

Collegiate Assimilation and Current Quality of High School Friendships

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**Abstract**

Jablin's (1982) organizational assimilation theory states that as individuals are assimilated into a new organization, new relationships are formed. The formation of new relationships means that less effort can be committed to maintaining past relationships. This study investigated whether a college student's progression through the phases of organizational assimilation via- encounter, metamorphosis, and exit phases, were predictive of the current quality of high school friendships. The results demonstrated that an individual's progression through each phase of assimilation was not predictive of past friendship quality.

*Keywords: Organizational Assimilation, Friendship Quality, College Students*

### Collegiate Assimilation and Current Quality of High School Friendships

Organizational assimilation refers to the process by which individuals move from being outside an organization to full membership within an organization (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001). Originally, organizational assimilation was studied as specific events isolated from another; however, in Jablin's (1982) theory of organizational assimilation, he describes the process as one cyclical phenomenon that reactivates upon transitioning between organizations. His theory of organizational assimilation dissects the process into four distinct, yet interrelated phases: anticipatory socialization, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Miller, 2006). These stages are made distinct by the communication phenomena that occur within each stage. Communication is the tool used to adopt an individual into the organization and likewise, the tool through which the individual establishes his/her niche in that organization (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Gibson & Papa, 2000; Miller, 2006).

In the past, the general population did not undergo more than one organizational assimilation process, for the culture in the United States prior to World War II encouraged a reciprocated loyalty between an organization and its members for a lifetime (Miller, 2006). However, the current cultural norms in the United States have transitioned such that it is common for individuals to go through membership in numerous organizations. Nyquist and Booth (1977) concluded that educational institutions, including colleges, are considered organizations and as such, are subject to examination under organizational theory. Therefore, in general, the transition from high school to college can be considered the first organizational assimilation process that many individuals undergo independent of the familial environment.

As with any other organization, the assimilation into college happens via communication.

Once an individual has assimilated into an organization, this implies that he/she has adopted the communication norms and disregarded past communication norms. This communication is central to establishing new relationships and maintaining the quality of already established relationships (Ruben & Stewart, 2006; Thayer, 1968; VandenBos, 2007). Therefore, communication norms, used to previously maintain high school friendship, change upon assimilating into a university. The purpose of this study is to determine whether the progression of assimilation into a university is predictive of friendship quality regarding high school friends.

### **Anticipatory Socialization**

The first phase of organizational assimilation is anticipatory socialization. This phase is characterized by the development of a set of expectations and beliefs concerning communication in a particular organization (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001), and is accomplished through prior research regarding work in the organization, a particular occupation, and the organization itself (Miller, 2006). This research comes from two main sources: (1) organizational literature and (2) interpersonal interactions with other applicants and members of that organization (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001). Here communication norms have only been researched, not encountered (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Miller, 2006). For a prospective college student, anticipatory socialization would involve researching about student life.

### **Encounter**

The second phase of organizational assimilation is encounter. This is sometimes referred to as the *breaking-in* period (Jablin, 1987; Van Maanen, 1975). In this phase, the individual confronts the reality of his/her organizational role and discovers discrepancies between expectations and reality (Hughes, 1958; Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Louis, 1980). The newcomer

learns the requirements of his/her new role in the organization and what its members believe to be normal patterns of behavior and thought (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Van Maanen, 1975). This learning process is achieved through communication (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001). For a college student, the encounter phase involves initially engaging in social and academic interactions and realizing his/her previous communication norms are not congruent with the university.

### **Metamorphosis**

The third phase of organizational assimilation is metamorphosis. This is when an individual makes the transition from *outsider* to *insider* by adopting new attitudes or behaviors and modifying existing ones (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001; Kramer, 1993a, 1993b, 1995, 1996; Miller, 2006). The new attitudes and behaviors manifest themselves through communication. Also through communication, members of the organization determine when an individual is fully accepted and assimilated as a congruous member of the organization (Jablin, 1987; Porter, Lawler, & Hackman, 1975). Therefore, previous communication norms that may have seemed abnormal have become natural to the fully assimilated individual. For a college student, this means that he/she fully identifies himself/herself as fully functioning member of the university.

### **Exit**

Exit, or disengagement, is the final phase of organizational assimilation. This phase is the process of leaving the organization which includes the individual beginning to disregard the norms and values of the current organization (Jablin, 1982, 1987, 2001). The individual also begins to acquire new information about the organization that they intend to assimilate into next. In this, the process of organizational assimilation becomes a cycle as anticipatory socialization begins again (Ojha, 2005). For a college student, this comes upon graduation when the student is

preparing to leave the university and enter an organization of employment.

### **Friendship - Quality**

Friendship is defined as a “voluntary interdependence between two persons over time, that is intended to facilitate social-emotional goals of the participants and may involve varying types and degrees of companionship, intimacy, affection, and mutual” (Hays, 1988, p.395). It is a voluntary relationship, although it can be sparked and fostered by forced interaction through mutual organizational membership (Devito, 1992). It is the voluntary nature of friendship that makes this relationship unique from any other (VanLear, Koerner, & Allen, 2006).

For friendship to exist, it must be reciprocated (Norwood & Duck, 2010). One person can have feelings of respect, appreciation, and liking for another, but unless those feelings are reciprocated no friendship exists (Devito, 1992). In this framework, friendship exists between two people and is not something that one person can possess alone (Norwood & Duck, 2010).

Friendship sets forth a particular union between two or more people that helps them to overcome boundaries between individual subjects (Dreher, 2009). Many characteristics of relationship quality are associated with reliance on basic norms of social interaction (Kline & Stafford, 2004). Following social norms can help to distinguish a high-quality friendship from a low-quality friendship (Metts, 1994). A friendship is balanced when the benefit-to-contribution ratios are equal for the two friends meaning that a friendship is balanced when, regardless of contributions, the benefits from the relationship are equal (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978).

When distance factors in, research shows that best friends (those more likely to end due to decreased affection) had the longest duration of friendships (Johnson et al., 2003). Close friends (those that interact in varied settings and have more exclusive interaction) had the second

longest duration. Casual friends (those more likely to end due to proximity) had the shortest duration.

Friendships serve six primary functions which are stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, self-validation, and emotional security (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Stimulating companionship refers to doing things together that arouse enjoyment, amusement, and excitement. This quality seems to be an important expectation of friends at all ages (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Help refers to providing guidance, assistance, information, advice, and other forms of tangible aid necessary to meet needs or goals (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Intimacy is sensitivity to the others' needs, providing an accepting context in which personal thoughts and feelings can be openly and honestly expressed, and openly and honestly disclosing personal information about oneself (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Reliable alliance refers to being able to count on continuing availability and loyalty of the friend (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Self-validation refers to perceiving the other as reassuring, agreeing, encouraging, listening, and otherwise helping to maintain one's self-image as a competent and worthwhile person (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). This is often achieved through social comparison and consensual validation of one's attributes and beliefs (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Emotional security alludes to the comfort and confidence provided by the friend in novel or threatening situations (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). It is assumed that individual friends fulfill some, if not all, of the functions (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Self-validation and emotional security consist of leaning on a friend as a way of establishing mutual trust. Emotional support provided by a friend is considered to be important (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999), and a good way to provide that support is to be an encouraging and reassuring friend. Reliable alliance also contributes to these

since it has to do with friendship pushing forward through conflict or any other problems (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999).

### **Rationale**

When making the move from one organization to another, like high school to college, people will build new relationships (Cummings, Lee, & Kraut, 2006). The new relationships formed also differ depending on what stage of assimilation an individual is in (Jablin, 1982). These new relationships mean that less time can be committed to past relationships (Cummings et al., 2006). Time is not one of the factors measured on the friendship quality measure (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999), so no work has shown that the transition into a new organization affects the quality of those past relationships. Thus, there is a need to study whether new relational roles indicated by the stage of assimilation affects the quality of past relationships. This study is focused on college students and the transition from high school to college and the new and past friendships that accompany the transition. Therefore, the research question is as follows:

RQ: Is a college student's stage of assimilation into a university predictive of the current quality of his or her high school friendships?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The participants included 162 undergraduate students at a moderate size southeastern university. A total of males 65 (40.1 %) and 97 females (59.9 %) participated. 20 (12.3%) participants were freshmen, 43 (26.5 %) were sophomores, 46 (28.4 %) were juniors, and 53 (32.7%) were seniors. The age range was 17-24 with a mean age of 20.27 ( $SD = 1.355$ ). 105 (64.8



%) of the participants had close friends come to college with them, and 83 (51.2 %) of those participants still considering them close friends.

### **Procedure**

Questionnaires were administered at the main campus library. This location was chosen because a majority of students at this university visit the library at some point in the week, giving researchers access to a variety of students. Participants were approached to take the questionnaires and asked if they would be willing to participate in a study involving their experiences at the university and their friendships from high school. Upon completion, questionnaires were returned to the researcher who thanked participants for their participation. It took most participants approximately 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire. No incentive was offered for participation.

### **Instrumentation**

The 53 item questionnaire consisted of two measures and biographic information. The first part of the questionnaire measured which stage of Jablin's (1982) organizational assimilation process at their current university participants fit into: encounter, metamorphosis or exit. Anticipatory socialization was not measured because all students were already attending the university and thus, had passed the anticipatory socialization stage. Each phase was measured by six seven-point Likert-type items with responses ranging from *Agree Strongly* to *Disagree Strongly*. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was run to assess the concurrent validity of the three measures. Three distinct factors loaded; however, one item for exit was removed because of a low factor loading. Items have good face validity based on construct definitions. Reliability scores for the measure of each phase were as follows: Encounter ( $\alpha = .874$ ), Metamorphosis ( $\alpha =$

.883), and Exit ( $\alpha = .828$ ).

An adaption of the McGill Friendship Questionnaire- Friend's Function (MFQ-FF) was used to measure friendship quality (Mendelson & Aboud, 1996). The MFQ-FF is a 30 item questionnaire that uses 5 items to measure each of the six functions of friendship which are indicators of quality: stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, emotional security, and self-validation. Items were altered to reference a specific group of friends rather than one specific friend. Additionally, scaling of items was adapted to a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from *Disagree Strongly* to *Agree Strongly* as opposed to the original 9-point measure ranging from *Never* to *Always*. The author reports good face, concurrent, and discriminant validity. The reliability of the subscales are as follows: Stimulating companionship ( $\alpha=.936$ ); Help ( $\alpha=.931$ ); Intimacy ( $\alpha =.621$ ); Reliable alliance ( $\alpha =.942$ ); Emotional security ( $\alpha=.930$ ); and Self-validation ( $\alpha =.929$ ). The overall reliability produced a score of  $\alpha=.966$ . The questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

### **Results**

A linear regression was run to see if an individual's progression through each phase of assimilation was a predictor of current friendship quality with high school friends. None of the phases were statistically significant predictors. Results are listed in Table 1.

A second regression was run to test the possibility that these results were confounded by participants having their close friends from high school come with them to college. This, however, was not the case. Even after participants who had their close friends from high school come with them to college were excluded, none of the phases were statistically significant predictors. These results are listed in Table 2.

### Discussion

The results of the linear regression did not give any evidence to imply that assimilation into college predicts friendship quality amongst friendships from high school. A person's progression through the three measured phases, encounter, metamorphosis, and exit, of assimilating into a university was not a statistically significant predictor of friendship quality as measured by the six constructs: stimulating companionship, help, intimacy, reliable alliance, emotional security, and self-validation (Mendelson & Aboud, 1999). Overall, this means that the progression of college students through the phases of organizational assimilation is not predictive of the current quality of friendships from high school. Because relationships are maintained through communication, and assimilation into college implies that communicative norms have changed for one party within a pre-existing high school friendship, this finding was unexpected.

This study was limited to a small sample at one public university in the southeastern United States. The sample also only included undergraduate students; graduate students were not included. The effects of assimilation may be greater on students working on graduate degrees because they have been through one process of assimilation already before continuing to graduate school and are further removed from high school. Also, the university as a whole was used to measure organizational assimilation. Certain organizations at the university, Greek, religious, or otherwise which would give a narrower view of assimilation, were not tested.

An increase in telecommunications technology which allows relationships to be maintained more easily (Cummings et al., 2006) has possibly negated any effects that organizational assimilation (Jablin, 1982) might produce. However, there were many participants that reported a decreased friendship quality with their closest friends from high school while at

college. This occurred in both cases when their close friends did not come to college with them and even when their close friends did come to college with them meaning that distance may not have been the cause. This phenomenon still desires an explanation, for in those cases, coming to college was related to a decrease in friendship quality. Future research should investigate what causes a decrease in high school friendships for some but not for others. This topic still has much potential for exploration and explanation.

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Table 1

*Results: Linear Regression*

	$\beta$	Beta
Constant	3.731	
Encounter	.087*	.085*
Metamorphosis	.219*	.185*
Exit	.084*	.084*

*\*p > .05*

Table 2

*Results: Linear Regression*

	$\beta$	Beta
Constant	4.433	
Encounter	.095*	.077*
Metamorphosis	.141*	.098*
Exit	-.058*	-.043*

*\*p > .05*

### Appendix A

Thank you for participating in this study. This study seeks to understand the relationship between your experience at the university and your friendships from high school. You have been invited to participate because your experience as a student can contribute to our understanding of friendship quality. Your participation is voluntary. You may change your mind later or stop participating even if you have already given consent.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher. You can contact the researcher at: Weston Duke, 509 11<sup>th</sup> Street Apt. 2005, Knoxville, TN 37916 and 865-765-4334.

The information collected in your survey will be entirely anonymous. No one will be able to access the information except the researcher. This survey takes approximately 10 minutes to complete.

By continuing you are giving your consent to participate in this study.

Please answer the following questions about your experience at the University of Tennessee scoring each as following: (1) Disagree Strongly, (2) Disagree, (3) Moderately Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Agree Moderately, (6) Agree, and (7) Agree Strongly.

1. I am still learning the norms of Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. I am still learning what is expected of me here.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. I go to school at Tennessee, but I would not yet call it my home.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. I am still learning my role at Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. I am still learning how to behave at Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. I am not yet fully accepted at Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. I know the norms of Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. I know what is expected of me here.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. I would call the University of Tennessee my home.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. I know my role at Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. I know how to behave at Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. I feel accepted at Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. I am beginning to disregard the norms of Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. I have fulfilled the expectations for me here.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Tennessee has been my home for a while, but I'm ready to move on.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. I have fulfilled my role at Tennessee and am ready to find a new one.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. I am beginning to disregard behaviors of Tennessee	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. I am seeking acceptance elsewhere besides Tennessee.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please answer the following questions about the current state of your closest friendships from when you were in high school scoring each as following: (1) Disagree Strongly, (2) Disagree, (3) Moderately Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Agree Moderately, (6) Agree, and (7) Agree Strongly.

1. They help me when I need it.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. They would make me feel comfortable in a new situation.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. They are people I can still tell private things to	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. They have good ideas about entertaining things to do.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. They still want to stay my friend if we don't see each other for a few months.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

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6. They make me feel smart.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. They can still make me laugh.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8. They know when I'm upset.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. They help me do things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. They point out things that I am good at.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. They would be good to have around if I were frightened.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. They would still want to be my friend even if we had a fight.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. They lend me things that I need.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. They could make me feel better if I were worried.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. I can still tell secrets to them.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. They would stay my friend even if other people criticized me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. They compliment me when I do something well.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
18. They are still exciting to talk to.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Disagree Strongly, (2) Disagree, (3) Moderately Disagree, (4) Neutral, (5) Agree Moderately, (6) Agree, and (7) Agree Strongly.							
19. They still make me feel special.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
20. They would stay my friend even if other people did not like me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
21. They still know when something bothers me.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
22. They are still exciting to be with.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
23. They can make me feel calmer if I were nervous.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
24. They would help me if I'm trying hard to finish something.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
25. They make me feel that I can do things well.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
26. They would still want to stay my friend even if we argued.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
27. They still show me how to do things better.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
28. They are still fun to sit and talk with	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
29. They are still easy to talk to about private things.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
30. They can make me feel better when I'm upset.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Please share the following information about yourself.

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Class in School: Freshman    Sophomore    Junior    Senior

Sex:    M    F

Did any of your close friends from high school come to UT?    Y    N

If yes, would you still consider them close friends?    Y    N