

Role* – A reconception of role and relationship in the workplace

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This thesis proposes the notion of role (pronounced “role star”) that conceptualizes sets of behaviours and their effects on relationships, interactions and interpersonal dynamics, as perceived and actualized from the standpoint of the individual. Rather than focusing exclusively on role behaviours as an enactment of social status, position or function, role* focuses additionally on the effects and interpersonal dynamics created by the individual’s behaviour within the context of her or his immediate social environment. The thesis develops both the theory and practice of enabling participants to achieve awareness of these effects – both extrinsic and reflexive – through specific techniques of guided self-narrative that raises the self to figural awareness. As action research, participants in a role* discovery process can subsequently actualize their role* motivating aspects, thereby taking control of their lives in what otherwise may be challenging, daunting or demoralizing circumstances.*

It is a perennial question that daunts both the average worker and organization development professional alike: What causes some people to feel completely engaged and vitalized by their work, while others feel apathetic, despondent and depressed? While the complete answers to this question may be as elusive as it is devilishly complex, it may be possible to understand one small aspect of the answer having to do with personal motivation and engagement. In the context of a more comprehensive and rigorous examination of aspects that affect intrinsic motivation and engagement with whatever it is one occupies oneself, I propose the notion of role* – an expansion of the conventional notion of role. Here, I begin to examine it in the context of the workplace; the results of the research strongly indicate that such a notion is applicable elsewhere as well. Role* conceptualizes sets of behaviours, and their effects on relationships, interactions and interpersonal dynamics, as perceived and actualized from the standpoint of the individual.

This thesis extensively explores and theorizes role*, especially addressing the following questions:

- By what means can role* be discovered by an individual, and to whom might role* have meaning and relevance?
- In what ways does role* enable a person to locate the source of their personal motivation and engagement with how they earn their livelihood?
- In what ways, if any, do the discovery (and potentially, actualization) of role* empower a person in their workplace and their work/life to realize, and take advantage of, opportunities that otherwise may have been lost?

In posing and exploring the nuances of these questions, my research and thesis seek to make a contribution to the understanding of career development, personal motivation, and to those who are searching for meaning and relevance in their work/life. The research methodology combines aspects of interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989), action research (Valach & Young, 2004), Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1973), as well as Moustakas’s heuristic inquiry (1990) to discover some of the nature and characteristics of role*.



Theoretical Foundation

Hilbert (1981) suggests an approach to considering one's role behaviours that resolves the distinction between the two, seeming conflicting conceptions of role: one being that role behaviours are commensurate with one's social position and status, and the other maintaining that role behaviours are contingent upon the situation at hand. "Our recommendation is to view 'role' as an organizing concept used on occasion by actors in social settings, and to view its utility for actors in terms of what they can do with it... whatever their immediate purposes" (p. 216). Callero (1994) extends this notion, by articulating the concept of roles as resources, in that they are used as "tools in the establishment of social structure... and that human agency is facilitated and expressed through the use of roles as resources" (p. 229). Discovering this agency in the context of career counselling, however, is another matter. Valach and Young (2004) suggest a possible approach for a "contextual action theory of career and counselling" (p. 61). They view vocation and career as a social and dialogical relationship between the individual and those with whom s/he interacts. Such a perspective suggests an approach to career counselling that is hermeneutical in nature: "This hermeneutic not only can be applied to practice and research, but also reflects a process in which people are continuously engaged in constructing and decoding meaning in action and career" (p. 63). Their suggested process of discovery is through extensive narrative and reflection that comprise a construction of social meaning. "Connections and actions that contribute to a long-term and broad life meaning may be referred to as 'career'... By examining actions, we begin to see career in the process of construction" (p. 75).

While self-narrative may be an important vehicle through which an individual can gain an awareness of issues of identity, social location, and role, these processes often take a

great deal of reflection and therefore, time. There is, of course, great inherent value in processes that are both reflective and reflexive in nature. Practically speaking, however, few people are willing to undertake the personal investment necessary to embark on such a deep exploration of their job, either by themselves, or guided by a therapist of one sort or another. Snow and Duvall (2004) make a suggestion that points to a possibly effective solution. They suggest the use of the concepts of figure and ground, in order to highlight aspects of what is to be noticed and observed against a context that is largely unnoticed or undistinguished. With respect to self-awareness of individual role-effects, the contextual ground will be the social context in which the person acts. "Figure-ground effects ... illuminate social contexts of self-awareness. People often feel distinctive relative to their social context... Figure-ground principles thus connect self-awareness to interpersonal processes, an area in which the theory has not been widely applied" (Snow & Duvall, 2004, p. 356).

Methodology

During the interviews, I employed a feminist mode of inquiry (Oakley, 1981) into the personal experiences of workers that explored the roles they played, not in terms of traits and behaviours, but rather in terms of behaviours, effects and interpersonal dynamics – their own, unique experiences of role*. Additionally, I used two specific linguistic devices throughout the conversation to accomplish the desired figural focus on self. The first is what I call "visceral questioning," in which I would ask the participant (in a variety of ways) to describe how a particular situation feels in an attempt to have them viscerally re-experience the incident. This tended to have the effect of the participant recalling their emotional reaction at the time that lent valuable clues as to the motivating or demotivating factors of the interaction. The second technique I refer to as

the “invisible man question”: “If I was the invisible man, sitting in the meeting [for example] and looking at you, what would I see?” In response to this question, every participant realigned their narrative standpoint from being the focal point – they observing the action – to one of observing themselves in the context of the action. Both of these devices accomplished the objective of having the participants effectively looking at themselves, looking at themselves in the mirror.

Six in-depth conversations, including a self-conversation, were conducted and transcribed. To enable possible factors that would reflect behaviours, effects and interpersonal dynamics to emerge, I chose to primarily use an open coding approach from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1973). I listened to the recorded conversation while simultaneously reading the transcript, seeking patterns within the described interactions, as well as paralinguistic clues, that would indicate whether the participant was motivated, happy, satisfied, fulfilled, or engaged during a particular situation, or not. Certain sections were subjected to detailed narrative analysis (Labov & Waletzky, 1967) to determine the motivating/demotivating aspects. Once the transcripts were coded, I performed a cluster analysis to correlate coded interpersonal interactions with indications of being motivated or demotivated. Those that repeated with significantly more frequency, and more pervasively among each person’s stories, I refer to as “Motivating/Demotivating co-factors” (M/D co-factors). These reflect the behaviours, effects and interpersonal dynamics that occur most frequently among the participants’ shared stories coincident with indications of feeling either motivated or demotivated. The detailed analyses were shared with each participant, and their feedback was incorporated into the analysis and subsequent findings.

Findings and Discussion

The findings demonstrated that intrinsic motivation is a highly individuated phenomenon – and one primarily based on the nature and characteristics of interpersonal interactions, irrespective of one’s actual task involvement or job. This observation suggests an intriguing distinction between taking a role* approach to discovering motivating and demotivating aspects in an individual, and other, more conventional methods such as questionnaires, surveys or direct questioning. For example, if asked directly, many people would agree that having autonomy, gaining recognition and not having arbitrary expectations foisted on them are important aspects of job satisfaction, engagement and personal motivation. However, the findings among the participants indicate these are not visceral aspects that are pervasively experienced with a common degree of importance; rather, the set of dominant intrinsic motivating factors seem to be unique to the individual.

Participants saw considerable value in taking a role* perspective that connected the various aspects of their lives, compared to the multiple-role perspective that had always troubled some of them. One participant reported that, prior to the role* conversation, she felt like someone with a “split personality,” never being able to make sense out of what appeared to be very diverse and disparate interests that were apparently unrelated. Examining the (ground) effects of interactions, rather than focusing on the (figure) of traits, skills and functions, enabled connections that created cohesion, making sense among them all. This observation helped explain a situation with another participant who was involved in the selection of a new manager for a work team. The manager was interviewed by a selection committee that included team members who based their decision on conventional criteria of skills, experience, responses to hypothetical situations, and testimonials. However, hiring

without consideration for role* aspects – those of both team members and the manager candidate – ignored what soon manifested as dysfunctional dynamics in the work team. This observation suggests a possibly important role for role* in the process of hiring, and team formation. Work teams could potentially be developed with both compatible, and mutually enhancing, role* aspects. Similarly, combinations of role* aspects that might result in hegemonic or disruptive interactions could potentially be avoided.

Individualized role* motivation and demotivation responses also suggest that the effect of any engagement with a largely dysfunctional, inequitable or unjust environment may as well be an individualized response, based on the experience of two of the participants. That response would depend specifically on which aspect(s) of the person's motivating role* behaviour is being compromised or attacked through the effects of others' behaviours in that environment. The implication of these findings for organization development interventions is this: since role* motivating and demotivating aspects are not obvious and remain undetected by the currently available instrumentation of OD practice, augmenting a corporate OD initiative with an individual role* assessment – especially for key personnel and thought-leaders within an organization – may increase the effectiveness of the initiative, and the participation, satisfaction and engagement of the workers.

What is clear from the variety of stories shared by each participant is that consistent patterns of role* interactions occur throughout their individual lives, quite independent of the particular job or role the person has at any given time. This is especially evident with those who discussed their multiple roles both in and outside of several very different workplaces. Additionally, the findings suggest that role* motivating / demotivating behaviours are not specifically a

characteristic of any particular job or role. It therefore seems that different jobs and roles can enable common role* attributes to be expressed for a particular individual. Conversely, essentially the same jobs or roles may trigger opposite role* motivating factors for that person. These findings suggest additional levels of consideration may be required in career counselling, development and promotion.

In all instances, my participants did not realize the commonality of their role* aspects among work and non-work environments. Neither did they realize the commonality of their role* aspects among multiple jobs, roles, avocations, and situations, prior to participating in the role* conversation. Additionally, when I identified their individual recurring patterns and motivating / demotivating aspects, they were unanimously surprised, and agreed that these aspects did indeed have meaning and resonance in the context of their lives. This suggests the importance of the specific process and aspects of discovery that are enabled by the role* approach to sense- and meaning-making for a wide array of work/life situations.

Stated another way, one might observe that role* draws on the truism that intrinsic motivation comes from within oneself. Indeed, among the major objectives of contemporary management practice is to “tap in” to those intrinsic motivators for the vast majority of employees, in an attempt to encourage them to work “above and beyond the call of duty,” and truly feel that they are making a fulfilling contribution while doing so. If explicitly asked, people may agree that certain common characteristics of a work environment are important. However, among the thirty-six dominant motivating and demotivating factors identified by the six participants (including myself), only three factors were common among participants – and no factor was shared by more than two participants – despite the fact that the

majority of the thirty-six are often included as “espoused” motivators in the literature.

Role* investigation allows people to connect with their emotional and visceral responses to situations and interactions, and thereby is an extremely effective way of discovering personal motivating and demotivating factors, regardless of the “common knowledge.” This is especially true for those factors that the people themselves had not realized were dominant for them. Most corporations, and especially large corporations, cannot take an interest in the specific factors that motivate or demotivate any given individual, primarily because there is no mechanism for it to be concerned about *any* arbitrary individual among thousands. Thus, the individual him or herself must be concerned with the individual. For a person to abdicate his or her own motivating factors to the whims of corporate culture is tantamount to relinquishing control of his or her personal drive, and to suppress their desires and relational feelings in favour of those that primarily and preferentially serve the needs of

the corporation itself. This, in turn suggests what may be the most important finding among the participants of role*: individual awareness of role* can enable people first to understand, and then to take control of what drives them to accomplish, to succeed, and to find satisfaction in their endeavours and undertakings throughout their life.

Knowing that there are many people who are confused or uncertain about their work/lives, and experiencing feelings of dissatisfaction, lack of motivation and negative stress, a process of narrative and reflection on behaviours and effects might help in making sense of a career, or of even seemingly random and unconnected jobs and experiences. It would be even more useful if the process could be accomplished relatively quickly and relatively painlessly, as the role* discovery conversation has proven to be. By realizing one’s own work/life motivation through an authentic experience of discovery of role*, individuals can actualize those interactions that truly engage them and thereby be truly empowered.

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