

# This Week's Citation Classic

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Rizzo J R, House R J & Lirtzman S I. Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. *Admin. Sci. Quart.* 15:150-63, 1970.  
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The literature indicates that dysfunctional consequences result from the existence of role conflict and role ambiguity in complex organizations. Yet systematic measurement and empirical testing of these role constructs are lacking. This study describes the development and testing of questionnaire measures of them. [The Social Sciences Citation Index® (SSCI®) indicates that this paper has been cited in over 175 publications since 1970.]

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"Several years prior to this article, my coauthors and I were actively involved in organizational development consultation and research. One client organization in particular stimulated us into this study. Interviews with dozens of managers revealed many of them to be experiencing role conflict and/or ambiguity. Despite little evidence of malicious behavior, it was an achievement oriented climate with considerable pressure to produce. Yet there was a lack of support and direction, and an insufficiency of policies or goals to guide work. Coupled with a blame orientation, many managers were under stress. R.J. House (now at the University of Toronto) and I even found ourselves interviewing a local minister who was counseling a large number of managers who were seeking help in connection with job induced problems! The organization permitted us to do questionnaire surveys of a large sample of managers, giving us the opportunity to develop several measures that were both useful for survey feedback to the organization and needed in the management literature. Credit must be given to House for his ability to link the literature and needs of the field to practical situations of the kind we

faced. We divided the work of acquiring and developing survey instruments, did much work together, and rotated senior authorship on several new measures. One was the Organizational Practices Scale<sup>1</sup> and another the Role Conflict and Ambiguity Measure.

"For the role measures, we drew on the work of Kahn et al.<sup>2</sup> and Gross et al.<sup>3</sup> to write items representing the constructs. We were later pleased to find, with the help of S.I. Lirtzman, that there was clean factorial separation of role conflict from role ambiguity and that the measures correlated in expected directions with other independent and dependent variables.

"The Kahn et al.<sup>2</sup> work must have helped to generate interest, for we had requests for the scale before it was published. The frequent use and citation of the scale are probably attributable to its anticipated explanatory power and to the fact that role conflict and ambiguity are often experienced in complex organizations. They represent types of behavior relevant to widely acknowledged organization principles and practices such as formalization, task expectations, communication requirements, and performance appraisal, to name a few. It appeared we were onto something, for while we went on to different pursuits, other researchers apparently needed the scale and have used it often. Unfortunately, not all have administered the entire scale or contributed to its further development, although several, including House,<sup>4</sup> have recently done so. Research has tended to uphold the factorial integrity of the two constructs. Yet, more work needs to be done. In their review of the literature on role constructs, Von Sell, Brief, and Schuler<sup>5</sup> found moderate consistency in the forms and results of relevant research. The framework they provide for organizing research in this area should help us move toward learning more. If the popularity of these measures continues, I am sure it is attributable to the pervasiveness of role conflict and ambiguity as phenomena we all experience in complex organizational life."

1. House R J & Rizzo J R. Toward the measurement of organizational practices: scale development and validation. *J. Appl. Psychol.* 56:388-96, 1972.
2. Kahn R L, Wolfe D M, Quinn R P, Snoek J D & Rosenthal R A. *Organizational stress: studies in role conflict and ambiguity.* New York: Wiley, 1964. 470 p.
3. Gross N, Mason W S & McEachern A W. *Explorations in role analysis: studies of the school superintendency role.* New York: Wiley, 1958. 379 p.
4. House R J, Levanoni E & Schuler R S. An empirical examination of the construct validity of the Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman role scales: toward a clarification of the nature of role conflict. Paper presented at the Midwest Academy of Management Meeting, Columbus, Ohio, 1982.
5. Von Sell M, Brief A & Schuler R S. Role conflict and role ambiguity: integration of the literature and directions for future research. *Hum. Relat.* 34:43-71, 1981.