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Role Ambiguity: A Review And Integration Of The Literature

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Abstract

The attributes of role ambiguity are examined and defined in the present review. In particular, several models are offered showing that role ambiguity is a multi-dimensional concept and that the process of defining roles (role episodes) is not a static element, but one where continuous cycles of interactions are necessary. The detrimental effects of role ambiguity are discussed, along with the notion that the relationship between role ambiguity and many outcome variables may be a curvilinear one, where certain levels of ambiguity are necessary in order to motivate but beyond which the outcomes are detrimental. In addition, several practical intervention strategies for reducing role ambiguity are discussed (in particular role clarification, role negotiation and the possibilities of participative decision making strategies). The possible effects of technological advances as they relate to role ambiguity are reviewed, along with the possible implications of greater cultural diversity in the workplace. Finally, future research recommendations that seem to flow from the role ambiguity literature are outlined for the reader.

INTRODUCTION

Role ambiguity has been described by Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) as the single or multiple roles that confront the role incumbent, which may not be clearly articulated (communicated) in terms of behaviors (the role activities or tasks/priorities) or performance levels (the criteria that the role incumbent will be judged by). Naylor, Pritchard, and Ilgen (1980) state that role ambiguity exists when focal persons (role incumbents) are uncertain about product-to-evaluation contingencies and are aware of their own uncertainty about them. Breugh & Colihan (1994) have further refined the definition of role ambiguity to be job ambiguity and indicate that job ambiguity possesses three distinct aspects: work methods, scheduling, and performance criteria. In addition, role ambiguity has been hypothesized to possess multidimensional properties (Bedeian & Armenakis, 1981; Sawyer, 1992; Singh & Rhoads 1991). For purposes of this paper role stress will be defined as including role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload.

While the debate continues on the various instruments and methods used to measure the effects of role ambiguity, most of the research suggests that role ambiguity is indeed negatively correlated with job satisfaction and job performance variables (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman 1970; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler 1981; Singh 1998). It is now time to make this information available to practicing managers, along with offering some viable insights and possible remedies for the ambiguity issue. Perhaps the debate can now focus on the possible solutions to role ambiguity, including role clarification and role negotiation. These role clarification techniques warrant the attention that role ambiguity has received over the past 35 plus years, in order to determine if these concepts can indeed reduce role ambiguity and produce better outcomes for the role incumbents, role senders, and organizations. In addition, we must determine if technological advances such as e-mail, teleconferencing, Internet and Intranet activities contribute to role ambiguity and/or if they can assist in the delivery of role clarification.

Typically, the role ambiguity and role conflict constructs are discussed together. The present analysis focuses primarily on role ambiguity, because the literature has shown that role ambiguity and role conflict have different causes (Keller, 1975) and therefore potentially different remedies, although they have been shown to be related and negatively associated with job satisfaction, job involvement, performance, tension, and propensity to leave the job (Rizzo, et al.1970; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler 1981; Fisher & Gitelson 1983; Jackson & Schuler 1985). Sawyer (1992) has even hypothesized that different types of role ambiguity may have different causes, and Singh & Rhoads (1991) believe that role ambiguity is more amenable to managerial "intervention", that is implementing programs to diminish role ambiguity may be less difficult to conduct than interventions for role conflict.

One has to wonder, for starters, why the study of role ambiguity is so intriguing. The reason is that if employees do not know what is expected of them, they may be working on the wrong things (Van Sell, et al. 1981). What could be more important for the organization, and the individual, than making sure that they are working on the right things?

The purpose of this paper, again, is to review the role ambiguity findings available to date, to define parameters for continuing its study, to suggest potential remedies for role ambiguity for practicing managers in highly ambiguous environments, and to explore the possibility that role ambiguity possesses curvilinear characteristics when measured with job outcome variables. In addition, this paper will assist in integrating our understanding of roles (through a role model), role ambiguity, role clarification, role negotiation, and other intervention strategies by reviewing selected research and by critically evaluating it. Finally, some future research directions are outlined for the role ambiguity area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role Models

According to Banton (1965), a “role” can be defined as a set of norms or expectations applied to the incumbent of a particular position by the role incumbent and the various other role players (role senders) with whom the incumbent must deal to fulfill the obligations of their position. The role episode model (Figure 1) was introduced by Kahn, et al. in the classic study *Organizational Stress* (1964). It shows the interactions between the role senders and role incumbent (focal person) including the feedback loop from the incumbent back to the role senders and from the role senders back to the incumbent. The feedback loop is the portion of the role episode model, which potentially provides the greatest opportunity for role clarification and role negotiation and is perhaps the most ignored element. Kahn et al. (1964) further clarify the role model by stating that to adequately perform his or her role, a person must know (a) what the expectations of the role set are (e.g., the rights, duties, and responsibilities), (b) what activities will fulfill the role responsibilities (means-end knowledge), and (c) what the consequences of role performance are to self, others, and the organization.

Figure 1

Model of the Role Episode, Adapted from Kahn, et al. (1964)

According to Schaubroeck, Ganster, Sime, and Editman (1993), the episodic role-making process is complicated by poor communication between role senders and role receivers as well as from turbulence within the task environment, which requires continual modifications in sent roles.

Thus the "role-making" process begins for the role incumbent and the role senders and is a continual process.

Multidimensional Aspects of Role Ambiguity

The multidimensional approaches to the study of role ambiguity began with Bedeian and Armenakis (1981) and have continued with Sawyer (1992) and Singh, Verbeke, and Rhoads (1996). Based on their findings and the foundation provided by these works there are four (4) widely accepted dimensions to role ambiguity, which may be experienced by the role incumbents, and are based on the role incumbents perspective. The dimensions include:

- 1) Goal/Expectation/Responsibility Ambiguity - What is expected? What should I be doing?
- 2) Process Ambiguity - How to get things done. The ways of achieving organizational objectives.
- 3) Priority Ambiguity - When things should be done and in what order.
- 4) Behavior Ambiguity - How am I expected to act in various situations? What behaviors will lead to the needed or desired outcomes?

Related to the multi-dimensional nature of role ambiguity, most studies have focused on showing an association between role ambiguity and detrimental outcomes, (some causally - see Miles, 1975; Miles & Perrault, 1976; Bedeian & Armenakis, 1981), but most have not been asking the role incumbents multidimensional questions or how they cope with role ambiguity. Some of them might be:

- Do you ever ask yourself what should I do next?
- What do you do when you experience ambiguity?
- Do you initiate communication during ambiguity?

Role Senders

What about the role senders? Why haven't the role senders been more thoroughly evaluated? Kahn, et al. (1964) conducted substantial interviews with role senders to determine their perceptions of the focal person (role incumbent). They investigated the following areas:

- Description of job duties and activities of the focal person
- Role sender's relationship to the focal person
- Attempts to influence the focal person
- Normative behaviors to which the focal person should adhere
- Preferred style of performance for the focal person
- Demographic and personal data about the role sender.

Other questions that remain for role senders: What do the role senders consider to be their responsibility in the matter of role ambiguity? Do they perceive problems in communication or in the role incumbent's behavior? Again, the role episode is a continual cycle of interactions between the role senders and role incumbents (focal person), yet most of the studies have focused on the incumbents.

Does Role Ambiguity Have A Curvilinear Shape?

Singh (1998) postulates that role ambiguity may take on a curvilinear shape when measured against job satisfaction, job performance, tension, turnover intentions, and organizational commitment. Singh (1998) used a self-report mail survey to capture information from members of the Association of Sales and Marketing Executives (SME). Based on his research, Singh suggests that the strategies determined to be helpful in dealing with role ambiguity are somewhat out of step with conventional wisdom. He notes that increasing role clarity, by reducing role conflict and role ambiguity, is likely to help salespeople obtain a higher level of job performance, satisfaction, organizational commitment, and a lower level of turnover intentions and job tension.

The linear models of role ambiguity imply that ambiguity should be avoided, and that if it is present, then increasing levels of ambiguity are going to create an increasingly dysfunctional and counterproductive environment for the role incumbent. In evaluating the curvilinear impact of role ambiguity, however, Singh (1998) concludes that beyond a certain point (i.e. the intermediate level), further decreases in role ambiguity through detailed procedural guidelines are likely to increase job tension and turnover intentions, especially if the task environment has low feedback and task variety.

Figure 2

**Hypotheses of Linear and Curvilinear Effects of Role Stressors on Job Performance,
Adapted from Singh (1998)**

As shown in the above diagram and based on the curvilinear hypothesis, ambiguity can be both "good" (resulting in productive stress), also called eustress by Selye (1976) and "bad" (the lack of stress or too much stress which results in dysfunction), also known as distress (Selye, 1976). Researchers, such as Singh (1998), who support the curvilinear view of role ambiguity would agree that total absence of ambiguity should not be the goal for managers, but the reduction of ambiguity to levels which are productive, given the attributes of the role incumbent's job and the attributes of the role incumbent themselves, should instead be the goal.

Measures Of Role Ambiguity

No review or discussion of role ambiguity could be considered complete without giving some attention to the measures/tools used to evaluate the constructs. The scale (known as the Rizzo, House & Lirtzman or RHL scale) developed by Rizzo, et al. (1970) has been the most widely used (used in 85% of the studies according to Jackson & Schuler 1985) by researchers studying role stress (role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload) and it is also the most widely debated. The RHL questionnaire consists of 30 items, 15 of which deal with role ambiguity and 15 with role conflict. In the original study, subjects were requested to respond to each role item, indicating the degree to which the condition existed for him, on a seven-point scale ranging from very false to very true (Rizzo, et al. 1970). According to Schuler, Aldag, and Brief (1977) the RHL scales have been shown to have sufficient reliability and construct validity to warrant continued use.

The RHL scale has come under attack more recently due to its one-dimensionality and its linear view of role ambiguity. According to King and King (1990), despite its widespread use, the RHL measures have shortcomings because the scale items (1) lack clarity and precision, (2) ignore the multidimensionality of the underlying construct, (3) fail to represent the breadth of role concepts, and (4) have poor discriminability. In fact, the RHL scale has seen diminished usage

recently with the development of multidimensional measurement tools. Tools that consider the multidimensional aspects of role ambiguity have been developed and used by Sawyer (1992) and Singh and Rhoads (1991). Of course, replication of their work and further validation of their tools is needed to more fully understand the multidimensional properties of role ambiguity.

Role Clarification

Schaubroeck, et al. (1993) suggest that role clarification (a dyadic exchange process) is an intervention that is provided in a formal context wherein the supervisor (role sender) states his or her expectations to the direct report subordinate, and together the two parties discuss means by which the direct report's obligations can be managed effectively. The facets of the subordinate's role are, then, defined both in terms of content (i.e., what the duties are) and process (i.e., how effective performance on the duties should be achieved).

A form of role clarification, which was tested by Schaubroeck, et al. (1993), is responsibility charting. They define responsibility charting as a diagram of roles held by members of a top management team within the "critical result areas" (CRAs) of an organization or business unit. Schaubroeck, et al. (1993) further note that, after thorough enumeration and clarification of the list of critical result areas, the procedure utilizes an individual survey of perceived roles within the CRAs, followed by a group discussion to reach consensus on each manager's role in each CRA. Korey (1988) describes responsibility charting as a graphic way of recording and analyzing: 1) organizational structures, 2) departmental relationships, 3) environmental assessment, 4) strategic alternatives, 5) executive job content, 6) functional responsibilities and authority, and 7) decision-making processes.

Schaubroeck, et al. (1993) found that the responsibility charting experiment, which they conducted over a two-year period, demonstrated that supervisor role clarification reduced both role

ambiguity and employee dissatisfaction with their supervisor. Therefore, the results of responsibility charting help to identify each person's role within a department or division and the process involves several aspects of role negotiation (to be mentioned later). Viewing roles from the organizational perspective would seem to give employees the information they need to determine their roles as well. The boundaries of authority and decision making would also be critical components of the responsibility charting activity, which would alleviate confusion that may be present due to vague job descriptions, job analyses, and/or organizational structures.

Role clarification much like the role model (Kahn, et al., 1964) itself is a continuing series of interactions (some formal, some informal) between the role incumbent and the various role senders. Unfortunately, according to Schaubroeck, et al. (1993), the negotiation process usually tapers off following the entry phase of socialization to a new position, and interpersonal processes return to a steady state in which disruptions are disregarded. When the steady state is reached, increased role ambiguity and role conflict are inevitable without reinitiating the role clarification process. Therefore, based on the above ideas, a model of role clarification can be hypothesized.

For role incumbents to have role clarity the following attributes of the work environment must exist in sufficient quantity, which is considered desirable to the role incumbent, and in the appropriate mix:

- 1) Clearly Articulated Goals - from the top of the organization on down. These would include the expectations of each member of the organization, as well as, the how and when characteristics of getting the work done. How the work should be accomplished should be discussed - with the "tightness" of the parameters varying by the type of position. Discussions of when the work should be completed should also occur. Again each of these items needs to be embedded into everything the organization does from the mission

statement on down to the daily task logs. This should include clearly written job descriptions, which are based on a job analysis for the tasks that the organization actually wants, needs, and values in the delivery of its products and services.

- 2) **On Going Training** - Training should not stop with the end of a new hires orientation period. It should, however, be made available throughout the employee's career. Education levels and experiences on the job both seem to be moderators for role ambiguity (Fisher & Gitelson 1983; Van Sell, et al. 1981); therefore, investment in education and training should pay dividends in the long run by impacting the levels of employee ambiguity.
- 3) **Recognition and Rewards** - According to Blanchard (1984), managers should see if they can catch people doing things right. Recognition is widely regarded as one of the most important motivating variables for employees. Monetary and other rewards have merit, but simply acknowledging good performance can enhance the work environment, and may provide an opportunity for communication of expectations which is the essence of role clarification. As other employees see specific work and behaviors being recognized, they may begin to modify their own behaviors to achieve the same results.

It is hoped that these role clarification ideas (see Figure 3) will help managers develop a greater appreciation of the need to make sure that employees know what is expected of them. Sometimes, however, jobs and environments change and expectations need further clarification. This leads to the topic of role negotiation.

Figure 3

Hypothesized Role Clarification Model

Role Negotiation

Naylor, et al. (1980) define the concept of role negotiation, which starts as role clarification, as an emergent process involving role senders, the focal person (role incumbent), and others. They present role negotiation as a conflict resolution or intervention strategy for both role conflict and role ambiguity. The Naylor, et al. (1980) definition of role negotiation includes the following:

- (a) clarifying expectations,
- (b) defining the relative certainty of product-evaluation contingencies (defining satisfactory performance and understanding rewards and/or sanctions),
- (c) establishing priorities among expectations (so that products with the highest utility are acted upon first),
- (d) altering the values of outcomes associated with the sent roles and/or products of incumbent behavior (thus reducing or eliminating conflicts), and
- (e) redefining or negotiating sent-roles (to remove one or more products in conflict).

Watkins and Luke (1991) present another description for role negotiation, similar to Harrison's (1972) original ideas, as a process for structuring interpersonal communication and arriving at interpersonal agreements that improve job satisfaction and productivity. Role negotiation, as defined by these authors, produces specific, behaviorally stated feedback of value to the supervisor. In addition to group oriented role negotiation techniques they discuss a procedure for individual, or one-on-one negotiations. Watkins and Luke found benefits to including role negotiation in the supervisor/subordinate relationship, such as, a stronger emphasis on interdependence and increased levels of trust.

As mentioned previously, role negotiation would appear to begin with role clarification type activities, but it then converges into a two-way communication with the role incumbent having more of a say in their final roles. Consequently, perhaps role negotiation is one of the tools needed for on-going role clarification and/or perhaps it is simply a more complex and highly evolved form of role clarification.

SOME OTHER IMPORTANT VARIABLES

Participative Decision Making

Participative Decision Making (PDM) has been shown to be a moderator of job satisfaction (Witt, 1992). This finding begs several questions: Are there potential linkages between ambiguity levels and role incumbent participation in the decision making processes of the organization? Is PDM a way to moderate role ambiguity? Is it a form of role clarification and/or negotiation? Clearly, better definitions of role clarification, role negotiation, and PDM are needed to make these finer distinctions. As noted by Witt (1992), PDM efforts have been based on the notions that workers want to participate and that the outcomes of such participation are good for both the organization and the worker and, at least in some nations, for the society as well.

Further work in this area needs to address these linkages - especially as relates to PDM, job satisfaction, and role ambiguity.

The Impact of Technology

One has to wonder what impact technology will have on role ambiguity. Will opportunities like e-mail, teleconferencing, and information access via company Intranets or the Internet (on-line) provide employees with information that will help to reduce or moderate their levels of role

ambiguity or will ambiguity only be worse? This is an important question, since the level of information available today is cited in most stress studies as being a major contributor to role ambiguity (Sawyer, 1992).

Cultural Diversity

The ever-changing demographics of the workplace have had a profound impact on organizations and these effects will probably continue in the future (Johnson, 1994). The research in the area of role stress/ambiguity and cultural diversity must be updated to reflect this moving target. As role incumbents become more diverse the question becomes: What will be the impact on role ambiguity? Clearly, one would have to guess that greater communication and/or understanding problems will occur. As our view of role ambiguity is remolded by these demographic variables, one has to wonder if current ambiguity remedies may need to be modified for this new mix of incumbents? Work in this area has only just begun to take shape.

To summarize thus far, the stated purpose of this paper was to review the role ambiguity findings to date, to define the parameters for continuing study, to suggest potential remedies for role ambiguity for practicing managers, and to explore the possibility that role ambiguity possesses curvilinear characteristics when measured with job outcome variables. The review and discussion has posed some interesting questions that need further research and study.

FUTURE RESEARCH AREAS AND SUMMARY

The role ambiguity construct has been thoroughly examined by several generations of researchers (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman 1970; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler 1981; Singh 1998), and while it has been shown to have negative relationships with job satisfaction, and performance, very few

longitudinal or experimental studies exist demonstrating causal links between role ambiguity and job satisfaction, performance or other outcome variables.

Future Research Item 1: The research area needs to include more longitudinal or experimental designs to demonstrate the causal effects of role ambiguity.

While Singh (1998) has begun to reexamine the possible curvilinear aspects of role ambiguity, much attention needs to be paid to this interesting research pathway. If role ambiguity does in fact possess an inverted-U, curvilinear shape with respect to job satisfaction or job performance then the linear notion that less role ambiguity is simply more favorable may be inaccurate. The more appropriate question may be how much ambiguity is desirable for what types of jobs? In other words, what factors influence the generation of "positive" ambiguity? Replication and extension of these ideas would help to determine the levels of role ambiguity necessary to motivate learning and to encourage "stretching" on the part of the role incumbents. Care must be taken, of course, to induce just the right amount of role ambiguity in order to avoid burnout. This could be important information for practicing managers.

Future Research Item 2: The potential curvilinear aspects of role ambiguity need further study and critical examination. Replicate Singh's work on the inverted U-shaped aspects of role ambiguity in various job categories.

Much of the work currently available in the area of role ambiguity is extremely limited in its generalizability due to sample and sample design issues. While several meta-analytic procedures have helped to overcome some of these issues, the fact remains that sample design should be given

more attention than it has received. According to Fisher and Gitelson (1983), Schmidt-Hunter's meta-analysis approach is based on the idea that much of the variation in results across samples or studies is due to statistical artifacts and methodological problems rather than to truly substantive differences in underlying population correlations. Many authors impress the reader with statistics, but the underlying sample often does not support the over-generalized findings. Many studies also often use self-report mechanisms, which may not provide the highest validity of the methods of data collection available. The samples examined for the present review varied widely in the ages, occupations, organizational levels, and the tenure of the participants. Each of these may be viewed as confounding factors in the interpretation of the results, as noted by Van Sell, et al. (1981). Practicing managers and the academic community need data, which has sufficient breadth and generalizability to be meaningful to the entire management community or at the very least, some "sense" needs to be made of the conflicting results.

Future Research Item 3: Role ambiguity appears to be related to lower job satisfaction, job involvement and performance, and increased tension, and higher propensity to leave the job, but with what types of samples or in what types of organizations? Sample design and selection should be made more carefully in order to enhance the usefulness and generalizability of the findings.

The role clarification research is very limited. Therefore, additional research is warranted to investigate this potential moderator of role ambiguity. More specific role clarification models, activities, checklists and/or parameters may help practicing managers better meet the clarification needs of various types of employees.

Future Research Item 4: Role Clarification remains an underdeveloped tool for researchers and practitioners alike.

Role negotiation seems to be a concept, which is more complex than role clarification, and as a result, it would seem to be more appropriate for employees with longer tenure, more education, and higher status in organizations, but these ideas need to be substantiated through further research.

Future Research Item 5: Role Negotiation needs to be evaluated further in order to determine where it might be an appropriate intervention technique (for what types of individuals in which type of jobs).

Does research on participative decision making (PDM) have a place in the role stress/ambiguity debate? Do linkages exist between levels of ambiguity and the ability of employees to actively participate in setting organizational goals? These questions should be addressed through research, which brings the two areas together.

Future Research Item 6: Role ambiguity should be studied within environments that embrace the philosophy of participative decision making and those that do not. In addition, some determination should be made of how much participation results in more or less ambiguity.

Has technology had a positive or negative effect on the roles of employees? Is role ambiguity increasing as a result of increased technology in the workplace? Does technology give managers and employees more tools to communicate about expectations, or does it hinder the communication process?

Future Research Item 7: The impact of technology on work roles, role senders, role incumbents, and role ambiguity needs to be researched further.

Many studies have been conducted in the area of roles, and role stress, but the characteristics and behaviors of the role senders seem to have gotten lost. We need to begin studying the nature of role senders and their influence on the role incumbents and the impact of their participation, or lack thereof, on role ambiguity.

Future Research Item 8: The nature of the role senders must be included in future research in order to determine their effects on the role set and role ambiguity.

The area of cultural diversity has become an important focus for researchers and practitioners within organizations. In order to more fully understand the role episode process, we must bring the areas of cultural diversity and role stress/ambiguity together to determine if changes in the make-up of the workplace have an impact on the perceptions of roles and role ambiguity.

Future Research Item 9: The implications of the changing mix of people in organizations must be investigated further as it relates to roles and role clarity. At present, one can only guess, based on common-sense notions, that differences in backgrounds can cause miscommunications and differing expectations.

The issue of role ambiguity is significant and warrants continued study. It has been found to exist in a wide variety of organizations and remains an on-going problem. Fisher and Gitelson (1983) note that the consequences of role stress have potentially important cost implications for

organizations. They further note that whereas the costs of turnover and substandard performance are obvious, the costs of attitudinal difficulties are less direct and just beginning to be understood.

As the reader can see, although some things are known about role ambiguity in organizations, such as role ambiguity appears to be related to lower productivity, dissatisfaction with supervision, increased tension, and turnover intentions, much still needs to be learned, in particular, about the subject. Fine-tuning these "particulars" may result in better understanding of the causal effects of role ambiguity, how much ambiguity may be necessary to motivate what types of employees, and a greater awareness of intervention strategies that may help alleviate, if necessary, this organizational problem. Ultimately, management and employees should benefit from this greater understanding.

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