



Umbrella Summary

Role Stress

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is role stress?

A work role consists of “a pattern of behaviors perceived by an employee as behaviors that are expected” (Tubre & Collins, 2000, p. 156). When perceived work role expectations are unclear, incompatible with other expected behaviors, or too much to handle, role stress is said to occur (Tubre & Collins, 2000). Role stress is typically broken down into three main types: role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload.

Role ambiguity refers to a situation in which employees are unsure about what their responsibilities are, what behaviors are expected of them, and what the standards are for success (Rizzo et al., 1970). Role conflict occurs when there is incompatibility or incongruity in the requirements of a work role (Rizzo et al., 1970). Role conflict can take a number of different forms, such as when an employee feels conflict between their role and their values, conflict between role demands and their capacity (e.g., training, resources) to complete them, and conflict due to incompatibility between multiple requests from others or between expectations and organizational policies (Rizzo et al., 1970). Thus, it can be said that role ambiguity consists of a lack of information, whereas role conflict consists of too much contradictory information (Tubre & Collins, 2000). The last category of role stress, role overload, consists of a scenario where employees have too many responsibilities to juggle given their finite abilities and time constraints (Eatough et al., 2011). Role overload has already been covered in detail in the umbrella summary on [workload](#), so the focus here will be on role ambiguity and role conflict.

Importantly, role ambiguity and role conflict are related, but distinct, concepts. They are positively and moderately associated with each other and may relate to the extent that they can both arise from conditions in one’s work environment (Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Schmidt et al., 2014). However, they are definitionally distinct and are often measured as two separate types of role stress (Schmidt et al., 2014).

Role ambiguity and role conflict are most often measured using the Role Questionnaire (RQ; Rizzo et al., 1970). The RQ consists of 14 total items, six of which measure role ambiguity (e.g., “I know what my responsibilities are”) and eight of which measure role conflict (e.g., “I receive incompatible requests from two or more people”). Composite scores are calculated for both role ambiguity and role conflict.

Why is role stress important?

Role stress is important because meta-analytic research indicates that there may be negative consequences when employees experience role stress in the workplace. Specifically, research indicates that role ambiguity has a moderate negative relationship with job performance, and

role conflict has a modest negative relationship with job performance (Gilboa et al., 2008). There are modest negative relationships between both types of role stress and organizational citizenship behaviors (discretionary behaviors, such as such as volunteering and helping others, that benefit the group and organization), indicating that employees experiencing these forms of role stress may be less likely to perform extra-role behaviors (Eatough et al., 2011). Role ambiguity and role conflict are also both moderately and negatively associated with job satisfaction (Abramis, 1994; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Additionally, both type of stress have moderate negative associations with organizational commitment (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). There is a modest positive association between role ambiguity and turnover intentions and a moderate positive association between role conflict and turnover intentions (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). When examining the actual rate of turnover, evidence indicates that there are modest positive associations with both role ambiguity and role conflict (Rubenstein et al., 2017). Lastly, meta-analytic research utilizing samples of mental health professionals indicates that role ambiguity and role conflict also have moderate positive associations with employee burnout (Lee et al., 2019).

What contributes to role stress?

Meta-analytic research thus far has identified a number of contextual factors within one's workplace environment that are related to role stress. However, these findings are simply correlational in nature, so we are unable to infer causality. Research indicates that employees may be less likely to experience role ambiguity and conflict when their leader practices relationship-oriented behaviors (e.g., being supportive and friendly, respecting ideas, communicating openly, recognizing accomplishments) and task-oriented behaviors (e.g., providing direction, planning, scheduling, problem solving). High levels of feedback from colleagues and from one's tasks are also related to less role stress (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). High levels of job autonomy and formalization are also associated with less role ambiguity, but there is not a relationship between these characteristics and role conflict (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Employees may also experience less role stress when they are able to participate in decision making and when their job provides high task identity (i.e., their job tasks allow them to complete a process from start to finish and see the impact of their labor; Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Lastly, a higher workload is associated with greater amounts of role ambiguity and role conflict (Bowling et al., 2015). Thus, factors like job design, feedback, and leadership style may be related to whether employees experience role stress in the workplace, but causal research is needed to further identify the nature of these relationships.

Can role stress be improved?

To more directly address role stress, agencies can begin by using the Role Questionnaire to assess the extent to which it is an issue. The questions themselves serve as fairly direct leads for follow-up, which could be accomplished via focus groups among those with undesirably high role stress. For example, if scores are high for role conflict in general and specifically for the item about having to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment, staff should be encouraged to share what types of rules or policies are barriers to task completion. The agency can then explore avenues to reduce this conflict.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ There are three main types of role stress: role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload.
- ▶ Role ambiguity occurs when an employee is unsure of expectations, and role conflict occurs when an employee faces competing expectations.
- ▶ Role ambiguity has a moderate negative relationship with job performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment and a moderate positive relationship with burnout. There is a modest negative association between role ambiguity and organizational citizenship behaviors and a modest positive association between role ambiguity and both turnover intentions and actual turnover.
- ▶ Role conflict has a moderate negative relationship with organizational commitment and job satisfaction and a moderate positive relationship with turnover intentions and burnout. There is a modest negative association between role conflict and both job performance and organizational citizenship behaviors and a modest positive association between role conflict and turnover.
- ▶ Employees with leaders who practice relationship-oriented and task-oriented behaviors may be less likely to experience role stress.
- ▶ High levels of feedback, participation in decision making, and task identity are associated with less role stress.
- ▶ Greater autonomy and workplace formalization are associated with less role ambiguity, but not role conflict.
- ▶ Higher workload is associated with greater amounts of role ambiguity and role conflict.
- ▶ Practitioners or researchers who would like to assess role ambiguity and/or role conflict should consider the 14-item Role Questionnaire by [Rizzo et al. \(1970\)](#).

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Author(s)

Sarah Stepanek, MA, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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