

## PERSONALITY CORRELATES OF ROLE STRESS

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*Summary.*—The relationship between role stress, i.e., role ambiguity and role conflict, and personality as measured by Gough and Heilbrun's (1965) Adjective Check List was examined on the basis of data drawn from 202 nursing personnel. Experienced role ambiguity correlated .17 with defensiveness, .15 with self-control, .13 with endurance,  $-.13$  with order,  $-.15$  with nurturance, .20 with aggression, and  $-.17$  with deference, while role conflict was significantly related .12 with exhibition. These correlations (all significant statistically but of low magnitude) were interpreted in light of previous findings.

Although the relationship between personality and role stress (more specifically, role conflict and role ambiguity) has long been of interest to organization theorists, relatively few studies have presented findings in this area. Parsons (1951, pp. 44-45), for one, has suggested that the behavior and work attitudes of individuals are a function of the interaction of both personality and organizational factors. As such, the formation of a role-definition is both a result of the internal processes of an individual and the social role of the individual in any given situation. As suggested by Ackerman (1951), the relative contributions of personality and role in this process will largely depend upon the nature of the personality, the role, and the act involved. Clearly, some measure of congruence between personality dispositions and role expectations is necessary for performance (Getzels & Guba, 1955). The degree of congruence, however, between personality and role in any behavioral act is affected by several factors. First, as noted by Wolfe and Snoek (1962), individuals with certain personality dispositions tend to elicit certain responses from surrounding individuals. They cite as an example the volatile, aggressive personality who evokes strong pressures as compared to a more sensitive and withdrawn person. Second, it is very likely that personality factors act as mediating variables in the relationship between objective and experienced levels of role stress. The withdrawn and sensitive person may realize greater anxiety and tension under mild pressures than does a person with "thicker skin" under intense pressure. Finally, it is generally believed that certain personality dispositions make greater use of certain forms of coping responses. Subjects high in role stress have been found to be extra-punitive and ego-defensive, whereas subjects under low stress have

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been described as more intrapunitive and need-persistent (Getzels & Guba, 1955). In summary, it is argued that the degree of role stress perceived by an individual is, to an important extent, a function of personality.

Supporting research in the area of personality and role stress is, as previously noted, generally limited. Budner (1962), utilizing a variety of samples, has reported finding intolerance of ambiguity to be positively related to both authoritarianism and conventionality. This result is consistent with the previously mentioned work of Getzels and Guba, as well as with Pine and Levinson's (1957) study of the personality and organizational roles of hospital aides. Dividing their subjects into personality types (custodial vs humanistic), Pine and Levinson found the role orientation and behavior of each type differed. Persons with a custodial view were much more authoritarian and conventional in their behavior, while humanistic types held a permissive view of authority. In, perhaps, the most intensive study of its type, Kahn, *et al.* (1964; Kahn, 1964), using 53 managerial level employees drawn from several industries as subjects, noted significant relationships between role conflict and factors such as sociability, neurotic anxiety (defensiveness), introversion, self-confidence, emotional sensitivity, and flexibility-rigidity.

Building on these findings, the major purpose of this study was to determine if other personality traits are significantly correlated with role ambiguity and role conflict. It was felt that due to the absence of a well-developed theory relating personality to either role ambiguity or conflict, such an identification might provide further insight into this area and, thus, prove useful in the formulation of future predictions.

#### METHOD

##### *Research Site and Subjects*

This study was conducted in a Veterans Administration Hospital of 1100 beds. An estimated 60% of the hospital's work load is devoted to the care of mental patients (both acute and long-term), with the balance of its activities devoted to acute and long-term medical and surgical patients. The hospital is divided into six services and 24 wards. At the time of the study there were approximately 980 inpatients and 6,000 outpatients on the roles.

The sample was comprised of 202 respondents at five levels in the hospital's nursing service, each differing in formally prescribed authority, responsibilities and rewards. The distribution included 93 nursing assistants, 36 licensed practical nurses, 56 registered nurses, 8 nurse practitioners, and 9 nurse administrators, i.e., department heads and program coordinators. All subjects, except nursing assistants and licensed practical nurses, were RNs. Employees who were temporary or part-time were not included. The sample involved a representative number of employees from all levels of the nursing hierarchy and from all departments.

Fifty-seven percent of the respondents were females. All had completed high school with 36% reporting a college background. Their ages ranged from 22 to 59 yr. The mean and median age of the sample was 39 yr. Average length of service was 14 yr., with a range of 1 to 37 yr.

#### *Data Collection*

Questionnaires were administered to subjects under controlled conditions in small groups. To minimize demand characteristics and experimenter bias, the study was identified as part of the established on-going research effort of the hospital's Nursing Services for Education staff. The questionnaire package was pretested on a representative group of subjects to determine the impact of factors such as length and readability. All respondents' queries were answered using a predetermined standard response format. Any questions not anticipated in advance were handled in an identical manner. The confidentiality of results was stressed. Willingness to participate voluntarily was indicated by the signing of a consent statement. The hospital's staffing demands and assurance of maximum participation required that administrations of the questionnaire be conducted over a five-day period at times convenient to each of the hospital's three shifts.

#### *Measures*

Role ambiguity (coefficient  $\alpha = .79$ ,  $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = .60$ ) and role conflict (coefficient  $\alpha = .89$ ,  $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = .78$ ) were measured using six and eight items, respectively, from the scales developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970). Using a 5-point response mode ranging from "very false" to "very true," each scale was scored by averaging across the relevant items. Both role ambiguity (reversed) and role conflict were scored so that the greater the score, the greater the perceived stress. These scales were chosen because of their established psychometric properties (Schuler, Aldag, & Brief, 1977) and wide usage in role-theory research. A factor analysis for the present sample confirmed the unidimensional structure of both scales.

Personality characteristics of study participants were measured using Gough and Heilbrun's (1965) Adjective Check List. This device has 300 adjectives (comprising 21 experimental scales and three indices) representing a broad range of attributes commonly used to describe a person. Subjects are requested to check as many adjectives as they consider to be self-descriptive. Validity and reliability data on the checklist are available in Gough and Heilbrun (1965). This checklist was chosen because its reliability for both sexes is established. Furthermore, in its design, attempts were made to control for social desirability and acquiescence. In addition, unlike similar instruments, e.g., Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (1959), the checklist has the advantage of being normative rather than ipsative in nature. Its use as a research

technique for assessment of personality was presented by Gough (1960). Complete descriptions of the specific personality variables utilized in the present study are given by Gough and Heilbrun (1965).

#### RESULTS

To evaluate the differential relationships of role ambiguity and role conflict with each of the variables being investigated, all hypotheses were tested by computing partial correlations, controlling first for role conflict and then for role ambiguity. Initially, simple correlations were computed; however, given the study's purpose and the small but significant correlation between role ambiguity and role conflict ( $r = .38, p < .001$ ), partial correlations were deemed more appropriate for the intended analyses. The resulting partial-order correlations are presented in Table 1. Only correlations for those variables significantly related to role ambiguity or role conflict are reported. Approximately 8 of the 84 correlations originally computed would be expected to be significant at the .05 level, and 4 at the .01 level on the basis of chance alone. In this study, 15 were significant at the .05 level and 7 at the .01 level or greater. Thus the personality variables as a group may be considered significantly related to role ambiguity and role conflict.

TABLE 1  
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF PERSONALITY VARIABLES AND ZERO-ORDER AND PARTIAL-ORDER CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ROLE PERCEPTIONS AND PERSONALITY VARIABLES SIGNIFICANTLY RELATED TO THE FORMER ( $N = 202$ )

Personality Variable	M	SD	Role Ambiguity		Role Conflict	
			Zero-order	Partial	Zero-order	Partial
			$r$	$r$	$r$	$r$
Defensiveness*	53.80	8.68	-.16†	-.17‡	-.01	.06
Self-control	55.41	7.73	-.17‡	-.15†	-.11	-.05
Endurance	56.09	7.17	-.12†	-.13†	-.01	.04
Order	53.27	7.27	-.14†	-.13†	-.05	-.01
Nurturance	53.49	7.59	-.16†	-.15†	-.04	.02
Exhibition	49.58	7.63	.06	.02	.13†	.12†
Autonomy	47.34	7.06	.16†	.12†	.14†	.09
Aggression	45.88	8.01	.21‡	.20‡	.08	.01
Change	46.17	7.46	.18‡	.15†	.13†	.08
Deference	52.23	7.79	-.17‡	-.17‡	-.03	.03

\*Reverse scored. † $p < .05$ . ‡ $p < .01$ .

As Table 1 indicates role ambiguity is significantly related to defensiveness ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ), self-control ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ), endurance ( $r = -.12, p < .05$ ), order ( $r = -.14, p < .05$ ), nurturance ( $r = -.15, p < .05$ ), autonomy ( $r = .12, p < .05$ ), aggression ( $r = .20, p < .01$ ), change ( $r = .18, p < .01$ ), and deference ( $r = -.17, p < .01$ ). Role conflict is significantly

related to exhibition ( $r = .12, p < .01$ ). The impact of role ambiguity on the relationship between role conflict and both need for autonomy and change is evident by comparing the simple correlations with the partial correlations for these variables ( $r = .14$  vs  $r = .09$  and  $r = .13$  vs  $r = .08$ ). It should be recognized that, although these  $r$ s are significant, they are all quite small and account for little common variance.

#### DISCUSSION

The finding that role ambiguity, but not role conflict, is significantly related to scores on a variety of personality scales provides an interesting qualification to the suggestion that individuals with certain personal dispositions tend to experience behavioral acts more intensely than others. This leads to the suggestion that personality is an important correlate of role ambiguity, but not role conflict. This notion, of course, is quite inconsistent with the findings reported by previous investigators. The over-all picture which emerges from the present data indicates that those individuals who tend toward impulsiveness, stubbornness, and competitiveness, and who are headstrong, aggressive, and quick in temperament and reaction may be more likely to experience higher levels of role ambiguity than those who display opposing qualities. The finding that a similar pattern does not hold for role conflict may be a reflection of the fact that role stress must be viewed not only from an individual standpoint but in relation to numerous other phenomena within a social system. Indeed, the fact that the magnitude of the relationships reported is not very large strongly indicates that other phenomena contribute significantly to role stress. Factors such as employees' educational level, employees' tenure, and professional commitment may serve to influence experienced ambiguities and conflict. Moreover, in weighing these results, it is important to recognize that individuals' needs, as portrayed in personality, almost inevitably have their internal contradictions (Levinson, 1959).

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