

# Exploring the socialisation experiences of female board members



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**Orientation:** The processes that newly appointed female board members undergo to gain the social knowledge and skills to migrate from outsiders to insiders are not well understood.

**Research purpose:** This study aimed to explore the socialisation experiences of female board members in South Africa to determine whether the process is conducive to ensuring these individuals, as newcomers, are better equipped to navigate the challenges and nuances of the board in a short amount of time.

**Motivation for the study:** A paucity of research exists concerning organisational socialisation processes (onboarding) that new female board members undergo to acquire the skills and social knowledge required to migrate from outsiders to insiders. This study intended to fill the gap.

**Research approach/design and method:** A qualitative exploratory research method was followed. An inductive thematic analysis was conducted from semi-structured interviews consisting of 15 female board members from various industries.

**Main findings:** The board organisational socialisation process needs to be strategic, deliberate, collaborative and iterative. A conceptual framework was developed from the summary of findings.

**Practical/managerial implications:** There is a need for organisations to reassess how they perform board organisational socialisation to achieve its intended outcome and maximise the board's performance and newcomer's performance predisposed to challenges upon entry.

**Contribution/value-add:** Using the proposed conceptual framework developed in this study, this research can lend itself useful to organisations, leaders and consultants involved in the socialisation of newcomers within non-traditional organisational structures.

**Keywords:** organisational socialisation; onboarding; newcomers; socialisation; female board members.

## Introduction

Women in leadership positions have been a topic of discussion for many years (Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). In academic literature and business forums, focus has been placed on the need and urgency to increase female representation in leadership positions in organisations and in government sectors (Besley, Folke, Persson, & Rickne, 2017; Kossek & Buzzanell, 2018). Over the past decade, in particular, corporate board gender diversity has been a topical issue globally, yet women remain grossly underrepresented on boards (Bertrand, Black, Jensen, & Lleras-Muney, 2019). Some of these debates have been about the role of women in the boardroom and the motives behind their appointments in organisations (Bertrand et al., 2019; Glass & Cook, 2016; Park, 2018; Seierstad, Warner-Søderholm, Torchia, & Huse, 2017).

Although studies have been conducted to understand the challenges and relational dynamics that women face post-appointment in leadership positions (Bertrand et al., 2019; Ercan, 2018; Field, Souther, & Yore, 2020; Glass & Cook, 2016), few studies have been conducted to understand the experiences of women who serve on corporate boards in South Africa. Even less understood is the organisational socialisation processes (also known as onboarding) that new female board members undergo to acquire the skills and social knowledge required to migrate from being outsiders to insiders.

Korte and Lin (2013) proposed a generally accepted understanding of the concept of organisational socialisation as a 'process by which organisations help newcomers learn about their work and adjust to the workplace' (p. 409). Such a process is implemented in order to reduce uncertainty

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and work anxiety and promote performance in a short period of time (Chao, O'Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994; Ellis et al., 2015). Studies broadly place emphasis on the importance of organisational socialisation as an element of increasing positive newcomer experiences (Allen, Eby, Chao, & Bauer, 2017); yet, little is offered on effective socialisation processes required to achieve success in newcomer experiences of female board members.

The South African population is made up of 51% women (Statistics South Africa, 2019). South Africa is considered one of the leaders in its efforts to increase gender diversity on its corporate boards (Eastman, Rallis, & Mazzucchelli, 2016). Despite this, Viviers, Mans-Kemp and Fawcett (2017) and the Business Women's Association of South Africa (2017) noted that South African women serving companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) represent approximately one-fifth (20%) of all directors on the JSE.

## Orientation

Literature supports the benefits of increasing women on corporate boards (Glass & Cook, 2016; Lai, Srinidhi, Gul, & Tsui, 2017; McGuinness, Vieito, & Wang, 2017; Perrault, 2015; Post & Byron, 2015). Research has indicated that female leaders contribute to increased innovation, stronger corporate governance, stronger corporate social responsibility, more diverse views, increased financial performance and increased quality of audit processes within organisations (Glass & Cook, 2016; Lai et al., 2017; McGuinness et al., 2017). Moreover, according to Post and Byron (2015), diversity in board composition 'promotes activities related to boards' primary responsibilities' (p. 27). While improvements are made to address underrepresentation in South Africa, the pace of increasing women on boards remains a challenge (Viviers et al., 2017).

According to the *South African Companies Act No 71 of 2008* (Republic of South Africa, 2008), a director is considered a member of a company's board. The board of directors is expected to manage the strategic affairs of the company on behalf of its shareholders (and stakeholders). It is incorporated by South African legislation (Republic of South Africa, 2008). While the minimum number of directors to serve on a board is regulated by the *Companies Act No 71 of 2008* (Republic of South Africa, 2008), the diversity of its members in terms of culture, race and gender of the board composition and structure is not regulated (Business Women's Association of South Africa, 2017). Moreover, some board members are employees (executive directors) of the organisation, while others are not (non-executive directors). The JSE only requires that companies listed on its stock exchange adhere to the principles of the King IV code, which in turn requires that a majority of the board comprise independent non-executive directors (Institute of Directors, South Africa, 2016).

Whereas studies have addressed the socialisation experiences of newcomers and managers (Delobbe, Cooper-Thomas, & De Hoe, 2016; Korte, Brunhaver, & Sheppard, 2015), the research

gap is that few studies have focused on board members post-appointment. The IoDSA NED Nomination Process Research Report (2020) posited that board members in South Africa were usually offered a structured and formal process of induction post-appointment. One of the duties of a company secretary is to ensure that a proper induction is offered to board members upon entry (Institute of Directors, South Africa, 2016). Induction programmes are not to be confused with organisational socialisation. Induction is described as a once-off subsection of organisational socialisation, whereas organisational socialisation as a whole is an all-encompassing process that facilitates newcomer adjustment in the organisation (Coldwell, Williamson, & Talbot, 2019).

There appears to be no comprehension of the standard against which female board members are socialised to become influential board members in the shortest amount of time. However, Glass and Cook (2016) hold that there would be obstacles unique to female leaders that will affect effective leadership. Most studies do not consider the means to overcome the dynamics, subtleties and behavioural elements experienced by women appointed on corporate boards.

There is a problem in that women's integration into leadership positions is neither defined nor understood (Glass & Cook, 2016). In the boardroom, female board members are said to experience increased scrutiny over their male counterparts, the old boys club and undue pressure to assimilate (Zajji, Wilson-Prangle, & Ndletyana, 2020). Some women have reported experiencing tokenism, invisibility and hypervisibility in the boardroom as a result of underrepresentation (Glass & Cook, 2016; Viviers et al., 2017) and thus have had to work harder to gain credibility (Kakabadse et al., 2015). Existent research has recognised the importance of organisational socialisation in adjusting newcomers to enhance role clarity, job satisfaction, more outstanding performance and lower turnover (Ellis et al., 2015; Nasr, El Akremi, & Coyle-Shapiro, 2019). However, newcomer integration is relatively explained from the lens of employees in an organisation where there exists a manager and, most likely, other team members or peers (Delobbe et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2015; Korte et al., 2015). The deviation and reflection on a non-traditional sense of organisational design and structure are largely unexplored in socialisation research.

This study aimed to expand on existing literature by exploring and providing insights into the socialisation experiences of newcomers that are understood to be predisposed to challenges upon entry. Such newcomers do not typically form part of the traditional employer-employee relationship in the organisational structure.

## Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of this research was to explore the organisational socialisation experiences of female board members. The intention was to determine whether the socialisation process is conducive to ensuring that female board members, as newcomers, are better equipped to navigate the nuances of the

board in a short amount of time. Increasing female representation through targets may well be a short-term solution; however, changing culture may be a longer-term solution.

The study aimed to expand on the organisational socialisation theoretical process by focusing on female board members in South Africa. The aim was further to explore the effectiveness and value of the process concerning a group of individuals who are predisposed to challenges upon entry into the organisation.

The research objectives were to:

1. understand the kind of organisational socialisation (onboarding) process that female board members underwent;
2. investigate the board's criteria, policies and procedures for determining the socialisation processes; and
3. explore how female board members found the process in terms of usefulness.

## Literature review

Organisational socialisation is a process that is intended to ensure that newcomers in an organisation are well equipped and prepared to progressively integrate from being outsiders to insiders in the organisation (Chao et al., 1994; Delobbe et al., 2016). Such processes are implemented in order to reduce uncertainty and work anxiety and promote performance in a short period of time (Chao et al., 1994; Ellis et al., 2015). King IV further stated that the board of directors has a responsibility to induct new members for these members to ensure meaningful contribution in the shortest amount of time (Institute of Directors, South Africa, 2016).

Various literature focusing on organisational socialisation has placed emphasis on three pillars of significance in fostering and facilitating newcomer adjustment (Delobbe et al., 2016; Ellis, Nifadkar, Bauer, & Erdogan, 2017). (1) Organisational tactics (such as training facilities) offered by the organisation (Allen et al., 2017; Ellis et al., 2015), (2) relational resources using managerial and team member support (Ellis et al., 2015) and (3) proactive behaviours of newcomers (Ellis et al., 2017) are recognised as essential pillars during socialisation. Such pillars have been given attention in exploring the experiences of newcomers in the socialisation process (Nasr et al., 2019). It is further suggested that the exchange between newcomers and the socialisation facilitators during the socialisation process impacts newcomers' obligation that is perceived by newcomers towards the organisation (Delobbe et al., 2016).

Some scholars have based their assessment of organisational socialisation on the theory underpinning social exchanges to evaluate the value that is perceived in the relationship between the newcomer and other agents (Delobbe et al., 2015; Woodrow & Guest, 2020). This study drew on social exchange theory as a theoretical framework that defines the influence that social exchange relationships have in the process of organisational socialisation. This study aimed to

link the value and reciprocation of social exchanges with newcomer experiences. This theory was characterised and described by the seminal work of Homans (1958). The researcher employed the social exchange theory to expand on the three key facilitators of organisational socialisation in the context of female board members.

## Organisational socialisation tactics

There is a body of literature that considers organisational socialisation tactics (such as formal training facilities and processes of integration offered by the organisation) through two lenses. On the one hand, socialisation tactics are formal and synonymous with institutional and standardised organisational socialisation processes (Delobbe et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2015). On the other hand, there is an introduction of individual socialisation tactics, which are those considered to demonstrate a more informal and less structured approach to socialising newcomers such as proactive newcomer behaviour to initiate change (Ellis et al., 2015) or relationship building at work. It is unclear whether the dichotomy and iterations of research on organisational socialisation tactics have brought about the understanding of newcomer experiences in totality. However, organisational socialisation tactics have been understood to yield positive outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Allen et al., 2017). They have a direct influence on the newcomer adjustment process (Ellis et al., 2017).

Separate studies have formulated varied conclusions about the socialisation tactics (Nasr et al., 2019). One such conclusion, which supports Ellis et al. (2017), is that socialisation processes require a level of comprehension of the synergy between formal and informal socialisation tactics (Nasr et al., 2019). Formal socialisation tactics, such as newcomer training, have been argued to be effective in enhancing role clarity of newcomers which, in turn, leads to higher job satisfaction and performance (Delobbe et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2015; Nasr et al., 2019).

Although support and consensus have been shown for formal or institutionalised socialisation tactics (Liao, Huang, & Xiao, 2017; Nasr et al., 2019), studies have highlighted the importance of informal socialisation tactics (Nasr et al., 2019; Nifadkar, 2020). Nasr et al. (2019) argued that a formal and standardised format of socialising newcomers could negatively impact, and even lessen, the team member role in newcomers' social integration, as newcomers perceive team members as providers of support.

To address the challenge posed by Nasr et al. (2019), suggestions have been made for a balance between the use of formal and informal socialisation processes (Nasr et al., 2019; Nifadkar & Bauer, 2016; Trainer, Jones, Pendergraft, Maupin, & Carter, 2020). It has been suggested that organisations introduce team members or peers as an informal part of the formal process (Nasr et al., 2019). In a more digital age, Leidner, Gonzalez and Koch (2018) referred to technology use as a means of encouraging interaction with peers and relationship building.

## Relational resources

It is argued that relationships formed at work play a significant role in the socialisation process (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). A reciprocal relationship is often formed between the employer and employee (Delobbe et al., 2016; Smith, Gillespie, Callan, Fitzsimmons, & Paulsen, 2017). This relationship would improve the process of newcomers adjusting to their new environment (Delobbe et al., 2016; Woodrow & Guest, 2020) as socialisation is understood to be a period during which newcomers are faced with significant uncertainty and insecurity. These relationships are referred to as relational resources.

## Team members

Liu, Bamberger, Wang, Shi and Bacharach (2020) explored another dimension of organisational socialisation by placing emphasis on vicarious learning. This relates to newcomer behaviours that occur predominantly because of modelling and learning vicariously through peers or other team members and forming stronger bonds with those parties. Ellis et al. (2015) defined this as part of relational resources that are explained as 'aspects of the social environment that support positive integration and social acceptance' (p. 18).

Studies have highlighted the significance of experienced team members as agents of socialisation for newcomers (Nasr et al., 2019; Ellis et al., 2015). Newcomers, in this context, are understood to form relationships, particularly with team members, co-workers or peers, that facilitate a better adjustment process through information-sharing by team members (Delobbe et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2015, 2017).

Whereas formal organisational socialisation tactics heighten role clarity, social integration is arguably increased by formal processes and team member support (Nasr et al., 2019; Trainer et al., 2020). However, it is argued that the quality of the relationship between the newcomer and team member is a key determinant of team member usefulness and value in the socialisation process.

## Leader members

An essential contribution to the literature on team members is the literature on supervisors or what is also referred to as leaders or managers (Delobbe et al., 2016; Redelinguys, Rothmann, & Botha, 2020; Sluss & Thompson, 2012). Ellis et al. (2017) and Nifadkar and Bauer (2016) suggested that part of the effective organisational socialisation process is the role played by the supervisor of the newcomers. In addition, Delobbe et al. (2016) and Matta and Van Dyne (2020) focused not only on the role of this agent but also on the quality of the relationship between the newcomer and the supervisor. Therefore, the usefulness of supervisors in the socialisation process is only as practical as the quality thereof (Delobbe et al., 2016; Matta and Van Dyne, 2020). This suggests that the higher the quality of the relationship between newcomers and the leader member, the better the outcome of the socialisation process (Nasr et al., 2019).

For female board members, specifically, Zajiji et al. (2020) suggest that the role of the chairman of the board is of significance in navigating the boardroom dynamics and increasing the quality of exchange between newcomers and other board members.

According to the researchers on observation, it is clear from existing literature that team members and managers contribute to the socialisation process of newcomers. However, the findings from literature are inconclusive about the variations of these relationships that will heighten newcomer experiences, thereby improving newcomer adjustment. Additionally, these forms of relationships have had limited testing against non-traditional work relationships such as a board of directors (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). Therefore, from the literature observed by the researcher, the behaviours that motivate the usefulness of these agents are less evident in the context of the newcomer's experiences of board members.

## Newcomer proactive behaviours

According to Allen et al. (2017) and Trainer et al. (2020), an essential element in the success of the organisational socialisation process is that which is influenced by the self-regulation of newcomers much like organisational citizenship behaviour (Tashtoush & Eyupoglu, 2020). Here, a significant emphasis is placed on newcomers' self-efficacy, individual traits and characteristics (Ozyilmaz, Erdogan, & Karaeminogullari, 2018; Yu & Davis, 2016). Newcomers' proactive behaviours are said to be a critical component for transitioning into active participants in the organisation (Armstrong, Van der Lingen, Lourens, & Chen, 2018; Yu & Davis, 2016). Whilst the theme of newcomer characteristics is broad, researchers have found that factors such as newcomer personality, learning, creativity, curiosity and prior work experiences have an impact on the organisational socialisation process (Allen et al., 2017; Tan et al., 2016; Trainer et al., 2020; Zajiji et al., 2020). Moreover, Ellis et al. (2015) and Trainer et al. (2020) posited that personal characteristics and newcomer attributes positively affect the socialisation process. The symbiotic relationship between the perceptions formed by newcomers and those formed by managers seems helpful during socialisation (Ellis et al., 2017; Fuller et al., 2015).

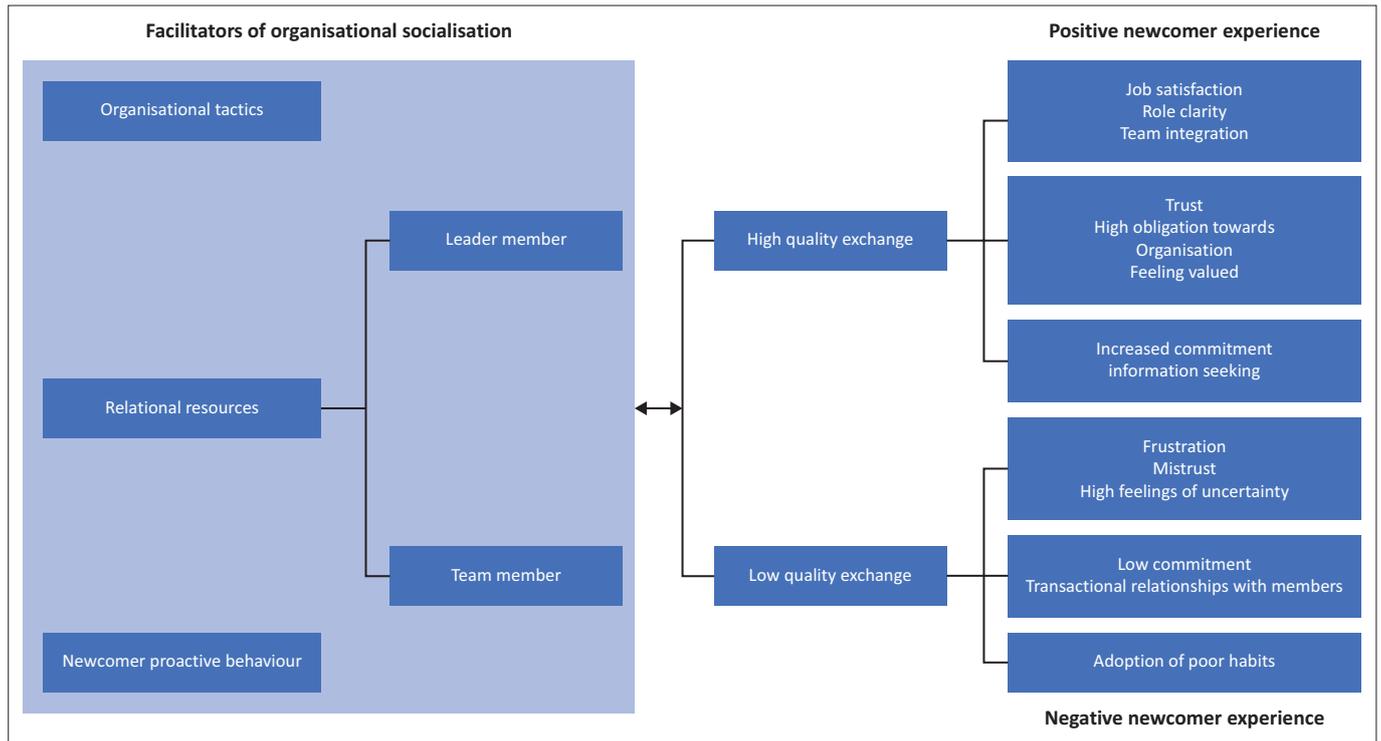
A summary of critical relationships that act as facilitators during the organisational socialisation process is demonstrated in a presumed framework in Figure 1.

## Research design

The following sections convey the research approach, research strategy and research method employed in this study and are discussed under the relevant headings.

## Research approach

As the researcher intended to understand and explore the unknown regarding the socialisation process of female board



**FIGURE 1:** Literature review organisational socialisation framework.

members, a qualitative approach was selected for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Furthermore, the researcher intended to interpret and draw conclusions based on the information provided by participants from their own description of reality and alleged experiences, thus ensuring that the research followed an interpretivist approach (Leitch, Hill, & Harrison, 2010).

This research was based on an inductive approach as the researcher could conclude from the data obtained (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher created propositions based on an analysis of the data in which participants had made meaning of their situation and experiences. This allowed for flexibility and the ability for the researcher to generate new theory (Patton, 2002).

A mono-method qualitative study was adopted as the researcher aimed to explore and comprehend the context of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews to gain more profound knowledge and understanding of the research topic, making the research design explorative (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In doing so, the researcher analysed data to understand and gain insights into newcomer experiences of female corporate board members which had not yet been explored (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Therefore, the research method was exploratory because the study was aimed at entering into a field that was yet to be explained (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Research strategy

The research was conducted in a specific time frame, which limited the time in which the report could be

completed. Consequently, the time horizon for the research was cross-sectional (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This study aimed to explore and understand women's experiences at a particular point in time in their lives to assess similarities and differences in their stories to conclude. For this reason, the research strategy was narrative (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with semi-structured questions as this allowed the researcher to gain deeper insight into the explorative research (Zikmund, Babin, Carr, & Griffin, 2013).

### Research method

The following sections detailed the method in researching this study.

#### Research setting

Because of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the intended face-to-face interviews were replaced with interviews through virtual conferencing facilities, such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom. The interviews were professional and in a quiet setting where the participants seemed most comfortable. The interview sessions were guided, with limited control over the conversation from the researcher's part.

#### Entrée and establishing researcher roles

The researcher played the interviewer's part by asking the questions and used software to transcribe the data. This is expanded on in the section 'Data Recording'.

## Research participants and sampling methods

The target population for the research was women from organisations in South Africa that had female board member representation. The researcher adopted purposive, non-probability, snowball sampling to ensure that access to the female board members, most of whom served on multiple boards, was obtained. The final sample of the research comprised 15 female board members from various industries including the financial sector, mining, construction, healthcare, consulting, education and legal fields to ensure triangulation. The participants varied in skills and qualifications and held positions of seniority in their respective careers. They served on boards as either executive directors, non-executive directors or a combination of the two. The sample included participants who had experience as board committee chair but none as chair of the board of directors. Most participants were between 40 and 60 years of age, with the youngest women aged between 35 and 40 years.

## Data collection methods

Data collection began only after the ethical clearance approval was received from the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS) research ethics committees. The questions asked to the participants (see Table 1) were deduced from prearranged themes from secondary data retrieved from the reviewed literature (Saunders & Lewis, 2018).

The reviewed literature formed the foundation of the following research questions:

**TABLE 1:** Details of participants.

Industry experience as board member	Number of participants
Banking	3
Consulting	4
Construction	1
Education	3
Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)	1
Healthcare	1
Legal	3
Mining and energy	6
<b>Executive and non-executive director experience</b>	
Executive	7
Non-executive	13
<b>Type of organisation</b>	
JSE-listed organisation	8
Private company	8
Non-profit organisation	4
State-owned company	7
Trust	3
<b>Participants years' experience as board member</b>	
0 to 10 years	8
11 to 20 years	5
21 to 30 years	2
<b>Age distribution</b>	
30 to 39 years	6
40 to 49 years	3
50 to 59 years	5

JSE, Johannesburg Stock Exchange.

- What kind of organisational socialisation processes do female board members undergo and who played a role in the process?
- Which criteria, policy and/or procedures, if any, were present in conducting of the socialisation process?
- How do female board members find/experience the socialisation process in terms of usefulness?

All 15 interviews were scheduled telephonically or by email. Disclosure of the recording, the interview process and confidentiality were confirmed with participants and reiterated at the beginning of each interview.

The researcher informed participants about the purpose of the study. However, the interview guide questions were not provided to participants before the interview. In the introductory phase, participants were encouraged to speak freely and add further insights into their experiences. The interviewer utilised open-ended questions to encourage participants to feel free to provide complete and in-depth disclosure (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Such questions were intended to provoke unexpected insights. Finally, the participants were allowed to provide additional information or key insights they wished to express, to support the research objectives or solicit ideas for future research.

## Data recording

The Otter.ai software was used for recording and transcribing the recordings into meaningful text, rather than using external resources, to heighten confidentiality. This software was not always 100% accurate. However, the researcher made sure to check errors on text against the recording shortly after each interview. The actual names of participants were not documented in the research. Instead, participants were numerically classified, and their data were translated appropriately in a separate file.

## Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

To ensure that the research was valid and reliable and to limit bias from the interviewer and participants, the researcher utilised a standard list of interview questions that formed the basis and guideline of the interviews.

The researcher has outlined the research design and how the data were collected and analysed to increase credibility. They explained the research process and the tools and process to participants. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the conversation without penalty. Transparency was practiced throughout the data collection process. The population in this study was limited to female board members and the data collection period was from 08 September 2020 to 18 October 2020. Therefore, using the methodology discussed, it is believed that the study can be conducted on other board members or other groups of newcomers in similar markets.

All interviews were recorded and documented in full and can therefore be confirmed to enhance dependability. The researcher ensured that coding and recoding were conducted systematically, and several times, using the ATLAS-ti software.

### Data analysis

On the first attempt of analysis, the research generated 60 codes. The researcher noted a significant reduction in codes by the time the eighth interview was being analysed. New codes being generated were less than 10 at that stage. In addition, no new codes and themes were produced as the researcher reached the 12th interview.

The researcher coded and interpreted patterns to assess meaning, not frequency. Common themes were identified from the data which was collected. In essence, an analysis was conducted to generate codes from the responses to build categories based on similarities. This was done several times. Each interview was transcribed verbatim to formulate themes. These themes were subsequently categorised to derive codes that were repeatedly analysed to form various conclusions. The codes and categories were then analysed to generate themes that were, in turn, analysed to conclude and to elaborate on main categories. A thematic analysis was thus used to arrange data according to patterns and ideas identified repeatedly from the data (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

## Findings and discussion

The findings of this study provided further insights into the organisational socialisation process, particularly of newcomers who are predisposed to specific challenges.

### Outline of the results

There were several themes from the research results which the researcher found relevant to answer the research questions. The connection of the results from the interviews conducted and the reviewed literature of this study are discussed below.

#### Theme: Key role players

When analysing the nature of organisational processes undergone by participants, findings revealed the importance of various agents and facilitators in the socialisation of female board members. Key to the findings was the role played by the chairman of the board, the company secretary, the committee chairman and the CEO and/or CFO.

Indications were that female board members expected the company secretary to play a key role in their socialisation process. This role was deemed a common factor in the experience of most participants. The company secretary was identified not only as a facilitator of the organisational socialisation process from an organisational point of view but also as a collaborator and enabler of the process. A collaborative, multipronged approach was, however, noted

as a missing key factor by participants. 'I don't think it is the company's secretary's responsibility ... It is a collective approach where each person should actually speak to their expertise or their field of responsibility' (Participant 7).

The documented literature highlights the importance of formal organisational socialisation tactics. The company secretary's role is part of the formal socialisation process in ensuring formal facilitation of the process. The quality of exchanges between the company secretary and that of the newcomers increased the newcomers' feelings of trust and role clarity.

However, participants indicated that they also required the involvement of a leader member, as suggested by Ellis et al. (2017), Nifadkar and Bauer (2016) and Zajiji et al. (2020). One participant referred to the active involvement of the board chairman in socialising new board members as something which adds usefulness to the entire process, 'it does not mean that the chair should physically do everything himself or herself, but definitely they should be involved, you know why? Because it adds gravitas to this thing' (Participant 2).

Relational resources outline the significance of a leader member and/or a team member to acclimate newcomers. The presence of the chairman of the board, as a leader, assisted in addressing the dynamics in the boardroom and enforcing a level of authority to the process of integration. This exchange, when positive, further increased team integration.

#### Theme: Newcomer behaviour and time considerations

It is asserted that the success of socialising newcomers has a great deal to do with the characteristics and individual attributes that the newcomers possess (Allen et al., 2017; Trainer et al., 2020). Participants confirmed this assertion. With each participant, where the process of socialisation was found lacking or dissatisfactory, participants found ways to navigate the situation and to ensure that they carve their own way in making a success of the process.

Findings suggested two more propositions. Firstly, unlike the personality or experience of board members (Zajiji et al., 2020), participants seemed determined to make the socialisation process work because they felt that there was an expectation that they knew and understood what they were doing. This study found that the main source of proactive behaviours demonstrated by participants was the pressure to succeed and to perform at the highest level in the organisation as an expectation from the organisation and existing board members. Participant 12 specifically referred to this as 'silent pressures'. This finding is particularly consistent with the feeling of hypervisibility that women are inclined to feel in senior positions (Settles et al., 2019).

Secondly, learning and curiosity were highlighted in literature as another factor that heightened proactive behaviours by newcomers (Allen et al., 2017; Tan, Au, Cooper-Thomas, & Aw, 2016; Trainer et al., 2020). Findings, in this regard, were consistent with the literature. Some participants viewed

organisational socialisation as a duty that came with the work of being a board member. Participants viewed learning and curiosity as a standard item when seeking to be socialised as a newcomer; the two were not viewed as mutually exclusive. The responsibility that comes with being on a board increases the intensity in which participants demonstrated their commitment towards the organisation.

From a timing point of view, irrespective of newcomer behaviours, participants found that the process was effectively not a process, but rather a one-time engagement over one or two sessions. This implies that what participants viewed as organisational socialisation was in fact an induction process, a subsection of organisational socialisation (Coldwell et al., 2019). Throughout the interview process, participants used the words 'induction' and 'organisational socialisation' interchangeably.

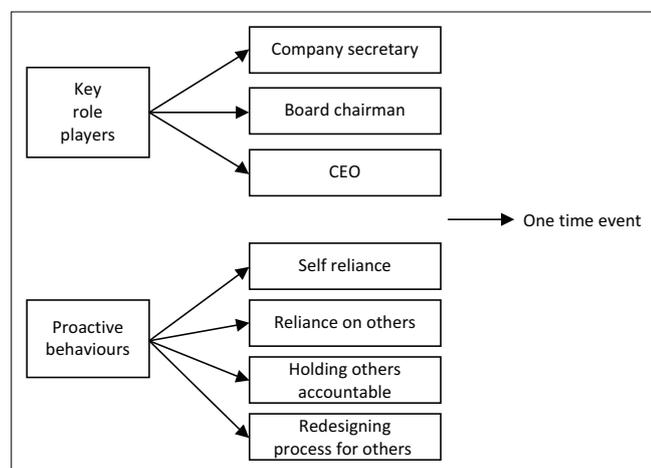
Time may be viewed as an organisational tactic. If the quality of training, for example, is also dependent on the length or frequency of exchange, then it is likely, from the findings, that participants would have felt valued thereby increasing job satisfaction. Participants were specific that the absence of quality training because of time constraints suggested to them that the organisation viewed the socialisation process as a tick-box exercise for compliance purposes:

'... I think from the company's perspective they also just want to tick off that they have done it. It is just one of those tasks, they have got to do it every year and it is probably a bit frustrating if whenever there is a new director that joins, because for the company it seems a repetitive exercise but obviously for the board member it is a new learning.' (Participant 7)

In relation to Research Question 1 (What kind of organisational socialisation processes do female board members undergo?), the following themes were derived:

1. Key role players.
2. Newcomer considerations.
3. Time considerations.

Figure 2 is a graphical representation of the summary.



CEO, chief executive officer.

FIGURE 2: Summary of research question 1.

## Theme: Formal and informal organisational considerations

Findings, as summarised in Figure 3, confirmed that congruence between literature and the results from the interviews of formal and informal organisational socialisation tactics were essential for board members. More importantly, findings indicated that the structured and procedural approach of socialisation was appreciated and that relational resources were equally valued for the process. Participants stressed the importance of peer support to the extent that 'peer mentorship' (Participant 5) was suggested as a consideration by the board to enhance the level of comfort and integration of members. Moreover, one-on-one meetings with key members of the board and executive managers and site visits were highlighted by participants as crucial. Relational aspects of good quality assisted in team integration.

What was surprising about these findings was that none of the participants had a solid measure of what it meant to be successfully integrated into the organisation. Even more surprising was that organisations themselves did not proactively measure whether the intended objective of the process was achieved.

In relation to Research Question 2 (Which criteria, policy and/or procedures, if any, were present in conducting the socialisation process?), the following themes were derived:

1. Formal and informal organisational considerations.
2. Measurement of success.

Figure 3 is a graphical representation of the summary.

## Theme: The usefulness of organisational socialisation

When participants were asked what they found most and least helpful, not much was found not to be useful, other than the approach followed.

Findings demonstrated agreement with the literature. Not only the emphasis was placed on the importance of female representation as a key component of the socialisation process for female newcomers but also the representation

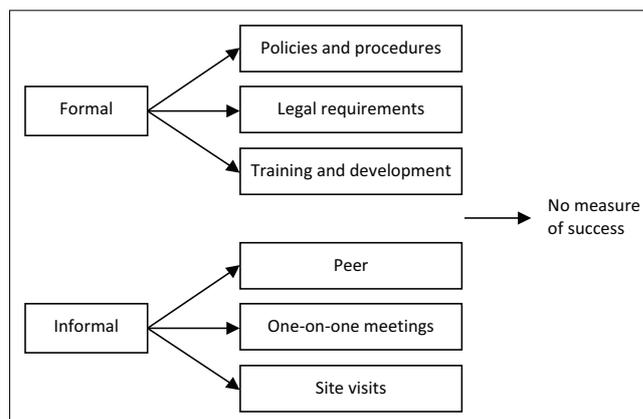


FIGURE 3: Summary of research question 2.

was heightened where female support was coming from women in positions of influence, such as committee chairmen. Participant 5 agreed by emphasising:

‘That is the other part, the fact that there are other females within the board and we are playing key roles and helping a person to quickly become part of the team and to be at their best.’

Findings further highlighted the significant difference in the manners in which female board members were socialised in relation to the size of the organisation. Participants indicated that the informal and unstructured process was more likely to take place in smaller organisations, while the formalised and standardised socialisation process typically took place in larger organisations. This could be because of the compliance factor attached to larger organisations, which further explains the view of some participants that organisational socialisation felt to them like a tick-box exercise that organisations used merely to comply with regulatory requirements.

Even in the imperfect state of the socialisation process, almost all participants found value in their socialisation process (Participants 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, & 14). However, what participants considered most useful varied between the use of technology, the representation of women on the board and the type of organisation. This was said to impact the kind of socialisation process that participants would receive, thereby increasing or decreasing the usefulness of the process to newcomers.

In relation to Research Question 3 (How do female board members find/experience the socialisation process in terms of usefulness?), the following themes were derived:

1. Technology.
2. Characteristics of the board.
3. Characteristics of the organisation.

Figure 4 is a graphical representation of the summary.

## Practical implications

The conceptual framework aims to expand and synthesise findings from the interviews with the reviewed literature to inform proposed concepts that can be of use to the board of organisations (see Figure 5).

The socialisation support mechanisms offered by the organisation should form part of the formalised, structured and standardised socialisation process tools. The assumption that board members are at a specific level and should therefore know everything about the organisation

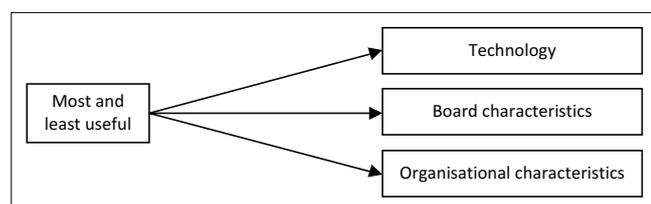


FIGURE 4: Summary of research question 3.

and its industry is a notion that should be reconsidered. Board members are like other newcomers in any organisation. They are appointed from different industries with different levels of experience. The assumption that organisations have little to contribute to the socialisation process of board members, particularly those of female board members, must be addressed. This is a strategic imperative not only because women are said to be inclined to facing various challenges upon entry as board members (Glass & Cook, 2016) but also because the representation of women on boards is still lagging behind in South Africa (Viviers et al., 2017).

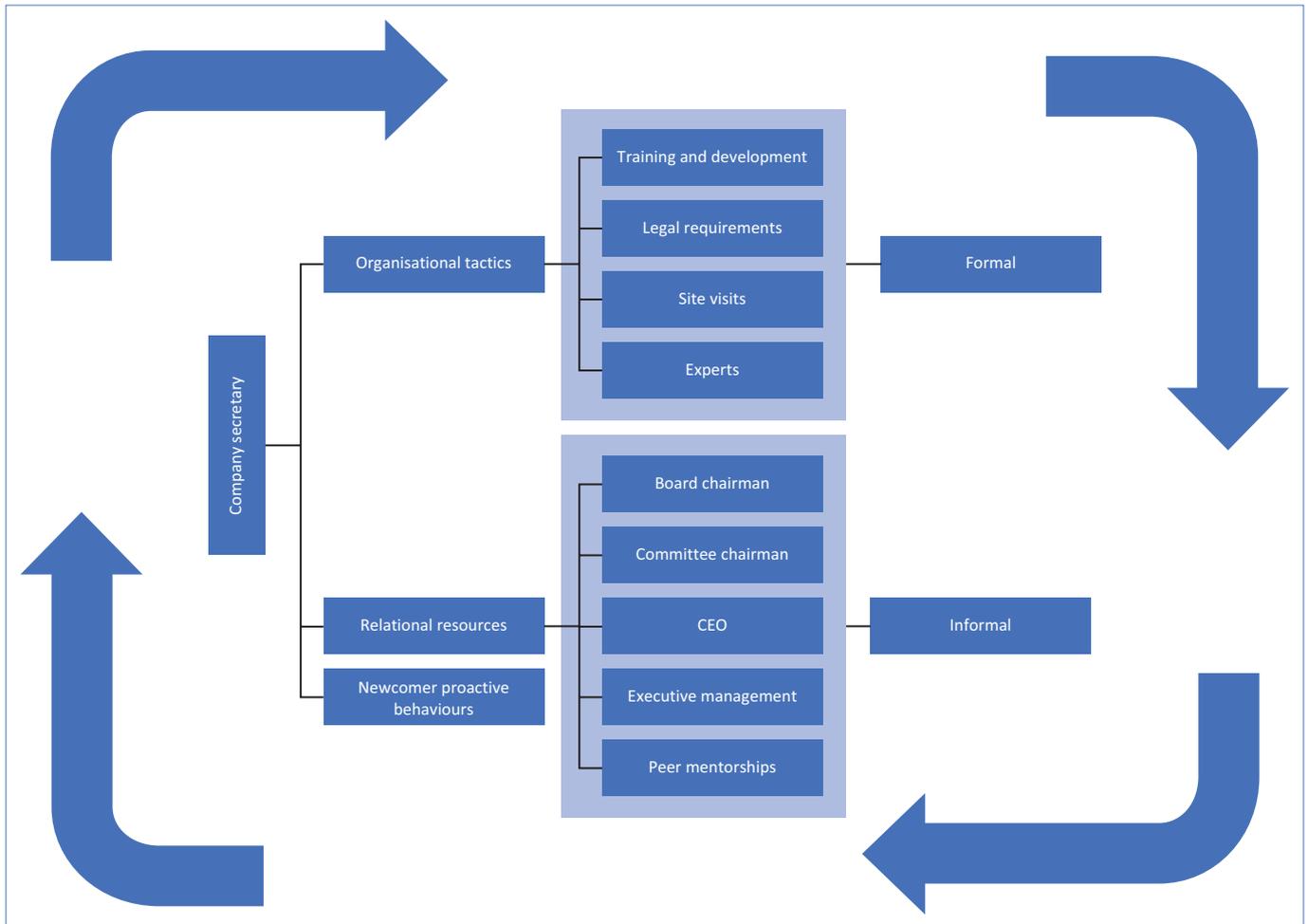
The key proposed concepts of the framework are listed below to be expanded in a follow-up article:

- The company secretary.
- Organisational socialisation tactics.
- Relational resources.
- Newcomer proactive behaviours.
- Measurement tools.

There is a need for the board to reassess how it performs its organisational socialisation to achieve the intended outcome out of the process. This is for the benefit of the board, the newcomers and ultimately the shareholders of the organisation.

## Limitations and recommendations

Qualitative research is exposed to a certain degree of bias from the interviewer, the participants and the interpreter because it is subjective (Shenton, 2004). There are several other limitations and drawbacks to this study. Firstly, the researcher, as an interviewer, was a novice at conducting interviews. Although the researcher conducted pilot interviews to test the flow of interview questions, the lack of expertise in interviewing skills might have compromised the research findings. Secondly, the time allocation for the research was limited, thereby reducing the amount of time for data collection. Thirdly, because the participants' lived experiences were recorded at a specific point in time, the participants' perspectives may be somewhat distorted. Fourthly, because of the research sample size, findings cannot be generalised and assumed to represent the entire population. A larger sample may help ensure that the findings of the research are more robust. Fifthly, the research excluded male board members and other minority groups which could, if included, contribute to further insights on the research topic. Therefore, there was bias towards female board members. Sixthly, the size of the board and that of the organisation were not taken into account. Size may have a significant impact on the type of organisational socialisation practices in an organisation. Lastly, some of the board members hold high profiles in publicly listed organisations and state-owned entities. Some might have withheld some essential information because of the public nature of the research, albeit confidential.



CEO, chief executive officer.

**FIGURE 5:** Conceptual framework based on findings.

Future researchers should conduct a study on the organisational socialisation experiences of organisations that do not have a company secretary to determine whether the process followed the findings similar to those stipulated in this research. This study focused on all female board members; it could be fruitful to examine the socialisation experiences of executive directors concerning those of non-executive directors. Future research could further explore whether there is a difference in the socialisation experiences of male board members or other minority groups. In addition, understanding the expectation versus the reality of leader members and team members, as opposed to newcomers, could be helpful to get a holistic picture of the process and to explore mentorship concerning organisational socialisation. Finally, technology has already had an impact on how work is conducted with consistent advancements and breakthroughs made (Allen et al., 2017). A study on the effects of technological advancements in socialisation research could be explored further.

## Conclusion

The board of directors comprises a non-traditional structure that encompasses both employees (executive) and non-employees (non-executive) of the organisation. In addition,

King IV requires that the board of directors be composed of a majority of independent non-executive directors (Institute of Directors, South Africa, 2016). This means that the socialisation of newcomers on the board of directors is not typical of the traditional structure where there exists a manager, team members and day-to-day involvement in the organisation.

As such, there is a need for the board to reassess how it performs its organisational socialisation to achieve the intended outcome out of the process. This is for the benefit of the board, the newcomers and ultimately the shareholders of the organisation. Such a process needs to be strategic, deliberate and collaborative in approach to maximise the board's performance as developed from the findings of the research. Further attention needs to be paid to newcomers who are typically predisposed to challenges in a system lacking diversity for decades. As calls for greater gender equality are heightened in the workplace globally, so too must action be taken to ensure success in this plight to benefit women and other stakeholders alike. It is hoped that using the proposed conceptual framework for the socialisation of board members, this report can lend itself helpful to leaders and consultants involved in the socialisation of newcomers within non-traditional organisational structures.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Author's contributions

Both the authors contributed to the design and implementation of the research, to the analysis of the results and to the writing of the manuscript.

### Ethical considerations

GIBS ethics committee approved the research on 29 August 2020, (23325772).

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### Data availability

Data that support the findings of this study are available upon reasonable request from the corresponding author, M.B.,

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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