifically, we identify four challenges stemming from the context that create a socialization experience that is hazardous for elite newcomers, forcing them to show their mettle. Second, contrasting with the pivotal role of uncertainty in understanding newcomers' motivation to adjust (Ellis et al., 2015), instead we find these hazardous socialization challenges engender reputational vulnerability for elite newcomers, motivating them to respond. Third, in terms of newcomers' responses, and differing from newcomer proactive behaviors that facilitate adjustment (Cooper-Thomas and Burke, 2012), we find elite newcomers engage in behaviors focused on simultaneously protecting and promoting their reputation. In sum, our research focused on elite newcomers finds evidence for a more hazardous context, a fundamentally different central motivation, and distinct actions for surviving socialization.

Navigating organizational socialization: Why elite status matters

Elite newcomers and their organizational socialization context

Organizational socialization refers to the adjustment process whereby newcomers acquire the social and role-relevant knowledge and behaviors to become effective organizational members (Bauer et al., 2025; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Organizations provide the context for this adjustment, with socialization achieved through the actions and interactions of newcomers and other organizational members (e.g., insider peers, other newcomers; Bauer et al., 2025; Chao, 2012). Despite elite newcomers' widely acknowledged influence and importance, or perhaps partly due to these factors, they experience high turnover, suggesting a suboptimal organizational socialization (Ciampa, 2016; Yi et al., 2020). For example, in a study of nearly 4000 US CEOs, almost 32% failed to get their contract renewed in their renewal year and thus exited (Cziraki and Groen-Xu, 2020; see also Yi et al., 2020). Similarly, turnover of newly-elected politicians—another group of elite newcomers—ranges from 25% to 40% per election across industrialized countries (Gouglas et al., 2018; Matland and Studlar, 2004; Vowles, 2015).

Some research hints at why socialization is typically so hazardous for elites. From organizational entry onwards, elite newcomers are highly visible and under pressure to perform (Conger and Fishel, 2007), with their performance dependent on effective coalition building (Dai et al., 2011), and their actions monitored and judged by a range of internal and external stakeholders (Byford et al., 2017; Graffin et al., 2013; Morrell and Hartley, 2006). A large body of evidence demonstrates the benefits of structured socialization experiences for non-elite newcomers (Bauer et al., 2007, 2025; Peltokorpi et al., 2022; Saks et al., 2007). However, the small amount of research on *elite* newcomers—written by scholar-practitioners—shows they are typically left alone to figure things out (Byford et al., 2017; Ciampa, 2016; Conger and Fishel, 2007; Dai et al., 2011).

Organizational socialization as a tactical process?

The organization's role in socialization is typically understood using Van Maanen and Schein's (1979) organizational socialization tactics theory, further refined by Jones (1986). The tactics represent how socialization is shaped for newcomers by existing organizational members. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) defined six tactics, each on a continuum: collective-individual, formal-informal, sequential-random, fixed-variable, serial-disjunctive, and investiture-divestiture. They argued these tactics occur in almost all socialization processes, including political careers and business careers, and can be deliberate or unplanned. While Van Maanen and Schein (1979) argued for various tactic combinations, Jones (1986) simplified and extended these in proposing two tactics categorizations, each pairing opposing tactics, that subsequent research has adopted (Bauer et al., 2025; Saks et al., 2007). First, Jones (1986) differentiated between (i) a structured and supportive process termed 'institutionalized' socialization, comprising collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics that direct newcomers toward accepting a clearly-defined role and (ii) a laissez-faire 'individualized' approach comprising the opposite end of each tactic, which leaves newcomers to figure things out for themselves. Second, Jones (1986) differentiated the six tactics into three dimensions of context, content, and social, according to whether the tactics reflect the broader structure of the experience (context), scheduling (content), or messages from experienced colleagues (social). While these tactics have withstood the test of time since their introduction, perhaps surprisingly, they have not been extended, despite Van Maanen and Schein (1979) suggesting the possibility of infinite tactics. Thus, socialization tactics theory has been criticized for lacking theoretical and empirical development (Ashforth et al., 1997; Bauer et al., 2025; Saks and Gruman, 2012).

We suggest the lack of advancement in socialization tactics theory may stem from two assumptions that come to the fore in our study of elite newcomers. First, the theory positions newcomers as clay to be molded by the organization and its current members, which suggests newcomers lack agency in shaping their own socialization (Ellis et al., 2015). Second, the theory's emphasis on *tactics* implies that existing organizational members decide how newcomers should perform their role and then undertake deliberate actions (whether through acts of commission or omission) to achieve this (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

Examining elite newcomer socialization has the potential to problematize both these assumptions. First, elite newcomers have a mandate to bring their personal skills and abilities to bear in how they perform their roles, making them less malleable than non-elite newcomers (Byford et al., 2017). Second, also owing to elites' status, there is likely a presumption by others that elite newcomers possess the social skills, political savvy, and business expertise to build their networks and decide how to conduct their role (Byford et al., 2017; Dai et al., 2011). Due to these two factors, elites may be offered support through a coach, peer mentor, formal training, or informal network building, but due to their status and influence, they cannot be compelled to participate in any socialization activities (Fox and Korris, 2012). Indeed, the small body of practice-based research aligns with elite newcomers largely forging their own socialization experience, with organizations providing only minimal socialization resources, such as a few days of onboarding covering policies and procedures (Saks and Gruman, 2012).

This existing evidence suggests that the assumptions of socialization tactics theory are unlikely to hold for elite newcomers. However, if elite newcomers are not exposed to purposeful socialization tactics, what dynamics do influence their socialization? And how can examining elites' socialization advance understanding of the forces shaping newcomers' adjustment more generally? These questions underscore the importance of empirically examining how elite newcomers experience socialization.

Newcomers' proactive efforts toward socialization

Our study of elite newcomer socialization is also relevant to research on the motivations for newcomers' proactivity. Newcomers address their socialization needs using a range of proactive behaviors, with proactivity defined as being anticipatory, self-initiated, and aimed at change (Parker and Collins, 2010). For newcomers, proactive behaviors are broadly divided into information seeking (where change is focused on learning, such as asking direct questions and seeking feedback) and relationship building (where change is focused on forging new connections, such as networking and strengthening key ties) (Ashford and Black, 1996; Cooper-Thomas and Burke, 2012; Zhao et al., 2023). A recent meta-analysis shows newcomer proactive behaviors predict better adjustment outcomes, including performance, belonging, and lower intention to quit (Zhao et al., 2023).

Notwithstanding aggregate positive results, newcomer proactivity can be detrimental: coworkers may react negatively when newcomer proactive behaviors require effort from them, threaten their sense of competence, or cause unwelcome change (Cooper-Thomas and Burke, 2012; Yin et al., 2024). For example, a study involving newcomers, their leaders, and their coworkers found newcomer proactive behavior was positively associated with threat perceptions for less competent leaders and peers, poorer relationships, and higher newcomer turnover (Yin et al., 2024). Research also suggests distinct proactive behaviors differ in their effects. For instance, acquiring political knowledge produces positive career impacts, whereas voicing concerns has negative career impacts (Seibert et al., 2001). These findings suggest that the effectiveness of any behavior depends on the sociopolitical context, which is less forgiving for elites (Graffin et al., 2013) who must establish credibility even while they learn and adjust (Bourgoin and

Harvey, 2018; Empson and Alvehus, 2020). Thus, elite newcomers seem likely to enact distinctive behaviors during socialization.

Supporting this need to investigate the adjustment behaviors of elite newcomers, most evidence comes from research on employees in lower-level organizational roles, ranging from temps (Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014) through graduates (Morrison, 2002), where even populations classified as ‘experienced’ (Zhao et al., 2023) are relatively junior. In contrast to newcomers at lower organizational levels who may aim to look keen by asking questions and requesting performance feedback, elite newcomers may prefer to project a favorable image of competence and expertise, and thus restrict their use of behaviors that highlight uncertainty or reveal ignorance (Miller and Jablin, 1991). Scholar-practitioners advise elite newcomers to act like a politician, constantly monitoring demeanor, heeding different stakeholders, and balancing thoughtful listening with decisive action (Byford et al., 2017; Ciampa, 2016; Dai et al., 2011). Yet importantly, alongside the lack of research on how elite newcomers experience the process of socialization, we also lack knowledge of how and why they proactively respond to this process.

Investigating elite newcomers in a political context

To research elite socialization, we chose the intensity case (Patton, 2002) of new politicians entering New Zealand’s (NZ) national legislature. Politicians’ roles resemble those of other elites, including board members, partners, and CEOs, who must all prove their value to stakeholders—whether voters, shareholders, or fellow partners—and typically within time limits set by election or contract renewal cycles (Cziraki and Groen-Xu, 2020; Graffin et al., 2013; Zhang, 2008). Elites’ performance is interdependent with others (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019; Fich and Shivdasani, 2007); this is particularly so for politicians, whose political career depends on the success of their political party as well as themselves, requiring simultaneous cooperation *and* competition with same-party peers. Elites often lack conventional employment contracts that define their role and responsibilities because, due to their status, they are expected to define what their roles are and how to perform them. For example, politicians swear a broad oath of allegiance to their country, new partners in professional services firms sign an agreement with responsibilities to benefit their firm, while board directors receive a letter of appointment mandating them to contribute strategically to advance the company. Thus, elites often have a different legal connection to their organization and greater discretion in how they conduct their roles. These factors mean that standard human resources procedures, such as formal socialization practices, onboarding, training and development, and detailed job descriptions, may not be legally or practically appropriate for elite newcomers (Fox and Korris, 2012; Silvester and Wyatt, 2018). Hence, new politicians provide an appropriate group for addressing the question: *what challenges do elite newcomers experience during socialization, and why and how do they respond to those challenges?*

Methods

We conducted a qualitative, interpretivist study (Crotty, 1998) of new politicians entering the New Zealand Parliament. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for

capturing the nuanced nature of political contexts (Doldor, 2017) and for investigating practices that can be informal and difficult to observe, such as the often hostile context facing elites in new roles (Ciampa, 2016). We chose an intensity case of new politicians to provide an information-rich—but not extreme—example of elite newcomer socialization, enabling stronger theory building (Patton, 2002; Solarino and Aguinis, 2021).

Research context and participants

NZ's Parliament, known formally as the House of Representatives and colloquially as the Beehive, is a relatively small, unicameral Westminster-style parliament normally comprising 120 seats, each held by an elected Member of Parliament (MP; <https://www.parliament.nz/en>). In 1996, NZ introduced mixed member proportional (MMP) voting, modeling Germany's election system; each voter gets two votes, one for their preferred political party and one for their preferred local electorate candidate. Consequently, candidates in NZ can become an MP either as an electorate MP, by gaining the most votes in their electorate seat, or as a list MP, based on their party's share of the vote and their list ranking. Every political party publishes a list ranking of all their MPs (i.e., electorate and list) prior to each election, with the potential for MPs to campaign unsuccessfully for an electorate seat yet enter Parliament as a list MP if they have a high enough list ranking. Parties receiving 5% or more of the party vote gain list seats proportionately.

In terms of their work, MPs face a multitude of tasks. There are 26 "sitting" weeks per year where they must be in the Beehive between Tuesday and Thursday, with legal obligations to attend Question Time (held in the Debating Chamber with TV recording and a public gallery) and their allocated select committees (or find a replacement). Broadly, work at the Beehive includes political debates, select committee meetings where laws and policies are thoroughly scrutinized (with attendance typically open to the public), caucus meetings, stakeholder meetings, and hosting visiting delegations as well as informal meetings with other MPs, public servants, members of the public, non-government organizations (NGOs), and media. Outside of this, both electorate and list MPs have a regional office where they meet individuals and groups with specific concerns or campaigns, and they attend events to engage with local communities.

In the 2011 NZ election, 29 new MPs entered the Beehive, of whom 23 (80%) participated in interviews. Participants comprised approximately equal numbers of women (10) and men (13), with a median age of 46 years. Participants came from four of the six political parties in Parliament and belonged to either the coalition government (9) or opposition (14). The overall cadre of new MPs had diverse previous work experience, including business, law, education, police, local governance (e.g., school boards), and media. Additionally, we interviewed two senior public servants from the Office of the Clerk and Parliamentary Services.

Data collection

Primary data. We interviewed new MPs about their experiences as newcomers after they had spent 2 years in Parliament, mindful that the length of socialization varies depending on the complexity of the role and context. For example, probation periods

can last from 1 year, as reported for an Indian IT company (Nifadkar and Bauer, 2016), through 3 years for CEOs (Bae and Joo, 2021). For CEOs as elites, Citrin et al. (2019) suggest it takes at least 2 years to get up to speed. We assumed that the complexity of the MP role, along with minimal formal training (Silvester and Wyatt, 2018), made a longer socialization period likely. Moreover, new MPs would need to feel sufficiently settled and secure in their role to agree to an interview and provide useful and candid reflections of their experiences, and not be concerned that information would be used against them (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). New MPs' interview responses supported our interview timing at 2 years. For example, one described his first 3-year term as an apprenticeship, another referred to himself a 'newbie' who was still figuring things out, and another commented, 'after a year or two, you figure out how things work but then something will come along that happens only once every 3 years, and so you slowly build up your experience' (Anthony). The first author conducted interviews face-to-face, aiming to build rapport and encourage open sharing of potentially sensitive information. Interviews lasted about 1 hour; we sent interviewees their transcripts to review before starting our analysis.

Secondary data. Following our initial thematic analysis of the data, we collected archival data on each new MP to refine our overall understanding of their first term in Parliament. We searched for media articles mentioning each participant, particularly focusing on 2011–2014, the period covering these new MPs' initial three-year parliamentary term. We used a New Zealand-focused media database called Newztext and supplemented this with publicly available documents including personal and party websites, media articles, and the NZ Parliament website archives. Secondary data enriched and corroborated our understanding of the difficulties faced by new politicians, highlighting, for example, the scrutiny they faced in news media and the potential for reputational damage that could end their careers (see Findings).

Data analysis

We used reflexive thematic analysis to analyze interview data (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2021; Nowell et al., 2017), supported by NVivo. This process is highly iterative and interpretive, explicitly acknowledging researchers' role in constructing findings. We outline our staged analysis approach next (see also our Figure 1 data structure and Appendices 1–3 for evidence per code).

Stage 1: Data immersion and generating initial codes. We started analysis by familiarizing ourselves with the entire dataset, both listening to and reading interview transcripts multiple times to develop an intimate understanding of MPs' socialization experiences. Based on this familiarization, we developed initial codes, for example: 'environment – conflicted, ambiguous, public,' 'party-political,' and 'role innovation and variety.' In addition to codes relating to socialization experiences and how MPs responded, we identified an unexpected third set of codes relating to new MPs *feeling exposed* and *at risk* due to their newness.

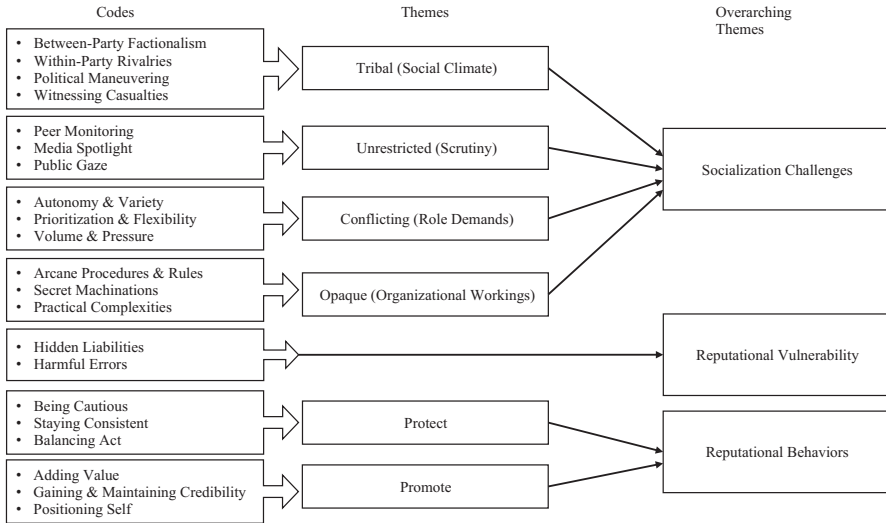


Figure 1. Data structure.

Stage 2: Developing and revising themes. The next stage in analysis involved grouping initial codes to construct provisional themes and, in turn, overarching themes, and then further refining these. More specifically, we developed three overarching themes relating to the socialization challenges, their effects (reputational vulnerability), and elite newcomers' responses (protect and promote reputational behaviors). Within each overarching theme, we iteratively refined our initial themes and codes, using the data inductively to revise our analysis. During this process, we merged, split, and abandoned codes to better fit our provisional themes (Grodal et al., 2021) and to ensure codes were coherent and bounded (Braun and Clarke, 2012). For instance, we developed an initial reputational behavior code '*discerning – perspective taking*', which we subsequently dissolved, dividing the data between the socialization context code of '*public gaze*' and the protect behavior code of '*balancing act*.' We drew relational diagrams to help us understand how the codes and themes fitted together (Ravasi, 2017).

Stage 3: Abductive theorizing to situate our findings. Having developed the findings inductively from the data, we adopted an abductive approach to generate and refine our theoretical insights relative to past organizational socialization research (Klag and Langley, 2013; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). We followed three principles outlined by Locke et al. (2008), of embracing doubt, nurturing hunches, and disrupting known order to stimulate various interpretations. While we had put our knowledge of organizational socialization aside for the inductive analysis, at this point we reintroduced this knowledge (Charmaz, 2016; Klag and Langley, 2013) to explore alternative interpretations. In brief, we compared our inductive findings with prior theory and categorizations of socialization tactics (Jones, 1986; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) to understand new

MPs' experiences of socialization challenges (Locke et al., 2022). We contrasted new MPs' concerns about errors with established motivators of newcomer behavior (Bauer et al., 2025) and compared new MPs' actions to stay safe and make headway with established understandings of newcomer proactivity (Zhao et al., 2023).

Stage 4: Generating theoretical coherence. The last analysis stage was to refine and tell our overall theoretical story (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). This involved finalizing the names of codes, themes, and overarching themes, based on both inductive and abductive analyses. We iteratively refined our ideas by drawing figures and using tables to conceptualize how our data, codes, and themes fit together, allowing us to generate and communicate theoretical insights (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021; Gioia et al., 2013; Nowell et al., 2017; Ravasi, 2017).

Ensuring analytical rigor

Throughout our analysis, we took actions to ensure the trustworthiness of our findings (Nowell et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2020; Tracy, 2010). We checked each retained code had sufficient depth of evidence through power and proof quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Pratt, 2008). We assured credibility by having the second and third authors scrutinize the first author's assumptions and test the plausibility of analyses (Pratt et al., 2020), and offer authentic dissent (Nemeth et al., 2001). For dependability, we maintained an audit trail to document the research process (Pratt et al., 2020). We enabled transferability by providing thick descriptions that allow other researchers to judge the extent to which our findings may apply in other contexts (Nowell et al., 2017; Pratt et al., 2020).

Findings

We base our findings on the data structure provided in Figure 1, showing the codes, themes, and overarching themes. Next, we explain our findings in detail and support them with evidence from our dataset; we provide additional supporting quotes per code in the supplementary material (Appendices 1–3).

Elite newcomers' experience of socialization challenges

Tribal social climate. A key socialization challenge was *tribalism*, with new MPs facing a combative environment in which colleagues vied to prove their relative superiority. Statements encapsulating participants' antagonistic experiences include: 'I totally accepted that I was going into a hostile environment where I was a newbie' (Donald) and 'They don't call it the bear pit for nothing; it's a jungle in there' (Charles). The tribal social climate was evident between political parties (*between-party factionalism*) and within them (*within-party rivalries*). Exemplifying this dual contest, one new MP noted: 'I'm not just competing with the people sitting across the [Debating] Chamber from me, I'm competing with the other people sitting around me as well' (Gary). At times, these interpersonal contests revealed other MPs' *political maneuvering* to gain opportunities,

as well as *witnessing casualties* when colleagues' ill-considered actions allowed others to inflict reputational damage.

Reflecting *between-party factionalism*, new MPs experienced hostility from MPs in competing parties, including other new MPs. Some new MPs considered this a deliberate stratagem by others to become renowned for denigrating opponents:

I could probably name five MPs on that side of the House¹, and five on this side, too, who have decided that to come here (. . .) is about shouting insults at people and just constantly haranguing other people with stupid comments that are derogatory. (Patricia)

Some recounted war stories of receiving verbal attacks or other undermining, describing them as a form of point scoring that left the new MPs more circumspect. More broadly, participants described oppositional politics as inherently combative: 'People smell fear, and they smell weakness, and they attack' (Maria).

Tribalism prevailed also through *within-party rivalries*, as bitterly summed up by one participant: 'Your greatest enemies in Parliament end up being [in] your own caucus because if you are exceling, they see it as making them look bad' (Donald). This reflected the constant battle to ascend 'further up the food chain' (Gary). Such contests were both immediate (e.g., winning an opportunity to pose a question in the House), and longer-term (e.g., fighting to secure a preferred role or portfolio). The hierarchical power structure of parties contributed to this internal rivalry: 'If you're a deputy chair of a committee, you're slightly further up the ladder than someone who's got nothing. If you're a chair, you're further up again. If you're party whip, you're slightly further up again. Everyone's competing' (Gary).

A third component of tribalism was *political maneuvering*, with new MPs acknowledging their place at the 'bottom of the pecking order' (Gary) and vying for patronage from senior MPs to progress their careers. Some new MPs saw political maneuvering as the natural order of things, captured by one new MP who bluntly stated:

If alpha males and alpha females do not know how to organize their time, or know how to advantage their position within their party, or to advantage their party, [then] sorry honey but you sure as fuck shouldn't be here. (Dorothy)

Contrasting this, others were uncomfortable with what they viewed as ingratiation:

You see a lot of people trying to be very ambitious. And they'll clutter around when there's the Prime Minister in and they'll say, 'Oh how are you? Oh yes', and they'll talk about the things that they're doing and it's all about getting themselves in the picture. (Edward)

A final feature of the tribal challenge was *witnessing casualties*. These included new MPs who made errors of judgment, as well as salutary tales of experienced MPs' blunders. Witnessing casualties resulted in harms, ranging from public embarrassment through forced resignations. This constant risk of a fatal error was illustrated by one MP who reeled off a rather long list of former MPs pressured to resign:

Not everyone survives. Zane obviously didn't make it through. People do drop by the wayside from time to time. People make mistakes and get caught. Roger and Philip . . . Jim . . . at the end of the day, MPs are only human and it's a cut-throat business. Like they say, you make one little trip, people are pretty ready to jump on you and put the knife in. (Charles)

In many cases, other MPs (within and across parties) and the media took advantage of the situation to damage the offending MP's reputation. Additionally, the tribal social climate was exacerbated by the three other challenges—unrestricted scrutiny, conflicting role demands, and opaque organizational workings—to which we turn now.

Unrestricted Scrutiny. Scrutiny was a pervasive challenge as part of the adversarial socialization context, as reflected in statements such as: 'you can't escape the gaze,' 'you're always on show,' 'the walls have ears no matter where you go,' and 'you have no more anonymity.' Participants reported three main sources of scrutiny: *peer monitoring*, *media spotlight*, and *public gaze*.

Given that MPs' success and longevity can also depend on the relative success of their political party and other MPs across all parties, it is unsurprising that new MPs experienced and participated in *peer monitoring* of MPs by MPs. 'You're being judged the whole time – it comes back to that you're "always on." And it's not just your constituents, not just your team, it's not just the party—it's your colleagues as well' (Daniel). A handful of MPs said they sometimes monitored their peers to learn from those individuals, for example, to pick up debating skills or for dealing with the media. Nonetheless, new MPs typically viewed *peer monitoring* as a burden, requiring them to be continuously cognizant of how other MPs would judge their conduct.

A second source of scrutiny was the *media spotlight* directed at new MPs, which some were unprepared for: 'I was startled by the level of media scrutiny' (Sandra). New MPs realized their lack of experience increased their likelihood of making newsworthy mistakes. Thus, media exposure created a catch-22 for them. On the one hand, they needed to figure out how to gain media attention to raise their public profiles: 'That's still something I haven't mastered, just breaking stories to get media. That seems now to be the major determinant of how successful you are as a politician' (Margaret). On the other hand, the wrong type of exposure could irreparably damage MPs' public profiles or end their careers: 'This term a Member from [party name] was basically hounded out, and you know it's pretty vicious to watch when you see it happening . . . it was a media frenzy around it' (Elizabeth). Participants criticized the media for adopting a 'sensationalist' or 'tabloid' approach, for example, by reporting on an MP's attire and overlooking 'a lot of the hard work that is going on' (James). Moreover, new MPs felt the media sought or even invented stories that would gain interest: 'Anyone who trips, they [the media] will pounce on them. . . And they're not averse to putting a foot out either' (Charles).

The third aspect of scrutiny was *public gaze*, with new MPs instantly becoming recognized at local and sometimes national levels. Many experienced a loss of anonymity and—sometimes after embarrassing experiences—started to carefully consider their public appearances: 'You are a public figure so you can't just go out and do whatever you choose to do without some reflection' (Daniel). Consequently, some new MPs reported

restricting their leisure-time public appearances, limiting outings such as shopping, and socializing only at home with family and friends.

Conflicting role demands. A third challenge facing new MPs was immense pressure to prove themselves, recognizing they were constantly being observed (unrestricted scrutiny) and judged relative to others (tribal social climate), and with implications for their list ranking and future opportunities. Yet while trying to prove their worth, new MPs contended with the challenge of conflicting role demands, reflecting a substantial, complex, and changeable workload. This comprised a range of tasks relating to developing or challenging legislation, and communications with their own staff, other MPs, government departments, the public, the media, lobbying companies, industry representatives, community groups, and foreign dignitaries. With insufficient time to complete all tasks, shifting deadlines, and unanticipated external events that added new demands, new MPs had to frequently reevaluate task priorities. With no single correct way of being successful, and a lack of feedback, new MPs struggled to figure out how best to tackle manifold demands. *Conflicting role demands* comprised *autonomy and variety*, *prioritization and flexibility*, and *volume and pressure*.

MPs have autonomy by virtue of their democratic legitimacy, but the flipside is the lack of supportive structures and supervision that might be available in other contexts.

Even though I felt like I could ask other people what they did, it wasn't as accessible as normally when you start a job [when] you've got someone to look to, or a job description, or something to give you guidance, and this felt quite 'figure it out, in the deep end.' (Nancy)

This autonomy was both an asset and a liability given new MPs faced a huge *variety* of tasks, people, and opportunities in limited time. They had to decide where to focus their energies to be effective in a context where, at least early on, they had limited understanding of what success might look like. Moreover, although not explicitly stated, MPs in marginal positions may have focused on tasks they believed would maximize their chances of reelection. Thus, some new MPs became 'primarily social workers' (Anthony) at the community level, known for meeting local constituency needs, while others focused on developing a reputation for advancing policies and legislation within Parliament, and still others tried to 'juggle' these 'two orbits' (Joseph). Regardless of their choices, new MPs found it hard to gauge their own success:

I've been in a lot of management positions before where I've had really clear deliverables, and this job doesn't have clear deliverables. . . . I found at least the first year—maybe a bit more—really difficult just in not knowing where I stood because I couldn't measure my progress in ways that I was used to. (Maria)

Given the autonomy and variety of the role, new MPs noted the importance of combining *prioritization and flexibility*, that is, focusing on key tasks while also being flexible to take advantage as new opportunities arose. Exemplifying prioritization, one participant stated: 'There's a lot of competing priorities that you've got to constantly manage' (Brian). Some had discovered early on the costs of failing to prioritize:

When you get in (to Parliament) you want to be seen to be hitting the ground running . . .so you say ‘Yes’ to everything and you spread yourself out in a million different directions, and then you feel really overstretched and burnt out really quickly. (Linda)

In conjunction with prioritization, MPs observed the importance of flexibility; for example, taking advantage of serendipitous openings, triggered by media interest or policy changes. ‘There is a balance you have to strike between strategic planning and being opportunistic and seizing the moment when things happen’ (Nancy). At other times, the need for flexibility was imposed. New opposition MPs referred to sudden and frequent changes to Parliament’s schedule upending their plans and necessitating rearrangement. Some saw this as a deliberate government ploy to ‘Always try to give the opposition MPs a bit of a run around’ (James), reflecting a perceived antagonistic undercurrent.

Finally, compounding these complexities, new MPs frequently remarked on the sheer volume and pressure of work: ‘I knew the task would be enormous [but] you always feel you just can’t do enough, there are so many balls that are in the air, so many issues that need attention’ (Margaret). Many noted feeling exhausted from the long hours and ‘absolute continuity’ (Kenneth) of work: ‘I’ve found anyway that the pace is just so, so fast. . . to actually keep all of those issues in your head, let alone what you’re supposed to be doing with them’ (Maria). The combination of high volume and intensity placed immense pressure on MPs deciding where to focus their energies to have impact, while not neglecting tasks where a lack of progress might garner criticism.

Opaque organizational workings. Exacerbating conflicting role demands, incoming MPs commonly experienced their new work environment as ‘arcane,’ ‘archaic,’ ‘complex,’ ‘complicated,’ and ‘difficult to get [one’s] head around.’ Thus, the fourth socialization challenge, *opaque organizational workings*, compounded the difficulty of understanding how to be—and be recognized as—an effective politician. This was captured by statements including: ‘I haven’t figured everything out yet and I’m sure that there will be some things that will remain a mystery ‘til I die’ (Anthony) and ‘I think people could be here for twenty years and not know what’s going on’ (Frank). This opacity comprised three themes: *arcane procedures and rules*, *secret machinations*, and *practical complexities*.

New MPs had to contend with *arcane procedures and rules* governing appropriate conduct across formal and informal parliamentary contexts. While new MPs received an initial introduction to parliamentary procedures (New Zealand Parliament, 2020), their detail and complexity were such that most MPs developed their understanding either haphazardly or through diligent effort: ‘It seems to be this kind of arcane system with hidden bits to it, you happen upon, or figure out if you spend time’ (Maria). Consequently, new MPs’ ignorance made them susceptible to breaching procedures and rules, which made them look foolish:

If you get up and you say it wrong, the Speaker says, ‘Oh, actually it’s not a formal closure motion, diddums’, and the debate continues, and the whips are looking at you going, ‘You said it wrong!’ And you’re sitting there going, ‘Well I didn’t know what to say!’ (Daniel)

Secret machinations refer to the consequential political stratagems and interactions that take place out of sight and off-record: ‘The way things operate behind the scenes, the way negotiations are done, the way deals are struck’ (Charles). New MPs found these machinations particularly challenging because they had not yet gained access to the informal networks where negotiations occurred: ‘Stuff is done informally through networks and contacts. And I am not very good at that. . . decisions get made and you’re not quite sure how they get made; they don’t always come to a formal decision-making process’ (Margaret).

The final code supporting the challenge of opaque organizational workings was *practical complexities*. These ranged from ‘getting to grips’ (Charles) with the physical layout of parliament—‘There are still parts of the building that I don’t even know where things are’ (Gary)—to mundane administrative tasks: ‘I couldn’t get the photocopier to work, I remember being in virtual tears because there you were, supposedly a Member of Parliament, and you couldn’t even do the basics’ (Margaret). Dealing with *practical complexities* was especially challenging for new MPs considering the pressures from other elements of the socialization context, in particular constant scrutiny: ‘Life was difficult until you worked these things out. Simple things, like: Where’s the dunnies? Where’s the canteen? What floor are we on? *And doing that whilst living in a fishbowl!*’ (Charles, emphasis added).

Elite socialization challenges’ effects: Reputational vulnerability

The four socialization challenges compounded each other to provide an extremely testing context. Unrestricted scrutiny was the core challenge, exposing new MPs to relentless judgment from diverse others, and compounded by the tribal social climate, conflicting role demands, and opaque organizational systems. The mutually compounding effects of these socialization challenges typically caused elite newcomers to feel reputationally vulnerable, exposing them to reputational damage that could threaten their career prospects or even precipitate an early exit. As one participant observed regarding tensions to cooperate versus compete, even for MPs in the same party, ‘You can’t show your vulnerability too much, to anyone’ (Nancy). Several interviewees noted senior people, at their brief onboarding session, mentioned their precarious situation as newcomers:

Somebody like the Speaker, somebody senior, when we were first given our induction, they said ‘Just listen and learn and breathe through your nose because you don’t want—in the first 6 months—to come down in a screaming heap because you’ve embarrassed yourself.’ (James)

The complex and adversarial context, combined with a lack of knowledge and experience—or formal support—placed new MPs’ reputations at risk. Two codes underpin reputational vulnerability, *hidden liabilities* and *harmful errors*.

Hidden liabilities refer to the reputational risk stemming from new MPs’ lack of knowledge and experience given their novice status. A common concern was the lack of detailed historical institutional knowledge which meant they did not know the backstory of new legislation already progressing through Parliament or the logic of specific

policies advocated by their party. This uncertainty is illustrated by the halting manner in which one new MP described his lack of background knowledge on current legislation being debated: ‘I found that a bit interesting; difficult; challenging. It didn’t upset me much, but it was, made you nervous about the process, and I suppose that, I think, I found that probably the most difficult thing’ (Robert). As well as the liabilities of inheriting work in progress, some new MPs identified specific situations where their inexperience was nearly exposed. For example, one new MP unexpectedly had the opportunity to introduce new legislation, which occurred in a public setting in Parliament, and risked revealing his lack of procedural knowledge:

I just remember going, ‘What do I do now?’ and the media are calling, the phone is going off, my executive assistant runs down and says, ‘There are journalists in your office!’ [I had] No idea what to do. I just remember feeling quite vulnerable. (Daniel)

A second and more painful form of reputational vulnerability came from new MPs who had learned the hard way through *harmful errors* that caused them embarrassment. MPs were rightly apprehensive that Parliament TV and Hansard recorded everything they said within the House, such that their mistakes would ‘be remembered forever’ (Robert). ‘That it’s there on the historical record is terrifying. What if you stuff it up, and I did!’ (Sandra). Furthermore, the media, including social media, were crucial intermediaries in shaping public perception of MPs, with participants recounting how small errors were magnified into attention-grabbing stories. These included responding in kind to an aggressive interviewer: ‘But when listening to it on the radio afterwards, I was like, “Win the argument, lose the audience”’ (Nancy); or providing recorded (versus live) interviews that could be edited to provide a biased picture, with one new MP wryly recounting: ‘They made out I was a pig with my snout in the trough wasting taxpayers’ money, and the interview, it was a masterful piece of editing’ (Donald).

Navigating elite socialization: Protect and promote behaviors

New MPs responded to their inherent vulnerability by deploying both *protect behaviors*—involving carefully considering possible actions and their potential reputational consequences before acting, or not acting, in order to safeguard themselves; and *promote behaviors*—involving selecting actions that showcased their abilities, might bolster their reputation, and open up future opportunities. This need to use protect and promote approaches synergistically was aptly outlined by one new MP:

Just how careful one has to be—it’s a lesson that I’m just constantly reminded of. But at the same time, if after three years you haven’t been seen to do anything, or been in the news, then the public will say, ‘Well, who is this turkey? What has he been doing?’ (Anthony)

Protect behaviors. Recognizing their vulnerability, new MPs noted *being cautious* in how they conducted themselves. Many new MPs had adopted the Speaker’s advice to ‘breathe through your nose,’ which literally meant they avoided talking. New MPs also withheld trust, as exemplified by one MP who interrupted his dialogue on MP cordiality to note,

‘Look, its politics, you’re not necessarily trusting everyone 100%’ (Daniel), showing that even within seemingly friendly interactions, it paid to be careful. Some MPs used the boxing metaphor of keeping their guard up, underscoring the career-damaging risks if they failed to do so:

What I have to keep reminding myself is that there’s never a moment when you can let your guard down. . . I’ve got through two years without going out in a blaze of scandal and that’s good. Being cautious is worthwhile. (Anthony)

The media were a particular cause for caution, with some new MPs limiting or even avoiding media interactions. For example, one new MP recounted a complex incident, which he felt had been misreported to his detriment, and so he steered clear of the media: ‘I do not know whether what I’m going to say will be correctly reported, so I just stay away’ (Thomas).

A second protect behavior was *staying consistent* across the diverse environments new MPs entered, both formally and informally, and with friendly, hostile, or mixed audiences. Some new MPs contrasted their own genuineness against the riskier approach of peers who molded themselves to match the circumstances or specific stakeholders’ expectations:

Where people try to change themselves to fit environments, in particular if they’re doing it to try and advance themselves, I think you can get into real trouble. So I think remaining sincere and authentic to yourself, your beliefs, and your convictions is important. (Frank)

To ensure consistency, some new MPs recounted efforts to steer clear of potential pitfalls, such as the risk of getting caught up in the trappings of being an MP or being unduly influenced by others. ‘It’s the sort of environment where you have to really have a clear sense of who you are, what you stand for, because it will be challenged every single day’ (Edward).

Reflecting the complexity of different demands on MPs, a third protect behavior was *balancing act*. This relates to trying to simultaneously satisfy the expectations of different stakeholders, across various contexts:

You have to be, not paranoid, but you have to be close to it in terms of highly sensitive to the impressions that other people form. ‘Cause you are obviously juggling: you’re dealing with your colleagues in Wellington, but then back in the electorate you’ve got a party organization—a substantial party organization—and a lot of volunteers and ultimately, every three years, you need to persuade them to back you as the candidate. So you spend a lot of time thinking and worrying and making sure that everybody is reasonably happy. (Anthony)

Similarly, new MPs tried to navigate the tension between fitting in with their parties and distinguishing themselves to gain notice. This occurred across various forums, but especially in the media, where new MPs had to balance their own individual visibility, which was critical for career advancement, with the need to cede opportunities to senior MPs, which benefited their parties. This was a delicate task, with success in the eyes of one group of stakeholders risking failure in those of another. For example, one new MP

recounted working hard on an issue which, when there were publicity opportunities, she appropriately passed up the party hierarchy; yet subsequently, while party colleagues recognized her efforts, she was belittled on social media as ‘the invisible MP’ (Sandra).

Promote behaviors. Alongside the need to protect themselves in a risky, adversarial environment, new MPs recognized the imperative to promote themselves in order to stay in role, through reelection, and obtain further responsibilities within their party. New MPs used *adding value* as a foundational behavior to demonstrate their ability to contribute to their party. This included meeting the core demands of their role and, beyond this, developing a specific niche where they could contribute. The fundamental demands new MPs worked on ranged from contributing to legislation through helping citizens resolve problems. While these actions did not differentiate them specifically, they were important in establishing their credentials as team players for their party, and thus maintaining their position. ‘Everybody does little things . . . that are really great and wonderful things. But that’s expected of you. . . It’s all under the radar stuff, it’s never going to make the papers’ (Dorothy).

Additionally, new MPs sought to establish special areas of expertise where they could contribute, and prove they were not ‘tokens’ (Donald). ‘I’m going to find my way through this and see, look here’s a piece, there’s a niche in the system, here’s a part that I can play, a piece of the puzzle’ (Edward). In these niche areas, MPs measured their success through gaining visibility in the media, improving legislation, and occasional positive feedback from political party colleagues or constituents. Yet new MPs noted the rarity of these indications of positive impact: ‘It’s easy to feel like you’re trying to do a million things at once and. . . you’re not sure if any of them are having any impact or effect’ (Nancy).

A second more overtly self-promoting behavior used by new MPs for raising their profiles was *gaining and maintaining credibility*. This relates to positively influencing other MPs to recognize their achievements, especially within their own party, because ‘credibility is everything’ (Frank). Relevant forums for establishing credibility included public and private settings: debates in the House, caucus, select committees, and during constituency visits with same-party colleagues. For example, one new MP noted how his strong contributions and community connections had established his reputation with colleagues: ‘I can get up now in our caucus and talk about this stuff, and people listen to me’ (Robert).

Indeed, many new MPs emphasized caucus as a critical forum for establishing credibility, recounting incidents where senior MPs had singled them out for praise. Equally, new MPs emphasized the importance of maintaining credibility, since it was easily damaged: ‘[I can] think of colleagues who’ve [got] something quite good to say, and they’ve taken five times too long to say it, and people switch off. And it happens incredibly quickly’ (Anthony).

The third promote behavior, *positioning oneself*, was more overtly political and reflected new MPs figuring out how to cultivate relationships with senior MPs who could provide opportunities through patronage. New MPs varied in how actively they positioned themselves for the opportunities they wished to gain, with some taking time to ‘consciously decide what it is I want to do and then build some skills in doing those things, so that at some point I can step up a notch’ (Linda), and others working more

actively: ‘I’m just timing that out and making sure I get that at the right time and the right place . . . So, you’re always sort of thinking . . . “Do I go now? Have I seen the right people?”’ (Edward).

Discussion

Figure 2 provides a visual summary of our overall findings and thus encapsulates our overarching contribution to understanding the process of elite newcomer socialization. Specifically, the figure illustrates the socialization challenges elite newcomer experience, how those challenges motivate action by rendering elite newcomers reputationally vulnerable, and the specific behaviors elites deploy in response to such vulnerability. Around the outside, we situate four ellipses representing the socialization challenges elite newcomers face: a social climate that is tribal, scrutiny that is unrestricted, role demands that conflict, and organizational workings that are opaque. These four challenges are mutually compounding, depicted by the connecting orbits that surround elite newcomers and create a hazardous environment where errors are more likely. In turn, this environment generates reputational vulnerability, situated at the center of our model. Elite newcomers seek to shield and advance their reputations using protect and promote reputational behaviors, with bidirectional arrows in Figure 2 showing these behaviors’ synergistic effects. Protect behaviors defend against the hostile nature of the socialization context while promote behaviors recognize that success relies on competing to show one’s contributions, especially relative to others. Next, expounding on the findings relative to past research, we develop our theoretical contributions.

Expanding and complicating theorizing on organizational socialization processes

Our first contribution is to expand and complicate prior theoretical understandings of organizational socialization by illuminating the processes that socialize elite newcomers. Existing studies have predominantly used the institutionalized versus individualized socialization tactics categorization offered by Jones (1986), focusing on the institutionalized end of this continuum where tactics represent a set of structured processes designed by insiders to mold newcomers (Bauer et al., 2025; Saks et al., 2007). However, elite newcomers are unlikely to be socialized by institutionalized tactics because their status gives them considerable leeway to shape their own socialization and because their high position suggests (to insiders) that they are unlikely to need structured support in adjusting. Therefore, according to socialization tactics theory, one would expect elites to be socialized through individualized, laissez-faire tactics (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979).

Our findings complicate this view by suggesting socialization tactics are largely absent in elite newcomers’ socialization. The term ‘tactics’ usually implies actions calculated to achieve a particular objective. However, socialization tactics theory differs from this by framing tactics as being deployed either deliberately through acts of commission (actively shaping newcomers with institutionalized tactics) or incidentally through acts of omission (letting newcomers find their own way with individualized tactics) (Jones,

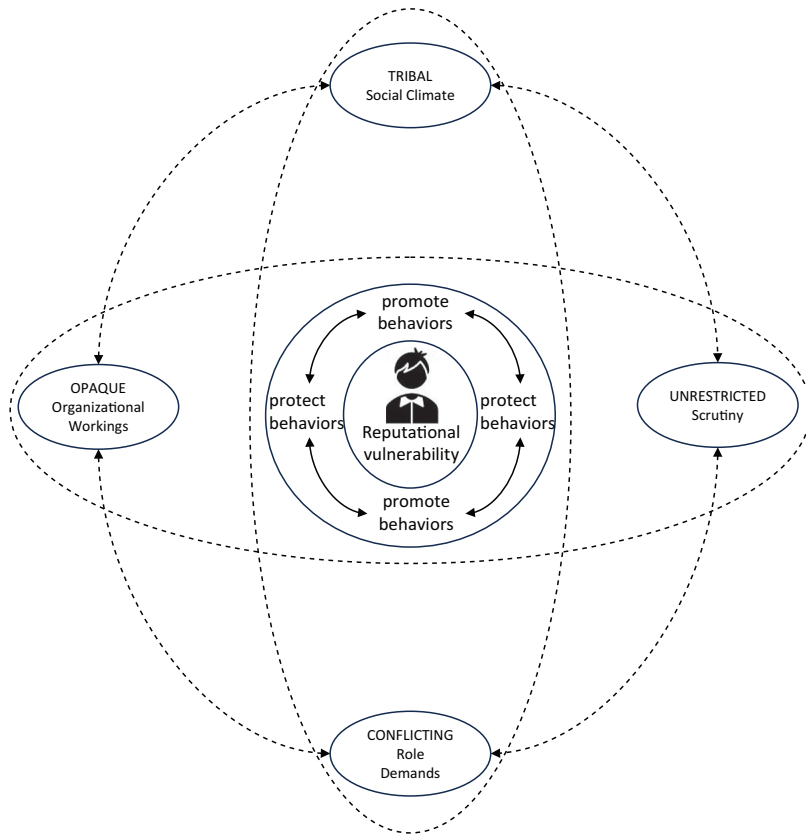


Figure 2. The four socialization challenges causing elite newcomers to experience reputational vulnerability, and their consequent promote and protect reputational behaviors.

1986; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). Yet, in the case of elite newcomers, such tactics appear largely irrelevant because their socialization is shaped predominantly by challenges inherent to the socialization context, not by tactics (whether deliberate or incidental) deployed by an overseeing organization.

As such, our study highlights the limitations of understanding the organizational socialization process through the lens of institutionalized versus individualized ‘tactics.’ Instead, our findings imply that the socialization process might be better understood along a continuum of two broad approaches—*tactical* versus *emergent*—each of which comprises a set of ‘dimensions’ (rather than tactics). In this reimagined continuum, socialization is *tactical* when it is shaped by deliberate, structured activities deployed by an organization. In contrast, socialization is *emergent* when it results from unplanned interactions between newcomers and aspects of their new social, structural, and physical environment. Thus, tactical could replace ‘institutionalized,’ and emergent could replace

‘individualized,’ in scholars’ understanding of socialization processes. This proposed distinction addresses concerns over the ‘tactics’ terminology expressed in prior research, for example, descriptions of individualized socialization tactics reflecting an ‘absence of structure’ and occurring ‘more by *default* than by *design*’ [italics in original] (Ashforth et al., 1997: 211).

In addition to problematizing assumptions regarding the ‘tactical’ nature of individualized socialization—and offering an alternative conceptualization of this process as ‘emergent’—our findings address calls to flesh out the details of this unstructured type of socialization (Ashforth et al., 1997; Bauer et al., 2025; Saks and Gruman, 2012). Specifically, we suggest the four socialization challenges experienced by new MPs shed light on what we call the key ‘dimensions’ of emergent socialization. Thus, in the following paragraphs, we expand on the four socialization challenges of tribal social climate, unrestricted scrutiny, conflicting role demands, and opaque organizational workings, and we suggest how they might fit as dimensions within Jones’ (1986) tripartite categorization of context, content, and social. This positioning within the well-established categorization, combined with the proposed change of terminology, allows socialization scholars to make sense of our findings within existing frames of reference. Rather than reinforcing the misleading labeling of unplanned and uncontrolled processes as ‘tactics,’ we call these dimensions. Additionally, we label the contrasting emergent and tactical ends of each dimension, giving the emergent end the term developed through our findings and generating an opposing term for tactical end. Through this thorough and coherent new positioning, we provide a basis for future research to test, debate, and refine our findings.

The first dimension of socialization we name organizational workings, ranging along a continuum from opaque (at the emergent end) to transparent (at the tactical end). We situate this within the context category (Jones, 1986). Opaque systems require newcomers to figure things out, with their understanding hampered by complex rules, interminable minutiae, and obscure influence processes (Denis et al., 2000; Empson and Alvehus, 2020). In contrast, transparent systems enable newcomers to easily learn how structures and people work. In terms of effects, we propose opacity destabilizes newcomers, slowing their progress toward full understanding and efficient use of workplace systems, and hence this tactic may be valued by insiders who view elite newcomers as needing to prove themselves or, indeed, as potential future rivals.

The second new dimension we term scrutiny, ranging from unrestricted (at the emergent end) to internal (at the tactical end). Elite newcomers must prove themselves to a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., other elites, shareholders, the voting public, clients), creating unrestricted scrutiny, whereas nonelite newcomers must primarily prove their worth to colleagues within their organization, making scrutiny internal (Dexter, 1970/2012; Odendahl and Staw, 2002). We situate this dimension of scrutiny within the context category (Jones, 1986). In terms of effects, unrestricted scrutiny may reveal errors that stakeholders—especially rivals—may seek to leverage to further their own position (Graffin et al., 2013).

The third new dimension, role demands, we situate in the content category. This dimension ranges from conflicting (at the emergent end) to aligned (at the tactical end). Role theory—comprising role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload—has a long history in work research (Parker et al., 2017). Yet it has only lightly permeated socialization research,

with role ambiguity (or its opposite, role clarity) being measured as an outcome but not recognized as a dimension shaping socialization experiences (Bauer et al., 2007, 2025; Saks et al., 2007). Elite newcomers face conflicting role demands that create uncertainty, compounded by changeability, in that other people or events have the power to create, modify, or remove demands (Morrell and Hartley, 2006). In contrast, aligned role demands enable newcomers to understand how the parts of their role fit together and thus focus their learning, prioritize tasks, and more rapidly demonstrate good performance. Thus, the conflicting end of the role demands dimension creates both risks and rewards for elite newcomers: poor decisions expose them to errors and loss of credibility (Denis et al., 2000) whereas astute decisions establish their competence by accommodating shifting demands from multiple constituents (Dai et al., 2011).

The fourth and final new dimension is social climate, which we situate within the social category (Jones, 1986). This dimension ranges from tribal (at the emergent end) through inclusive (at the tactical end). A tribal social climate is characterized by high levels of factionalism and competition (Doldor, 2017). Indeed, less competent insiders may feel threatened by highly proactive and able newcomers, resulting in lower quality relationships (Yin et al., 2024), potentially exacerbating tribalism. In contrast, an inclusive climate facilitates more frequent interaction of newcomers with insiders and thus enables better adjustment (Deng et al., 2024). In terms of effects, a tribal social climate can result in lower trust and a longer adjustment period as elite newcomers figure out relationships and navigate the tension between performing to benefit their tribe versus avoiding becoming a casualty due to rookie errors (Epitropaki et al., 2020; Miller and Jablin, 1991).

Theorizing why elite newcomers are motivated to navigate organizational socialization

Our second contribution is revealing that these four socialization challenges constantly test elite newcomers such that they feel their reputation is at stake, motivating them to take action. This differs from traditional explanations of newcomers' motivation, which focus on reducing uncertainty and developing relationships (Bauer et al., 2025; Ellis et al., 2015; Miller and Jablin, 1991). The four hazardous socialization challenges are tacitly accepted and even enacted by existing members of the organization and other stakeholders, who expect only some newcomers to succeed through rapidly developing their abilities. One new MP illustrates this in commenting: 'There is that sink or swim, if it's all too easy for you, you won't properly learn so there needs to be an element of struggle, and then to see how you actually cope with that' (Daniel). This echoes findings from a handful of prior studies that show harmful effects of organizational actions on newcomers (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Montani et al., 2019). For example, Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2012) found newcomer lawyers who felt colleagues tried to strip away their values experienced more ethical conflict, emotional exhaustion and, in turn, lower career fulfillment. Nonetheless, reputational vulnerability may be a unique motivator for elite newcomers, who realize they are in the spotlight and expected to perform as an elite, with minimal tolerance for naïve errors (Conger and Fishel, 2007).

Reputational vulnerability not only motivates elite newcomers, who notice their own liabilities and errors and act to ensure they are mitigated, but also has two broader benefits for institutions. First, elite newcomers who observe peers failing may be motivated to avoid making the same mistakes, echoing Mintzberg's (1985) argument that organizational politics can be functional because adversity motivates corrective action. In the socialization context, costly errors may efficiently accelerate either adjustment or failure (see also Cooper et al., 1993; Epitropaki et al., 2020). Second, elite newcomers who survive these testing socialization experiences, or outperform rivals even slightly, may be viewed by insiders as more worthy of investing effort in (Schwarz and Severinov, 2010), permitting efficient allocation of resources.

Theorizing how elite newcomers respond to reputational vulnerability

Our third contribution lies in elucidating how elite newcomers respond to reputational vulnerability, namely through behaviors that protect and promote their reputation. Specifically, they use promote behaviors to advance reputation through demonstrating competence alongside protect behaviors that aim to minimize reputational risk. These promote and protect reputational behaviors differ in important ways from established understandings of newcomer behaviors, which are often viewed through a proactivity lens (Ashford and Black, 1996; Cooper-Thomas and Burke, 2012). Proactive behaviors are defined as self-initiated, change-oriented, and future-focused (Parker and Collins, 2010); promote reputational behaviors fit these criteria, but protect reputational behaviors may be present- or past-focused and aim to avoid change. Moreover, while junior-level newcomers benefit from proactive behaviors such as asking questions and networking (Cooper-Thomas and Burke, 2012; Zhao et al., 2023), leading to positive adjustment outcomes, such behaviors pose risks for elite newcomers, potentially exposing their naivety and providing an opportunity for rivals or the media to benefit (Ciampa, 2016). Instead, elite newcomers combine protect and promote behaviors, simultaneously shielding and advancing their reputation. Having established our novel contribution to understanding how elite newcomers respond to reputational vulnerability, namely through reputational behaviors, next we review these in relation to previous research.

Protect behaviors defend against the hostile nature of elite socialization, restricting action to limit risks. Of the three protect behaviors, being cautious aligns with Kipnis and Schmidt's (1988) unexpected finding that bystanders—those who do not attempt to influence others—receive moderate to high supervisor performance ratings. Similarly, employees using less voice achieve more salary progressions and promotions (Seibert et al., 2001). A second protect behavior, staying consistent, helps demonstrate authenticity. Behaving authentically benefits external perceptions of an individual, including being viewed as more likable and trustworthy (Cha et al., 2019), which are important considerations for elites whose career success often relies on acts of support (e.g., votes), whether from peers, shareholders, or the public. The third protect behavior, balancing act, reflects elite newcomers considering different stakeholders' perspectives. Elites influence key decisions (Aguinis and Solarino, 2019), requiring an awareness of how stakeholders will react. Yet stakeholders may hold divergent expectations, complicating attempts to satisfy them. Analyzing CEO successions, Yi et al. (2020) found new CEOs

can successfully manage their early tenure through ingratiation and self-promotion to different sets of stakeholders, but these behaviors can backfire when witnessed by the same stakeholder. This exemplifies elites' motivation to implement balancing act behavior. Overall, while these three protect behaviors reflect limited and well-considered actions, with an eye to preserving reputation, this may only work in the short term as, ultimately, elite newcomers need to demonstrate performance (Zhang, 2008).

Turning to the three promote reputational behaviors, elite newcomers use these to demonstrate capability, but they also entail risk. The behavior of adding value pertains to proving one's abilities both in general and through finding niche areas to contribute. While adding value has similarities to core task performance behaviors (Griffin et al., 2007), in complex and ambiguous contexts, even seemingly standard performance-oriented behaviors might cause problems, such as threatening another elite's domain. As an example from our study, one new MP had the destabilizing experience of feeling he had performed well in advancing the interests of a group of constituents only to discover that another MP in his party felt threatened by his actions, creating unpleasant ripples for the new MP.

For the two remaining promote reputational behaviors, gaining and maintaining credibility is about proving performance to peers, while positioning oneself relates to impressing others to improve future opportunities. Elite newcomers understand the need to demonstrate performance (Dai et al., 2011; Fitzsimmons and Callan, 2016) but this entails risks, for example, acting before having sufficient understanding. As one new MP pithily noted, new MPs needed to be 'Prepared to stick your neck out a little bit. Some people do it badly and they get shot down' (Frank). Risky behaviors to gain advantage in competitive contexts can have negative consequences when they are unsuccessful, such as higher crash rates among NASCAR drivers feeling crowded from those directly below them in rankings (Bothner et al., 2007) and risky audit behaviors from auditors in partnership firms with more rivals (Pruijssers et al., 2020). Similarly, we suggest promote reputational behaviors require skilled use to achieve career benefits without overstepping the mark.

Limitations, future directions, and practical implications

A limitation of our study is the small sample size relative to many qualitative studies, although it represents 80% of the newcomer cohort, and includes new MPs from different political parties, both in power (government) and in opposition (non-government). This may have restricted our ability to identify the full range of socialization challenges, all aspects of reputational vulnerability, and consequent reputational behaviors. Moreover, at 2 years' tenure, new politicians may have forgotten or held biased recollections of past events and their reactions. While socialization continues throughout a person's career, it intensifies at boundary crossings (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979); new MPs likely remembered key events, but other quotidian details may have been overlooked. Bias might have resulted in self-aggrandizement by new MPs but our data suggest this was rare, with many initiating discussion of their mistakes. Longitudinal research designs could investigate any intensification of socialization challenges and elite newcomers' actions at boundary crossings, and their effects, whether positive,

negative, or mixed. However, elite informants are difficult to access, due not only to cost and time pressures, but also their concerns that disclosed information could be used against them or to advantage rivals (Solarino and Aguinis, 2021). Such concerns will be especially salient to elite newcomers in their early days in role, and hence research designs should mitigate apparent risk.

We chose a political context to provide an information-rich intensity case of elite socialization (Patton, 2002). More specifically, the context of politics is adversarial although bounded by legal and institutional frameworks, with politicians' actions having broad ramifications and therefore being of interest to many stakeholders. These factors help reveal the complex facets of elite newcomer socialization (Conger and Fishel, 2007; Dai et al., 2011), and echo findings from other settings in which elites work, for example, the competition and factionalism present in professional service firms, consultancies, and academia (Cooper et al., 1993; Empson and Alvehus, 2020; Pruijssers et al., 2020).

The four socialization challenges, which we tentatively position as new socialization dimensions within an emergent socialization process, require further research to refine their positioning, content, and effects. A fundamental question is whether these are correctly positioned as dimensions of socialization (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) understood within Jones' (1986) tripartite categorization, or whether they should be conceived at a broader level, perhaps reflecting entrenched forces (Fox and Korris, 2012). Exploration and delimitation of these new dimensions could be achieved by investigating environments that are adversarial or of high public interest. Competitive environments include hospitality, sales, and sports (Bani-Melhem et al., 2023; Pappas et al., 2023; Schuth et al., 2023); high scrutiny contexts with watchful stakeholders include publicly traded companies with shareholders, infrastructure companies whose services affect many citizens (e.g., energy, water), and government organizations held accountable by voters. Additionally, research could usefully investigate whether and how non-elite newcomers experience the new dimensions, such as new nurses who may face conflicting role demands (Frögéli et al., 2019) or new graduates whose hazardous work environment can leave them 'bloodied' (Coupland, 2001: 1115), perhaps reflecting opaque organizational workings.

A final area for future research is our proposed interaction of socialization dimensions, reputational vulnerability, and promote and protect reputational behaviors (Figure 1). Socialization tactics research typically investigates individual or aggregate effects (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Saks et al., 2007) whereas we propose the dimensions have compounding effects. Additionally, most previous research presents the positive effects of planned and structured institutionalized tactics to achieve proximal outcomes of role clarity and social acceptance (Bauer et al., 2007, 2025; Saks et al., 2007). In contrast, we suggest elites facing complex and testing socialization challenges aim to establish and safeguard reputation. Thus, future research could investigate whether reputational vulnerability has this pivotal, mediating role. Additionally, research is needed to investigate whether our positioning of promote and protect behaviors as outcomes is appropriate, in particular because this differs from typical modeling of newcomer proactive behaviors as antecedents to socialization (Bauer et al., 2025; Zhao et al., 2023). Finally, the proposed synergistic effects of promote and protect behaviors require investigation:

do elite newcomers who skillfully mix behaviors thereby support their reputation and achieve greater success (Lewis and Smith, 2022)?

From a practical perspective, our findings can guide organizations and elite newcomers. It can be argued that socialization challenges create a testing environment which, even if brutal, has efficiency benefits for institutions and colleagues: poor performers are quickly exposed and ejected (Graffin et al., 2013; Zhang, 2008). However, we question whether the use of taxing newcomer experiences is justifiable, with examples from non-elite newcomers including the stigmatization of police rookies (Van Maanen, 1982), new midwives made to feel like ‘pond scum’ (Fenwick et al., 2012: 2058), and newcomers experiencing negative treatment across healthcare (Nifadkar and Wu, 2022), law (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012), management (Montani et al., 2019), and education (Harris et al., 2020). Negative socialization practices result in high levels of newcomer burnout, exhaustion, intent to quit, and turnover, suggesting such practices are ethically dubious and probably inefficient (Gouglas et al., 2018; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012). Moreover, an adversarial environment may encourage selfish, inappropriate, and even illegal behavior, with subsequent negative repercussions for organizations (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2012; Pruijssers et al., 2020). Tailoring the context, and especially providing elite newcomers with positive social interactions, could produce better outcomes for elite newcomers and organizations (Bauer et al., 2025; Cooper-Thomas et al., 2014; Dai et al., 2011).

Our findings may help normalize the experience of reputational vulnerability for elite newcomers: of simultaneously trying to circumvent hidden liabilities and minimize harmful errors while also building reputation (Bourgoin and Harvey, 2018). Beyond this, awareness of and ability to leverage the six reputational behaviors may help elite newcomers manage conflicting demands and achieve reputational credence. Moreover, promote and protect behaviors can be deployed in various combinations. Awareness of these diverse behaviors may benefit not only elite newcomers but also those who have a vested interest in helping them be successful, such as chief whips, board chairs, and managing partners.

In conclusion, our research provides a first detailed analysis of elite newcomers’ socialization. Using new politicians entering NZ’s Beehive as an intensity case, our analysis reveals an array of complex and adversarial socialization challenges embedded in the context. These rendered new MPs reputationally vulnerable through risking or making errors. In response, new MPs combined protect and promote behaviors to defend their reputation and improve their opportunities. We suggest ways to refine and apply our findings, hoping to inspire further research that advances understanding and provides evidence-based suggestions for the effective organizational socialization of elite newcomers.

Acknowledgments

We would like to acknowledge the New Zealand Members of Parliament and parliamentary employees who generously gave their time and views and, thereby, enabled this research. We thank Christina Dykes, Elizabeth George, Prithviraj Chattopadhyay, and Vernon Miller for stimulating conversations and constructive feedback that helped us to refine our ideas. In the same vein,

we thank Associate Editor Mina Beigi and three anonymous reviewers for their persistence in challenging us to sharpen our thinking across the review process.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

AI usage declaration

The authors acknowledge that they have followed Human Relations' AI policy. No AI was used for preparing the manuscript.

ORCID iDs

Helena D Cooper-Thomas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4080-9704>

Jo Silvester  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2769-4722>

James Greenslade-Yeats  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2589-623X>

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1 The House refers to the Debating Chamber within the Beehive.

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Helena D Cooper-Thomas is a Professor of Organizational Behavior at Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand. Her research interests include development and change in employees' relationships with each other and their employing organization, in particular the onboarding and socialization of new employees. Helena has published in a range of journals, including *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Group and Organization Management*, *Journal of Management and Organization*, and *Journal of Business and Psychology*. She is co-editor of the forthcoming *Handbook of Onboarding and Organizational Socialization* (Edward Elgar Publishing). [Email: helena.cooper.thomas@aut.ac.nz]

Jo Silvester is a Professor of Psychology at Loughborough University, UK. Her interests focus on understanding the nature of political work and identifying and developing political capability in democratic contexts. Jo is the author of two UK Impact Case Studies that describe her work in designing inclusive candidate approval procedures for political parties, and value-based culture change in the British House of Commons. Her research has been published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Human Relations*, and *Harvard Business Review*. [Email: j.silvester@lboro.ac.uk]

James Greenslade-Yeats is a Research Fellow in Management at Auckland University of Technology. His interests include paradox, gossip, ambivalence, moral distress, and the human realities of working in healthcare. He has published his research in outlets including *Organization Studies*, *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Management Inquiry*, and *Group & Organization Management*. [Email: james.greenslade-yeats@aut.ac.nz]