ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY: CORRELATES WITH JOB SATISFACTION AND VALUES

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INDIVIDUALS in complex organizations are constantly exposed to a variety of expectations from both themselves and others as they carry out their organizational roles. Kahn et al. (1964) have developed a theory of role dynamics which sees stress resulting from conflicting or incompatible expectations and unclear or vague expectations. Expectations which are in conflict may result in role conflict for the individual, while unclear or vague expectations may cause role ambiguity. Since role conflict and ambiguity pose problems of adjustment for the individual Kahn et al. predicted and found lower levels of job satisfaction for those with high conflict and ambiguity.

A review of the previous literature on role conflict and ambiguity (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, 1970) supported the Kahn et al. theory, and found both conflict and ambiguity to be clearly associated with low job satisfaction and dysfunctional behavior due to the stress and anxiety of role pressures. Rizzo et al. then developed a questionnaire to measure these role variables, and found that role conflict and ambiguity emerged as separate dimensions when a factor analysis was performed. Separate scales for conflict and ambiguity were then developed and validated, and correlations were obtained with other variables. Their data showed stronger negative relationships overall between role ambiguity and job satisfaction.

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measures than between role conflict and the same satisfaction measures. A later analysis of these data (House and Rizzo, 1972) indicated that role ambiguity indeed was more negatively related to job satisfaction than was role conflict. The authors concluded that role conflict and ambiguity are critical variables for organizational behavior, with ambiguity being the more powerful variable. In two separate studies, however, Tosi and Tosi (1970) and Tosi (1971) found almost the opposite: role conflict was significantly related to low overall job satisfaction, but there was no significant correlation between satisfaction and role ambiguity. The relative importance of role conflict versus role ambiguity for explaining job satisfaction is, therefore, not yet clear.

Greene and Organ (1973) have also done some recent research on role-related variables and job satisfaction. The researchers measured role accuracy, which is the degree of agreement on role expectations between the superior and the subordinate, and the obverse of role ambiguity; and role compliance, which measures the degree of agreement between role expectations of the superior and actual role activity performed by the subordinate. The data showed both role accuracy and compliance to have significant, positive correlations with a global measure of job satisfaction. A partial-correlational analysis, however, indicated that role accuracy actually operates as a precondition for role compliance, and that compliance is the direct cause of job satisfaction. Greene and Organ, however, did not consider the effects of role conflict on job satisfaction. Their job satisfaction measure, moreover, tapped only overall satisfaction.

The Kahn et al. role theory also includes such personality factors as motives and values as important determinants of both differential elicitations of role pressures and differential reactions to role pressures. Their data tended to support the theory in this regard since a number of personality dimensions were significantly related to differing degrees of objective conflict, and the ways in which objective conflict was experienced as strain by role incumbents.

The research study presented in this article was conducted in order to test some hypotheses generated from the Kahn et al. theory of role dynamics, and to extend and refine the relationships between role conflict, ambiguity and job satisfaction by using a multi-dimensional conception of job satisfaction. The basic hypotheses were that role conflict and ambiguity would be negatively related to dimensions of job satisfaction, and that personality-related values would be related to role conflict and ambiguity, as well as the dimensions of job satisfaction.
Method

Subjects

The subjects participating in the study were drawn from 88 professional employees of an applied science department in a large government research and development organization. Fifty-eight questionnaires were returned. Seven questionnaires were unusable leaving the actual sample of 51 (response rate = 58%). The average age of the respondents was 40 years, with a range of 29 to 57 years. All subjects had at least a bachelor degree, with most having a graduate degree. Average total work experience was 17.5 years, and average time in present position was 4.7 years. Compared to the total population of 88 employees, the 51 respondents were not significantly different with regard to age, work experience, or education. Thus, the respondents appear to be representative of their total population.

Measurements of Variables

Data were gathered by pencil-and-paper questionnaires which were distributed to the subjects at their place of employment, and then mailed directly to the researchers in postpaid envelopes. All responses were anonymous. Interviews were also conducted in order to complement and corroborate the questionnaire data.

Role conflict and ambiguity. The two scales developed and validated by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970) were used to measure role conflict and ambiguity. The role conflict scale consisted of eight items, each having a 7-point scale ranging from “very false” to “very true.” The role ambiguity scale contained six items with similar 7-point scales, all of which were reversed scored.

Job satisfaction. The Job Description Index (Smith, Kendall, and Hulin, 1969) was used to measure five dimensions of job satisfaction: satisfaction with the work itself, satisfaction with co-workers, satisfaction with supervision, satisfaction with pay, and satisfaction with opportunities for promotion.

Values related to personality. The Study of Values test (Allport, Vernon, and Lindzey, 1960) was used to measure six values or personality motives: theoretical, economic, aesthetic, social, political, and religious. The classification was based directly on the work of Spranger (1928).

Analysis. Scores were computed for each of the role conflict and ambiguity measures, for the five measures of job satisfaction, and
for the six measures of values related to personality. A correlational analysis was then performed on the measures.

**Results**

Results of the correlational analysis between the role conflict and ambiguity scales and the five dimensions of job satisfaction are presented in Table 1.

The analysis shows that role conflict was significantly related to lower levels of satisfaction for the supervision, pay, and opportunities for promotion dimensions. Opportunities for promotion, moreover, had the most significant, negative relationship with role conflict. The correlations between role conflict and satisfaction with the work itself and satisfaction with co-workers were negative, but not significant.

Role ambiguity was related to job satisfaction in a different pattern. Here, role ambiguity had a highly significant and negative correlation with satisfaction from the work itself. Ambiguity was also negatively related to satisfaction with co-workers, supervision, pay, and opportunities for promotion, but not at significant levels.

Table 2 reports the correlational analysis between the six scales of the Study of Values instrument and the role conflict and ambiguity scales. None of the correlations was significant and most were rather low. The average absolute correlation in Table 2 was .11, and the range was from −.01 to .24. In Table 3 the correlations between the six value scales and the five dimensions of job satisfaction are presented. The theoretical, aesthetic, social, political, and religious values scales all had non-significant, low correlations with the job satisfaction scales. The scale for economic value was correlated with satisfaction with pay at a high level of significance; however, the correlations between economic value and the other four dimensions of job satisfaction were low and not significant. Caution should be used in the interpretation of significance levels for the

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<td><strong>Correlations between Role Conflict and Ambiguity and Job Satisfaction</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dimensions of Job Satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role Ambiguity</td>
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* p < .05, r = .27, df = 49.
** p < .01, r = .35, df = 49.
*** p < .001, r = .44, df = 49.
Correlations between Personality-Related Values and Role Conflict and Ambiguity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Role Conflict</th>
<th>Role Ambiguity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetic</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>-.21</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.15</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Study of Values scales since the instrument is an ipsative measure (Hicks, 1970); namely, a score on one scale affects the scores on the other scales. Excluding the correlation between economic value and pay satisfaction, the average absolute correlation in Table 3 was .09, and the range was from .00 to ±.19.

To summarize, then, role conflict was significantly related to low levels of satisfaction with supervision, pay, and opportunities for promotion. Role ambiguity had a highly significant correlation with a low level of satisfaction with the work itself. Economic value and pay satisfaction had a significant and negative correlation; all other correlations between personality-related values and role conflict and ambiguity, and the dimensions of job satisfaction were non-significant and generally low.

**Discussion**

The results of this study tended to partially support the Kahn et al. (1964) theory of role dynamics. As predicted, role conflict and ambiguity were both associated with low levels of job satisfaction. The House and Rizzo (1972) finding that role ambiguity was a more powerful variable than role conflict, however, was not repli-
cated. Instead, role conflict and ambiguity were negatively associated with different dimensions of job satisfaction, which resulted in some interesting patterns.

Role ambiguity was highly and significantly related to low levels of satisfaction with the work itself, but was not significantly related to any of the other satisfaction dimensions. The interviews provided information which might explain these findings. The work of the department in which the study took place was of an advanced technological nature, and many of the subjects were working on tasks which were rather different from their education and previous experience. In addition, the goals of the department were not clearly defined. As a result the work itself was of a loosely-defined nature, and ambiguous expectations for performance came from the work. Hence, role ambiguity was negatively related to satisfaction on the intrinsic dimension of the work itself.

Role conflict, however, was not significantly related to work satisfaction, but was significantly related to low levels of satisfaction on three out of four of the extrinsic dimensions: satisfaction with supervision, pay, and opportunities for promotion. Information from the interviews indicated that requirements for pay increases and promotions were often inconsistent and not well communicated by supervisory personnel. Conflicting expectations, then, were related to extrinsic factors, and therefore role conflict was correlated with low levels of satisfaction with supervision, pay, and opportunities for promotion.

The data tended to indicate, then, that role ambiguity was related to intrinsic sources of job satisfaction, while role conflict was related to extrinsic satisfaction sources. Differences in findings between the present study and the House and Rizzo (1972), Tosi and Tosi (1970), and Tosi (1971) research reflect the importance of considering the source and content of role expectations for the meaning and effects of role conflict and ambiguity in a specific, ongoing organization. While the general relationships of role conflict and ambiguity to job satisfaction may be negative, the pattern of relationships appears to hinge on factors which are specific in nature. In addition, the data from the present study tend to reaffirm the importance of treating job satisfaction as a multi-dimensional concept rather than a global one. Meaningful patterns concerning job satisfaction emerged in the present study because a multi-dimensional approach was taken.

The other hypotheses derived from the Kahn et al. theory, that personality-related values would be related to role conflict and
ambiguity and to the dimensions of job satisfaction, were not supported. These results are consistent with the findings of White and Ruh (1973) who also found personal values not related to job attitudes. It may be that other dimensions of personality (such as career achievement and introversion-extroversion as found in the Kahn et al. data) would be related to elicitations and reactions to role pressures. In the present study, however, only data on personality-related values were obtained. Another reason for the differences in findings may be that the Kahn et al. data were based on national and multi-organizational samples, while the sample in the present study was drawn from one organization. The homogeneity of the source and content of role expectations in the present study may have accounted for the differences in results with the Kahn et al. studies.

Implications for Personnel Practices

A body of research is developing which indicates the importance of role conflict and ambiguity for understanding the behavior and attitudes of people in organizations. The research strongly shows that employees are significantly more satisfied with their jobs when expectations for performance are made clear and non-confllicting. Effective personnel practices should therefore strive to provide employees with role expectations that are clear and non-conflicting, and specific job behaviors that are needed to obtain such rewards as salary increases and promotions should be made clear. Too often, it appears, employees are left to fend for themselves in determining what is expected of them in job behavior. The results are often low satisfaction and inadequate performance.

The results of the present study also imply that the relationships between job satisfaction and role conflict and ambiguity are better understood when satisfaction is viewed and measured as a multi-dimensional variable. The source and content of role expectations were such that role conflict was related to extrinsic dimensions of satisfaction, while role ambiguity was related to the intrinsic dimensions of the work itself. This pattern of relationships, moreover, appears to hinge on factors which are specific to a given work setting. Thus, the implication here is that one should be familiar with the content of role expectations in a specific organization in order to understand the relationships between role conflict and ambiguity and the different dimensions of job satisfaction.
Summary

This study correlated role conflict and ambiguity with a multi-dimensional measure of job satisfaction and a measure of personality-related values. The data from a sample of 51 professional employees of a research and development organization showed role conflict to be negatively correlated with the extrinsic job satisfaction dimensions of supervision, pay, and opportunities for promotion, while role ambiguity was negatively related to the intrinsic dimension of satisfaction with the work itself. Values were found to be generally unrelated to role conflict and ambiguity as well as to job satisfaction.

A substantial body of research now shows that employees are generally more satisfied with their jobs when expectations for performance are made clear and non-conflicting. Effective personnel practices should therefore strive to let employees know what is expected of them in the performance of their organizational roles.

REFERENCES


