Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity. by Robert L. Kahn; Donald M. Wolfe; Robert P. Quinn; J. Diedrick Snoek; Robert A. Rosenthal
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This book reports research in the organizational application of role theory. The objectives were to explore the extent of role conflict and ambiguity in industrial positions, to identify high conflict and ambiguity situations and to relate conflict and ambiguity to personality factors. The underlying assumption is that social-psychological factors in the contemporary environment have major effects on the physical and psychological well-being of the person.

The authors have done an outstanding job of analyzing the methodological problems of mental health research in industry. Though systematic in their consideration of role theory, the authors become eclectic in their consideration of personality theory. The result is that, though they fulfill their own objectives, their conclusions and recommendations offer little that is new. For some findings they have no explanations, and other findings are contradictory.

The authors regard an organization as being an array of overlapping role sets. The concept of the role set, derived from Merton, incorporates role expectations (the key concept), role pressures, sent role, role forces, role behavior, role ambiguity and role conflict. In this conception, role conflict and role ambiguity are seen as the major causal factors of individual stress behavior in an organization. Enduring properties of the organization, and of the person, and characteristics of interpersonal relations are regarded as contextual.

To study conflict and ambiguity the authors interviewed 53 focal persons at various supervisory and executive levels in several industrial locations. In each case they asked the focal person to describe his
activities and to name other people with whom he came into contact who were his role senders, e.g., who made demands upon him or held expectations of him. The role senders he named were then asked by questionnaire what style of behavior they preferred the focal person to follow, to contrast those expectations with how he behaved (ideal versus actual behavior in this role), as well as to delineate organizational norms. The focal person was thereupon interviewed again and was asked to complete a personality inventory.

The authors sought to ascertain the amount of tension each focal person experienced in connection with his work (14 items self-reporting worry about work problems together with the degree to which he was bothered by them), the balance of satisfaction-dissatisfaction he felt about his job, and the quality of his interpersonal relations on the job. Personality factors were measured by standardized inventories and interpretive assessments of content analyses of the second focal interviews. The intensive study was followed by and matched to a national survey of job-related tensions of 725 working adults.

The authors found that the experience of role conflict and role ambiguity is common. The conflicts and ambiguities are usually hierarchical, and the consequent emotional costs include low job satisfaction, low confidence in the organization, a high degree of job-related tension, and withdrawal. The major elements of ambiguity include uncertainty about the way in which one's supervisor evaluates one's work, about opportunities for advancement, about scope of responsibility, and about the expectations of others regarding one's performance.

They report a systematic, curvilinear relationship between rank and role conflict. Role conflict is most intense at the upper levels of management, in part, according to the interpretation of the authors, as a consequence of the still unfulfilled mobility aspirations of middle management. The greatest pressure on a person in a given role comes from others who have, and are free to exert, leverage on him. The people who are least likely to apply such pressures are a person's peers and role senders outside his own department. The effects of objective role conflict are more pronounced for introverts, emotionally sensitive persons, and those who are strongly achievement oriented.

From their findings the authors suggest that conflict and ambiguity can be contained at tolerable levels by introducing structural changes in the organization, by introducing new criteria of selection and placement, by increasing the tolerance and coping abilities of individuals,
and by strengthening the interpersonal bonds among organizational members.

Taking role theory as a point of departure is consistent with the authors' environmental position. But role is a gross, descriptive, empirical concept, even when it is firmly anchored in a specific organizational structure. That we know someone is personnel director of Western Minerals or a nurse in Community Hospital tells us only in a general way something about that person's likely job behavior. When role is studied across organizations independently of the personalities of the persons who take the roles, the concept becomes even more vague; no matter how much the concept is elaborated, it remains evanescent because it does not denote specific enduring content. Role expectations and role pressures cannot therefore refer to the enduring givens of a specific role. Furthermore, even under the best of circumstances, the nature of role expectations and role pressures changes readily with the changing demands, philosophies, and styles of leadership. Given this weakness in the independent variable, it is no surprise that the conclusions say little that is new.

If role itself is only a gross categorization, role performance must vary widely with the role participant. Role conflict and role ambiguity must therefore, as daily observation tells us, necessarily be ubiquitous, and must necessarily arise predominantly from those who have power over the focal person. The authors themselves verify this. Their conclusions about role ambiguity also deal specifically with superior-subordinate relationships. If the major thrust of the conclusions lies in this one kind of relationship, then it hardly becomes necessary to adopt a new concept of role set and to examine role set in great detail to understand conflict and ambiguity.

Although it is useful in understanding a man's job behavior to know the relationship of his job to other jobs, if personality characteristics are enduring, from the authors' own conclusions we might more readily understand job stress if we knew those characteristics of a given officer holder, or holders of given offices in general, and the specific ways in which the behavior of superiors touched on them. For example, what similarities in personality are there among those who take the role of policemen and what effects do superiors' pressures have on these kinds of people in this role?

Despite the problems of the way the authors use role theory, it fits their empirical posture well. The dimensions to be measured have empirical referents and fit with each other theoretically. But when the authors attempt to be equally empirical with personality and
then to integrate role and personality concepts, they run into difficulty. Though their descriptions of personality variables are as comprehensive as their discussion of role theory, the variables themselves are unrelated to each other theoretically or systematically. The variables, taken separately, have internal statistical consistency, but taking them together results in treating personality additively rather than as configuration-in-equilibrium. The authors are able to integrate personality studied this way with role theory only when they leave their “rigorous” position and, in one chapter, describe a series of cases.

As a result, sometimes conclusions are both banal and circular: emotionally sensitive persons show substantially higher tension scores for any given degree of objective conflict. Sometimes conclusions are conflicting and the conflict remains unexplained: experienced strain, tension, job dissatisfaction, and reported good health increase as a function of status. (When a man reports himself to be in better health, is he? Is degree of worry about job-related problems that kind of tension which leads to stress symptoms?) And when it comes to middle-management men who experience the greatest role conflict (though in better reported health than those of lower status), the authors must turn primarily to personality concepts for explanation. This conflict is explained as resulting from heightened ego involvement, aspiration, and strong internal drive.

Security-oriented (dependent) individuals appear to be less sensitive than others to the effects of role conflict. This relative lack of vulnerability applies both to the experiencing of tension and the weakening of affective interpersonal bonds, both of which variables are associated with conflict in the sample as a whole. The authors apparently accept the contradiction that people who are more dependent on the organization are less disturbed by conflicts within it. The apparent contradiction is understandable if, with a configuration-in-equilibrium conception of personality, one can take account of the defense mechanism of denial and if his method allows him to examine more subtle symptoms.

For many years psychology suffered the mind-body dichotomy, which was then displaced by the equally futile heredity-environment controversy. The contemporary version of those issues is external social forces versus internal personality forces, contemporary forces versus historical antecedents; group versus individual. One way or another, each of these straw men rises in this book, distorting focus and vitiating the product. If we are seriously to study man in environment then we must equally seriously study man and environment. Survey methods
have their advantages; they do not, however, lend themselves easily to understanding complexity or depth.

In sum, circumscribed in concept and method, an admirable effort falls short of becoming the notable contribution such an excellent group of researchers could have made.  

HARRY LEVINSON

Director, Division of Industrial Mental Health
The Menninger Foundation


This report, undertaken by the members of the Society of Social Policy in Japan at the request of the Scientist’s Maintenance Problem Committee in the Japanese Academic Society, consists of data from an organizational survey and an individual survey. These data were derived from questionnaires that were sent to one-third of the teaching institutions and one-fourth of the research institutions in Japan.

Because of the shortage of engineers in Japan and the demands from business leaders for more engineers, Japanese educational policy for technology was recently reorganized and expanded by the government. While this emphasis on scientists for industry has improved the economic status of scientists in industry, it has not helped the status of scientists in teaching or research institutions. This problem suggested a study to investigate the difference in economic status, mainly the difference of salary, between the scientists in private companies and those in public institutions. The word "scientist" was applied to one whose main occupation is research. Scientists may work either in teaching institutions, ranging from junior colleges through graduate schools, or in research institutes.

According to the results of the research most of the scientists in teaching institutions are college graduates (82 percent), have taught or done research for an average of 16 years, and are forty years old. Only half of the scientists in research institutes are college graduates (59 percent), have worked at the institutions 11 years on the average, and are thirty-seven years old.

Before treating the problem of salary and wages, the major concern of the book, the authors raise a basic question about the salaries of scientists. They ask in what respects the financial needs of scientists