

# Role\* – Discovering the Passion in Your Work and Your Life

## Theory and Praxis by Mark Federman

Given the state of stress in North American society, the explosion of self-help and quick-fix approaches that pervade both bookstore shelves and television screens is hardly surprising. The rigours and demands of organizational life add to the stress for the vast majority of people who increasingly are feeling frustrated, alienated and powerless. Aside from various versions of a parent-like admonishment to “suck it up,” little is offered in the way of developing deep personal insight to understand one’s own mechanisms of motivation and deriving satisfaction from one’s occupation. In the meantime, managers, limited by their ability to increase material rewards, are forced to rely on so-called motivational speakers, pseudo-inspirational posters, and faux team-building exercises that are reminiscent of summer camp activities. These are often nothing more than temporary distractions from an environment that actively induces sagging morale.

A response to pervasive problems of morale, motivation and satisfaction arises in the newly conceived notion of role\*, pronounced as “role star.” It expands and enhances what many usually consider as roles played in the workplace – and elsewhere. Rather than something that can be encouraged – or even imposed – by managers, role\* considers motivation from the standpoint of interactions and effects that each of us create throughout our immediate environment. As individuals become aware of the interpersonal dynamics that especially energize and engage them, they can begin to align their work with their characteristic drives. Moreover, they can learn how to take more control over their reactions to situations that may be beyond their ability to change,

something that is vitally important in today’s accelerated workplace. For managers who assemble collaborative teams, making personnel choices according to complementary role\* dynamics will find members that invigorate and stimulate each other, thereby increasing not only productivity, but overall satisfaction and engagement for all concerned.

Based on new field research conducted at the world-famous Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, the role\* approach develops a framework for guided self-discovery, drawing from several diverse, but well-grounded, investigational techniques. These are combined in an original fashion to yield an innovative and remarkably rapid process through which the person can discover the nature of interactions that are particularly motivating and engaging, and those that cause apathy and despair. Each of us can actualize our own personal discovery of role\* to take control of how we feel about what we do in all aspects of life.

Discovering role\* means discovering your drive, your personal “wins,” and perhaps most importantly, your passion in everything you do.

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## *The Story of Role\* – A thesis set to fairy tale*

Once upon a time, there were some nice deterministic sociologists who liked to observe people and interpret their behaviours. They realized that the relatively nice society in which we live could be relatively nicely explained through a metaphor of actors playing roles, and acting out the drama(s) of life. People, they said, would mutually negotiate the roles they would play through a variety of expectations that they would assume for themselves and for others. If everyone played nicely, society would be a relatively orderly place. Those who did not appear to play nicely could either be explained as deliberately assuming misleading roles for some purpose – being either naughty or nice – or as requiring resocializing via training of one sort or another.

When managers and consultants (who kept changing their own nominal roles every decade or so) thought about applying these ideas to workers, they found that the resocializing mechanisms available to them were many. Many of these mechanisms did indeed involve training, and some actually made the workers feel better, but only for a short time. But still, the managers and consultants tried and tried to find newer and better mechanisms to get the workers to be resocialized – and it was often the case that the managers just wanted the workers to do more work. In fact, they found that these mechanisms grew increasingly more subtle as time went on – so much so that the employees often did not realize that they were being resocialized. Some of the workers even thought that they, and their organization, were actually learning. And so they were. (They just weren't always learning what they were told they were learning.)

Oh, oh. Along came the big, bad critical theorists. They shouted and shouted at the poor workers. "Can't you see that you're being oppressed? Can't you see that those roles you are in are merely ways of

maintaining the control that the powerful capitalists have imposed on you for decades?" All of a sudden, the poor workers didn't feel so good. They had been told by their managers that they were going to be empowered, but, on thinking about it, they didn't feel so empowered anymore. Some of them actually felt alienated. But the critical theorists wouldn't even let the workers be alienated in peace. They told the workers that what they were feeling – dissatisfaction and disappointment – wasn't alienation at all. What they were feeling as alienation was a total denial of their freedom and creativity. Poor workers. What could they do?

A couple of people came along and handed the workers tests, saying, "maybe if you take these tests, you will better understand your personality type, and then you'll be able to fit in and not feel so bad." Some workers took the tests, and some of them actually felt better, but only for a short time. And then, another passer-by shook her head and said that taking tests may well help them fit it, but in the long run, the tests may not really make them any more happy, let alone free and creative.

Along came some nice people who had some ideas that might stop the critical theorists from scaring the workers, and might even give the workers a new way of looking at the world, that might make them feel better. One said, "if you stop thinking that you are alone, and think that you are connected to other people, you might feel better." Another one said, "if you tell each other your stories in an honest way, you might feel better." Yet another said, "if you turn around your whole idea of role, so that you believe it creates your social location, rather than being determined by it, you'll feel better." Still another said, "if you bring some hidden aspects of your role identity into conscious awareness, you'll feel better." "Yes," said another, "and you will find that all these things help validate you as

individuals.” “Individuals who are connected to one another,” piped up someone else. And a couple of people said, “if you tell your stories, and then reflect on them, you may be able to make sense of all this.” But the workers still wondered whether it actually would work. And, given that all these nice, helpful people had spent years and years and years thinking about all these things, and had fancy letters after their names, what possible hope was there for the poor workers, who really didn’t want to have to think very much about their predicament anyway. Oh dear.

Night began to fall, and a man who had wandered into the midst of this great crowd of workers, critical thinkers and helpful people lit his small lantern to shed a bit of light for the assembly. The light was very small at first, but it was enough to make some people sufficiently comfortable to stay and share a story or two.

So several people began to tell stories of what they did in their lives, and how others reacted to them. And as they were telling their stories, an amazing thing happened. The more that people shared their stories, the brighter the light became. And the brighter the light became, the more clearly the people were able to see themselves. And the more they were able to see themselves, the more they realized that they didn’t really need to pay attention to the thinkers and critics and experts. All they needed was a bright light and what they already knew about themselves, but couldn’t really see before.

And what about the man with the lantern? Well, he was just happy that his light worked. But where did he find that lantern? And how did the small light grow into a bright light?

Therein lies the story of role\* ...

*The Beginning (certainly not The End!)*



# Thesis Synopsis

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

*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).

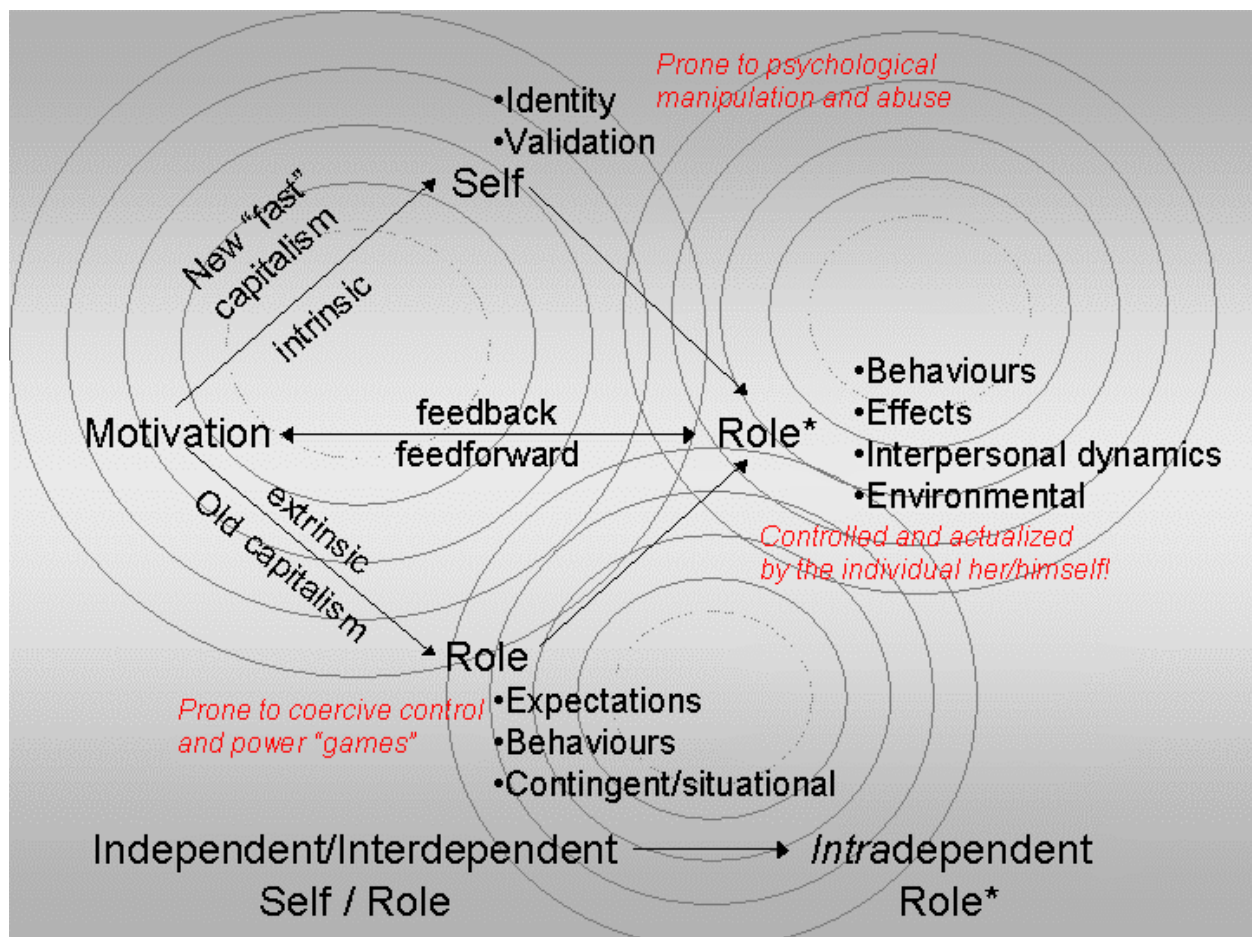
### **Methodology**

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; 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 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.

Individuated 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, the same jobs or roles may trigger opposite role\* motivating factors for that person. These findings suggest additional types of consideration for 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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Dear Friends,

My work (first thesis research, now a part-time counselling practice) centres on helping a person discover the dynamics related to their individual intrinsic motivation. What I discovered through my research participants is that, relative to engagement and motivation – and even passion – about your occupation, it matters less what you are doing, so long as you are able to actualize those sorts of dynamics, relations and interactions that (to put it colloquially) turn you on. Conversely, if you are in a situation that repeatedly triggers your demotivating dynamics and interactions, you could have the proverbial “greatest job on earth” and still be apathetic or despondent.

For people reconsidering their careers at (or approaching) mid-life/mid-career, this sort of facilitated self-exploration allows you to understand patterns of dynamics that have worked for you throughout your life (patterns that none of my participants so far had been able to link up before our conversation). You would then be able to contemplate the type of job, role or career that aligns most closely with those dynamics, and direct yourself accordingly.

Like the now-cliché commercial says, “I’m not only the discoverer of role\* (your individual motivating/demotivating aspects) and natural mode (your personal role metaphor), I’m also a client.” This was how I found my way to a completely different career path that ultimately brought me to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and my current research.

Is a role\* discovery conversation for you? Are you facing an important career decision, or concerned about your career progress to date? Are you considering a new career at mid-life? Or, are you seeking a deeper understanding of what motivates and demotivates you, to figure out why you are sometimes totally engaged and passionate about what you do, and at other times, completely turned off and apathetic?

If you are seeking a brand new approach to career and life coaching, please contact me – perhaps I can help. You can reach me by email at [federman@sympatico.ca](mailto:federman@sympatico.ca).

Yours in self-awareness,

