

Role Theory

Dimensions of Role Theory

A. Role Systems: Status and Role

Status relates to positions in a social system. Role relates to the expected behavior patterns attributed to that position. Status and role, then, are concepts serving to connect the culturally defined expectations with the patterned behavior and relationships which comprise social structure.

The term role is used to designate the composite of culture patterns associated with a particular status position. It includes attitudes, values, and behaviors that society applies to any and all persons occupying a specific position. Role is the dynamic aspect of status, i.e. what the individual has to do in order to validate her/his occupation of the status.

Human organizations can be defined as role systems. Certain activities are applied to particular positions in organizations. A complete set of activities for a particular position is its role. Formal documents, such as position descriptions define the activities of a particular position or office, including how it relates to other similar positions in the organization. In many cases roles are not set forth explicitly, and yet they seem to be understood by organizational members.

The concept of role relates to the activities of an individual in a particular position. It describes the behavior the role incumbent is expected to exhibit when occupying a given position in the societal or organizational system.

B. Multiple Roles

The concept of multiple roles recognizes that individuals play many roles simultaneously. Usually, however, only one role is active at a particular time while others are in relative degrees of latency. Multiple roles relate to multiple positions which an individual holds, often in various institutional settings-school, home, church, service organizations, fraternal order, etc. Within each organization the individual occupies a particular position and performs certain activities associated with that role. An individual's existence obviously varies in complexity according to the number of roles played in the various organizations.

C. Role Sets

For any particular position there is a variable number of orientations. Some roles are more complex than others. Each role involves an array of associated roles. For example, the role of teacher has its distinctive role-set, relating the teacher to pupils, colleagues, the principal, and superintendent, the board of education, support staff, parents, the PTA, and professional

organizations, among other groups. The role of medical student entails not only the role of the student in relation to professors, but also an array of other roles relating to other students, nurses, physicians, social workers, medical technicians, etc.

It is important to understand the difference between the concept of multiple roles and that of role set. The former refers to different roles in different organizational settings. Role sets, on the other hand, relate to the various roles which a specific position in a particular organization may require.

D. Role Perception

Accuracy in role perception has a definite impact on effectiveness and efficiency in organizations. If a task is incorrectly perceived, the result may be quite ineffective from the organizational point of view. On the other hand, a role associated with a particular position could be perceived quite accurately and yet inefficient performance could result because of deficiencies in ability and/or motivation. In addition, each of the constituencies within the school organization may have a different perception of the role of, for example, the school principal, which makes it very difficult to meet the expectations of all parties. These various elements are present in any organizational situation and must be considered together. The numerous factors affecting role perception can be considered in terms of the concept of role episode.

E. Role Episode

Personality and motivation affect individual behavior within an environment of technology, organizational structure, and status systems. Group dynamics and interpersonal relationships also affect the role process. In other words, the role episode takes place within the context of organizational technology and structure, the psychosocial system, and the managerial system.

1. A Model

There are four basic concepts involved in the role episode model:

- a. Role Expectations-standards applied to the behavior of any person who occupies a given organizational office or position.
- b. Sent Role- communications/overt behaviors stemming from role expectations that an individual "sends" to others as an attempt to influence them.
- c. Received Role-perceptions of the role that are received/perceived by others. The way in which the sent role is received will depend greatly upon the interpersonal relationships between the sender and the receivers. Also, individuals are much more likely to receive information and be influenced by "sendings" which reinforce their own expectations with regard to a given role.

- d. Role Receiver- the response of the original sender to the information and influence received from others.

An example of this is a baseball manager who is expected to behavior in certain ways in carrying out the duties of his office. He receives much advice from owners, fans, sportswriters, coaches, and players about how he should behave in certain situations. He filters this advice through selective perceptions and uses the residue; along with his own idea of the way the job should be done, to develop a behavior pattern, which guides his actions. His actual role behavior is the result of his own propensity to act in certain ways as modified by the influence of the persons in his role set.

2. Confounding Variables

The role episode takes place in the context of confounding variables such as:

- a. the attributes of the person
- b. organizational influences
- c. interpersonal influences.

These three major confounding variables are found in the context of typical organizations regardless of the specific individuals occupying the positions within the organization.