

# RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN ROLE THEORY

*B. J. Biddle*

Center for Research in Social Behavior, University of Missouri-Columbia, Columbia, Missouri 65211

## *Abstract*

Role theory concerns one of the most important features of social life, characteristic behavior patterns or *roles*. It explains roles by presuming that persons are members of *social positions* and hold *expectations* for their own behaviors and those of other persons. Its vocabulary and concerns are popular among social scientists and practitioners, and role concepts have generated a lot of research. At least five perspectives may be discriminated in recent work within the field: functional, symbolic interactionist, structural, organizational, and cognitive role theory. Much of role research reflects practical concerns and derived concepts, and research on four such concepts is reviewed: consensus, conformity, role conflict, and role taking. Recent developments suggest both centrifugal and integrative forces within the role field. The former reflect differing perspectival commitments of scholars, confusions and disagreements over use of role concepts, and the fact that role theory is used to analyze various forms of social system. The latter reflect the shared, basic concerns of the field and efforts by role theorists to seek a broad version of the field that will accommodate a wide range of interests.

## INTRODUCTION

Role theory poses an intriguing dilemma. On the one hand, the concept of *role* is one of the most popular ideas in the social sciences. At least 10% of all articles currently published in sociological journals use the term role in a technical sense, chapters on role theory appear in authoritative reviews of social psychology, essay volumes on role theory appear regularly, endless applications of role ideas may be found in basic texts for sociology and social

psychology, and role theory provides a perspective for discussing or studying many social issues. On the other hand, confusion and malintegration persist in role theory. Authors continue to differ over definitions for the role concept, over assumptions they make about roles, and over explanations for role phenomena. And formal derivations for role propositions have been hard to find.

This dilemma has prompted some authors to write damning reviews of role theory. Nevertheless, substantial reasons exist for the popularity of the role concept. Role theory exhibits an agreed-upon set of core ideas, and empirical research that uses these ideas flowers. The philosophical stance of role theory is attractive and useful in efforts to ameliorate human problems. Role theory offers opportunities to integrate key interests of researchers in sociology, psychology, and anthropology. Recent contributions also suggest that explanation in role theory is now becoming more formal. Consequently, the focus of this essay is more upon synthesis than criticism of the field. I review ideas basic to role theory, examine treatment of these ideas in several perspectives of social thought, and review empirical research for key issues in role theory. The essay ends with a discussion of issues and propositional theory for the field.

## BASIC IDEAS AND ORIENTATION

Role theory concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behavior—the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation. As the term *role* suggests, the theory began life as a theatrical metaphor. If performances in the theater were differentiated and predictable because actors were constrained to perform “parts” for which “scripts” were written, then it seemed reasonable to believe that social behaviors in other contexts were also associated with parts and scripts understood by social actors. Thus, role theory may be said to concern itself with a triad of concepts: patterned and characteristic social behaviors, parts or identities that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood by all and adhered to by performers.

Confusion entered role theory because its basic theatrical metaphor was applied only loosely and because its earliest proponents (Georg Simmel, George Herbert Mead, Ralph Linton, and Jacob Moreno) differed in the ways they used role terms. Unfortunately, these differences persist in current literature. Thus, whereas some authors use the term *role* to refer to characteristic behaviors (Biddle 1979, Burt 1982), others use it to designate social parts to be played (Winship & Mandel 1983), and still others offer definitions that focus on scripts for social conduct (Bates & Harvey 1975, Zurcher 1983). Although these differences appear substantial, the problem is more terminological than substantive. Agreement persists among role theorists that the basic concerns of

the orientation are with characteristic behaviors, parts to be played, and scripts for behavior. For convenience, in this essay I shall designate these basic concepts of role theory by the familiar terms of *role*, *social position*, and *expectation*, respectively.

Somewhat more serious are disagreements by role theorists over the modality of expectations presumably responsible for roles. Whereas many role theorists assume that expectations are *norms* (i.e. prescriptive in nature), others assume them to be *beliefs* (referring to subjective probability), and still others view them as *preferences* (or “attitudes”). Each mode of expectation generates roles for somewhat different reasons, so different versions of role theory result, depending on the mode of expectation assumed. (Later I will argue that all three modes should be retained.)

Even more serious is the retention, in role theory, of concepts whose definitions involve improbable, undetectable, or contradictory conditions. To illustrate this latter problem, one influential source defines a role as “a particular set of norms that is organized about a function” (Bates & Harvey 1975 : 106). Another describes role as a “comprehensive pattern for behavior and attitude” (Turner 1979 : 124). And still another conceives role as “behavior referring to normative expectations associated with a position in a social system” (Allen & van de Vliert 1984a : 3). These definitions overlap, but each adds one or more conditions not given in the others. This leaves the reader in confusion over how to conceptualize or study events that do not meet these conditions. (Are patterned behaviors then not roles when they are *not* associated with a function, *not* tied to attitudes, or *not* associated with norms or social positions?) Role theory would be better off if its major proponents could be persuaded to agree upon, or better yet, to eschew, such limiting conditions.

Although role theorists differ in the assumptions they build into basic concepts, they are largely similar in philosophic orientation and in the methods used for their research. Most versions of role theory presume that expectations are the major generators of roles, that expectations are learned through experience, and that persons are aware of the expectations they hold. This means that role theory presumes a thoughtful, socially aware human actor. As a result, role theorists tend to be sympathetic to other orientations that presume human awareness—for example, cognitive and field theories in social psychology or exchange theory and phenomenological approaches in sociology. And because of this sympathy, role theorists also tend to adopt the methods of research prevalent in these orientations, particularly methods for observing roles and those that require research subjects to report their own or others’ expectations.

Given its basic focus, one might assume that empirical research by role theorists would focus on the origins, dynamics, and effects of roles, social positions, and expectations. Surprisingly, this has not been the case. Instead, much of role research has concerned practical questions and derived concepts

such as role conflict, role taking, role playing, or consensus. The practical concerns of role research have been both a blessing and a curse. On the positive side, they have brought attention to role theory and funds for needed research efforts. On the negative, they have tended to expand and confuse the application of role ideas. This has led to widespread adoption of the role vocabulary as well as the generation of new concepts that might not have appeared had research been more focused. But formal development of the theory has suffered, and role theorists often have worked at cross-purposes. In addition, the fact that role concepts have been employed by scholars representing several different theoretical perspectives has meant that, in the views of some authors, "role theory" is merely an expression of those perspectives. This has led some reviewers to praise or damn role theory because they approve or disapprove of the perspective with which they associate it—failing to recognize that role concepts are employed for various purposes by other social scientists. These problems are serious ones, and role theory will prosper in the future to the extent that it adopts its own distinctive theoretical orientation, one that stands apart from the theoretical perspectives with which it has been historically associated.

## PERSPECTIVES AND THEIR CONTRIBUTIONS

As suggested above, interest in role theory has appeared in some of the central arenas of sociology and social psychology. Five such perspectives are discriminated here.

### *Functional Role Theory*

The functional approach to role theory began with the work of Linton (1936) but was not formalized until the publications of Parsons (1951; Parsons & Shils 1951). In general, functional role theory has focused on the characteristic behaviors of persons who occupy social positions within a stable social system. "Roles" are conceived as the shared, normative expectations that prescribe and explain these behaviors. Actors in the social system have presumably been taught these norms and may be counted upon to conform to norms for their own conduct and to sanction others for conformity to norms applying to the latter. Thus, functional role theory became a vocabulary for describing the differentiated "parts" of stable social systems as well as a vehicle for explaining why those systems are stable and how they induce conformity in participants.

A recent work that represents the thought of functional role theory is the text by Bates & Harvey (1975). This work views social structures as collections of designated social positions, the shared norms of which govern differentiated behaviors. Some of the norms applying to a given position govern general conduct, but others govern only relationships between a focal position and a specific, counter position, and among the latter, "roles" are those that apply to

the accomplishment of specific functions. Building on these concepts, the authors offer insightful analyses of various forms of social systems, ranging from groups to complex organizations and human communities. In addition, they discuss problems of the individual as a participant in particular social systems and examine the phenomena of stratification and social change. Thus, Bates & Harvey cover many of the traditional concerns of role theory and also reach out toward a synthesis of role theory with other orientations in sociology.

Functional theory was once very popular; indeed, it was the dominant perspective in role theory until perhaps the mid-1970s, and some writers of introductory texts as well as some sociologists interested in applying role concepts (e.g. Nye 1976) still embrace a functionalist stance. The assumptions of functionalism have been criticized, however, and this perspective has lost its former, dominant position in American sociology. Among other things, it has been pointed out that many roles are not associated with identified social positions, that roles may or may not be associated with functions, that social systems are far from stable, that norms may or may not be shared within the system and may or may not lead to conformity or sanctioning, and that roles may reflect other cognitive processes as well as normative expectations. Contemporary role theory seems debilitated by its lingering association with functionalism.

### *Symbolic Interactionist Role Theory*

Interest in the role concept among symbolic interactionists began with Mead (1934) and gives stress to the roles of individual actors, the evolution of roles through social interaction, and various cognitive concepts through which social actors understand and interpret their own and others' conduct. Although many symbolic interactionists discuss the concept of norm and assume that shared norms are associated with social positions, norms are said to provide merely a set of broad imperatives within which the details of roles can be worked out. Actual roles, then, are thought to reflect norms, attitudes, contextual demands, negotiation, and the evolving definition of the situation as understood by the actors. As a result of these emphases, symbolic interactionists have made strong contributions to our understanding of roles in informal interaction, and their writings are replete with insights concerning relationships among roles, role taking, emotions, stress, and the self concept.

Recent works within the symbolic interactionist tradition have included major reviews of the role field (Heiss 1981, Stryker & Statham 1985), a volume of reprinted works (Heiss 1976), and others concerned with applications of theory (Ickes & Knowles 1982, Zurcher 1983). Contributors have also continued to explore implications of role ideas. Gordon (1976) discusses the development of evaluated role identities, and Gordon & Gordon (1982) examine how the changing of roles also alters one's goals and self-conceptions. McCall

(1982) applies role concepts to the topic of discretionary justice; Stryker & Macke (1978) explore similarities between status inconsistency and role conflict; and Stryker & Serpe (1982) discuss commitment, identity salience, and role behavior. Turner continues his extensive contributions by examining rule learning (1974), the role and the person (1978), a strategy for developing role propositions (1979), issues over which role theorists disagree (1985), and the effect of others' responses on interpretation of role behavior (Turner & Shosid 1976).

Other writers, influenced by symbolic interactionism, have continued to explore implications of role theory's basic theatrical metaphor. Dramaturgical role theory can be traced to an early paper by Simmel (1920), but classic works expressing the perspective did not appear until midcentury. As a rule, this perspective has focused upon the details of role enactment and on the effects of that enactment on the actor and observers. This has led to discussions of self-presentation, impression and identity management, involvement, deviancy, and the impact of social labeling. Recent works representing these efforts may be found in Gove (1975), Lyman & Scott (1975), Scheibe (1979), Sarbin (1982), and Hare (1985).

Symbolic interactionism has also attracted its share of criticism. Not all symbolic interactionists use the role concept, but those who do tend to exhibit many of the problems associated with the perspective. Among these are tendencies to use fuzzy and inapplicable definitions, to recite cant, and to ignore the findings of relevant empirical research. Symbolic interactionists often fail to discuss or to study the contextual limits for application of their insightful ideas. Little formal attention is given to actors' expectations for other persons or to structural constraints upon expectations and roles. In addition, it is not always clear from the writings of symbolic interactionists whether expectations are assumed to generate, to follow from, or to evolve conjointly with roles—and if the latter, what we are to understand about the relationship between expectations and conduct. These problems have reflected both the unique history of symbolic interactionism and its epistemological approach, which favors ethnography over survey and experimental evidence. Such problems have weakened contributions from the perspective and have prompted additional attacks on role theory because of its presumed identification with symbolic interactionism.

### *Structural Role Theory*

Linton's early statement of role concepts also influenced anthropologists and others interested in social structure (see Levy 1952, Nadel 1957), and this has prompted the development of mathematically expressed, axiomatic theory concerning structured role relationships (Burt 1976, 1982; Mandel 1983; White et al 1976; Winship & Mandel 1983). Within this effort, little attention is given

to norms or other expectations for conduct. Instead, attention is focused on "social structures," conceived as stable organizations of sets of persons (called "social positions" or "statuses") who share the same, patterned behaviors ("roles") that are directed towards other sets of persons in the structure. Such concepts lead to formal discussions of various concerns including social networks, kinships, role sets, exchange relationships, comparison of forms of social systems, and the analysis of economic behaviors. Thus, as with functionalists, structuralists are attempting to take on some of the central concerns of sociology and anthropology. Their treatment of these subjects is far different, however. The assumptions they make are simpler, their focus is more on the social environment and less on the individual, and their arguments are more likely to be couched in mathematical symbols.

Structural role theory has not yet achieved a large following. Work representing this effort has the advantage of clarity and of explicit logic. On the other hand, most social scientists seem unwilling to read arguments that are expressed in mathematical symbols, and the assumptions made by structuralists are limiting. How does such an approach deal with the nonconforming person, for example, with social systems whose structures are not well-formed, with social change? Moreover, role theory is popular, in part, because it portrays persons as thinkers, thus purporting to explain both behaviors and phenomenal experience, while much of structural role theory ignores the latter. It is certainly possible to build a role theory that merely describes social structure, but one wonders whether the gain is worth the effort.

### *Organizational Role Theory*

However insightful the work of functionalists, structuralists, and symbolic interactionists, most empirical research in the role field has not come from these perspectives. Instead, it has reflected other perspectives that have generated their own traditions of effort. One of these has appeared among researchers interested in the roles of formal organizations. Their efforts have built a version of role theory focused on social systems that are preplanned, task-oriented, and hierarchical. Roles in such organizations are assumed to be associated with identified social positions and to be generated by normative expectations, but norms may vary among individuals and may reflect both the official demands of the organizations and the pressures of informal groups. Given multiple sources for norms, individuals are often subjected to role conflicts in which they must contend with antithetical norms for their behavior. Such role conflicts produce strain and must be resolved if the individual is to be happy and the organization is to prosper.

Organizational role theory may be said to have begun with the seminal books of Gross et al (1958) and Kahn et al (1964). Recent work includes review articles on role conflict research (Van Sell et al 1981, Fisher & Gitelson 1983),

others on role conflict resolution (van de Vliert 1979, 1981), volumes of original essays (van de Vliert et al 1983, Visser et al 1983), and an edited work seeking to extend the theory to the phenomena of role transition (Allen & van de Vliert 1984b). The latter work, in particular, presents theory and application papers focused on problems generated when the actor must cope with changes in social position or expectations for the actor's position. Such experiences typically cause strain, and the core of the theory concerns variables that affect the actor's choice of strategies for coping with the situation.

Organizational role theory has had considerable impact in business schools and among industrial psychologists and sociologists. It is also subject to criticism. Among other problems, its assumptions appear to be limiting and to preclude the study of roles that evolve or roles that are generated by nonnormative expectations. As well, the perspective implies that organizations are rational, stable entities, that all conflicts within them are merely role conflicts, and that the participant will inevitably be happy and productive once role conflict is resolved. These latter conclusions are questionable. Nevertheless, substantial empirical research has appeared based on this perspective, and much of what we know about role conflict and its resolution today has come from that effort.

### *Cognitive Role Theory*

The remaining bulk of empirical role research has largely been associated with cognitive social psychology. As a rule, this work has focused on relationships between role expectations and behavior. Attention has been given to social conditions that give rise to expectations, to techniques for measuring expectations, and to the impact of expectations on social conduct. Many cognitive role theorists have also concerned themselves with the ways in which a person perceives the expectations of others and with the effects of those perceptions on behavior.

Several subfields of effort can be recognized within cognitive role theory. A first began with Moreno's (1934) early discussion of *role playing*. As Moreno had it, role playing appears when the person attempts to imitate the roles of others. Role playing is said to appear naturally in the behavior of children and can be practiced as an aid in both education and therapy. The latter assertion has led to scores of studies on the effectiveness of therapeutic role playing; many of these confirm the value of the technique (McNamara & Blumer 1982). Role playing has been found an effective way to produce changes in expectations (Janis & Mann 1977). It has also been touted as a way of operationalizing dependent variables in social psychological experiments, but the latter application is questionable (Yardley 1982, Greenwood 1983).

A second subfield was stimulated by Sherif's (1936) early work on group norms but was given additional impetus by the subsequent work of others on



group norms and the roles of leaders and followers. Research on group norms and the roles of leader and follower continues to this day (see Moreland & Levine 1982, Rutte & Wilke 1984, Hollander 1985).

A third subfield has focused on theories of anticipatory role expectations originally suggested by Rotter (1954) and Kelly (1955). Emphasis within this tradition has *not* been upon normative expectations. Instead, expectations have been conceived as beliefs about likely conduct, and researchers have examined both subjects' beliefs about their own behavior and those beliefs that they attribute to other persons. Research stimulated by these insights has focused on counseling and the interpretation of mental illness, although recent work seeks to extend the orientation to an understanding of family interaction (see Brewer et al 1981, Carver & Scheier 1981, Duckro et al 1979, Mancuso & Adams-Webber 1982, Tschudi & Rommetveit 1982).

Finally, a fourth subfield has appeared as research on *role taking*, stimulated by contributions of Mead (1934) and Piaget (1926). Although other interpretations of role taking have also appeared, one group of investigators has assumed that this term refers to the degree to which persons attribute sophisticated thoughts to others. Standardized methods have been developed for measuring sophistication of role taking, and sophistication is generally found to be greater among persons who are older, wiser, and more mature (see Enright & Lapsley 1980, Underwood & Moore 1982, Eisenberg & Lennon 1983).

Other cognitive social scientists have also contributed to role theory, although they may not have used the role concept in their writings. To illustrate, Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) have conducted research examining the comparative impact of "attitudes" and of attributed norms on conduct. Schwartz (1977) has investigated subjects' responses to moral norms. Good and his colleagues (Brophy & Good 1974, Good 1981, Cooper & Good 1983) have studied the impact of teacher expectations about pupils on teacher classroom behavior and pupil achievement. And this list might be extended indefinitely.

Integrative works representing cognitive role theory appeared in the past, but given the breadth of this perspective, it is not surprising to learn that few such works have recently surfaced. An exception to this generalization appears in Biddle's (1979) text, a work that offers separate chapters on the concepts of role, social position, expectation, derived concepts, and applications of role theory to the social system and individual adjustment. In addition, Biddle explores the assumptions of role theory and provides reviews of applicable empirical evidence.

Unlike most role theorists, Biddle assumes that role expectations can appear simultaneously in at least three modes of thought: norms, preferences, and beliefs. These modes of expectation are learned through somewhat different experiences. However, each may (or may not) be shared with others in a given context, each can affect behavior, and all may be involved in generating a role.

Such an approach suggests a sophisticated model for the person's thoughts about roles and allows integration of role theory with various traditions of research on "attitudes," the self-concept, and related topics. In addition, Biddle, Bank, and their colleagues have published research on the origins and comparative effects of norms, preferences, and beliefs (Bank et al 1977, 1985; Biddle et al 1980a,b, 1985).

Cognitive role theory is also subject to criticism, of course. As a rule, the insights of this perspective tend to rely too heavily on contemporary American culture, its research fails to explore the contextual limitations of effects, and it tends to ignore the dynamic and evolving character of human interaction. As well, cognitive role theorists, by focusing on the individual, often slight role phenomena associated with social positions or with temporal and structural phenomena. For the present, however, cognitive role theory appears to have a broader empirical base than other perspectives in the field.

## KEY CONCEPTS AND RESEARCH

One of the strengths of role theory is that its concepts are easily studied. This has led to considerable research effort which, in turn, has produced information concerning basic issues in role theory. It is appropriate that I review some of this information here. For convenience, the review will focus on four key concepts that have stimulated research traditions.

### *Consensus*

The term *consensus* is used by role theorists to denote agreement among the expectations that are held by various persons. The significance of this concept was first argued by functionalists who asserted that social roles appear because persons in the social system share norms for the conduct of social-position members. Thus, such persons know what they should do, and all persons in the system can be counted on to support those norms with sanctions. And for this reason, social systems are presumably better integrated, and interaction within them proceeds more smoothly, when normative consensus obtains. As well, functionalists often built assumptions about normative consensus into their definitions of concepts for role theory. To illustrate, a social norm has been defined as "a standard shared by members of a social group" (Kolb 1964:472), and definitions such as these are often accepted today by role theorists who have little sympathy for the rest of functional theory.

Enthusiasm for consensus has not been universal, however. Role-conflict researchers have often pointed out that assumptions about consensus are sometimes untenable, and critical theorists have questioned the usefulness of focusing on consensus as the sole mechanism for producing social order. (Social order might be produced, for example, through negotiation, social exchange,

chicanery, or applications of force, and normative consensus may well result from hegemonic domination by powerful interest groups.) These arguments pose two questions about consensus that can be addressed through empirical research. *First*, to what extent do persons actually agree on norms, and what factors affect their agreement? *Second*, is it true that the integration of social systems is facilitated by normative consensus, and what factors affect this relationship?

As it turns out, research does not provide satisfactory answers to these questions. Early research produced a number of studies of normative consensus in small groups (see McGrath & Altman 1966), but this research tradition has largely lapsed today. Early research also generated good discussions of the norm concept and methods for measuring consensus (Jackson 1960, 1966; Leik 1966; Gibbs 1965), but these had little apparent impact on research. Indeed, recent research on normative consensus appears to be rediscovering measurement issues and to be largely concerned with posing criteria by which one might detect when sufficient consensus is present to conclude the "existence" of a social norm (see Labovitz & Hagedorn 1973, Hamilton & Rytina 1980, Jacobsen & van der Voordt 1980, Markoff 1982, Rossi & Berk 1985). Research on small groups suggests that normative consensus is greater within longer-lasting groups and when group cohesiveness obtains (Hollander 1985). Consensus also appears likely when persons are asked about their norms for easily identified social positions in the society-at-large (Deux 1984, Rossi & Berk 1985). But factors that would affect normative consensus seem not to have been studied for most social system forms, and it is difficult to find studies that address the presumed relationship between normative consensus and social-system integration.

Arguments concerning the advantages of consensus need not be confined to the normative mode of expectations. It is often asserted that social systems will also be better integrated when their members share beliefs about social conduct. (After all, such beliefs should lead to collective action that anticipates the effects of conduct thought likely.) This, too, is an attractive idea, but little research seems to have been conducted concerning it.

In contrast, considerable research has appeared concerning the effects of preferential consensus (or "attitude similarity"). Few of these studies have controlled for the possible presence of effects generated by norms or beliefs, and some studies have used scales for the measurement of preferences that are contaminated by normative or belief-oriented items (for discussion of this issue and an example, see Bank et al 1977). But within these limits, much of the available research supports the premise that preferential consensus promotes social integration. To illustrate, this consensus mode has been found associated with interpersonal attraction (Fishbein & Ajzen 1972), friendship formation (Hill & Palmquist 1978), and marital adjustment (White & Hatcher 1984).

However, there appear to be limits to the generality of the effect. It is less likely to appear if persons differ significantly in status (White 1979) or if the behavior at issue is disliked (Novak & Lerner 1968, Taylor & Mettee 1971). For these reasons, among others, preferential consensus is only weakly related to success in counseling (Ross 1977). Why should these effects occur? It is argued that when persons share preferences they are likely to respond similarly to a common stimulus, thus to coordinate their activities easily. But coordination is less likely when these persons differ in status or are responding to a stimulus they dislike.

The arguments for preferential-consensus effects appear to be weaker than those for normative consensus, and role theorists who have focused their theories on the latter are unlikely to be impressed with evidence concerning the former. But traditions of research on preferential consensus have been strong among cognitive psychologists, whereas sociologists have more often merely argued about or assumed the presence of normative consensus. This is a serious deficiency. Role theorists must provide more evidence concerning normative consensus or they will presently find that their arguments concerning it are ignored. And once they take up the empirical challenge, it seems likely that they will discover limits to the normative-consensus model. Some social systems involve deception, others are "staged," still others involve conflicts of interest, and many appear to be integrated through the mass media or the imposition of power. Normative consensus appears unlikely in such systems, and its appearance would not necessarily be integrative.

In the face of such thoughts, why do some role theorists continue to make assumptions about consensus? In part, this behavior seems to be generated by conceptual confusion. Thus, for some theorists a social norm or role "is" an entity that involves a state of normative consensus, and such persons find it difficult to think about role phenomena that might violate this assumption. In part, also, role theorists are merely reflecting an assumption that is commonly made in the society at large. Social psychologists have known for years that persons are likely to perceive consensus when none exists, and this phenomenon has recently attracted a good deal of empirical research (see, for example, Crano 1983, Sherman et al 1984, or van der Pligt 1984). But to make unwarranted assumptions about consensus seems a poor basis for constructing theory.

### *Conformity*

*Conformity* connotes compliance to some pattern for behavior. Sometimes that pattern is conceived as the modeling of behavior by others, and a good deal of research has been published on conformity as social imitation. But why do persons imitate the behaviors of others? Most role theorists answer this question by invoking the concept of expectation. They argue that others' actions either

reflect or lead the person to form expectations and that it is the latter that induce conformity. Thus, for role theorists, studies of conformity generally investigate the relationship between expectations and behaviors.

The idea that expectations generate behavior is endemic to most versions of role theory, and propositions about conformity may be found in functionalist, symbolic interactionist, organizational, and cognitive role literature. Much of this writing assumes that conformity is a good thing, that social integration and personal satisfaction are greater when persons conform to their own and others' expectations. But enthusiasm for conformity is also mixed. Symbolic interactionists often question the degree to which roles are actually generated through conformity, and ideological commitments of the past two decades have tended to favor nonconformity, creativity, and the questioning of traditional expectations. As well, role theorists have differed concerning their explanations for the relationship between the expectation and behavior. Such challenges suggest various questions for empirical research. How likely is it that people will conform to expectations, and what factors govern this? Why should persons conform to expectations? What are the effects of conformity, and when will those effects appear?

Most research on conformity has been conducted within modally specific traditions of effort. Some of it has reflected the idea that behaviors conform to norms. The argument for normative conformity goes something like this: Others often hold norms concerning the behaviors of persons. People are led to verbalize norms or to bring pressure to bear on others for conformity to them. As a result, those persons become aware of others' norms, and they conform thereafter either for instrumental reasons or because they internalize the norms. Instrumental conformity appears because persons perceive that others are powerful and are likely to sanction them for noncompliance. Internalized conformity, in contrast, results because persons accept others' norms as their own and conform because they believe it "right" to do so.

Evidence is available that tends to support normative conformity theory. To illustrate, scores of studies have confirmed the likelihood of conformity to norms in small groups (Stein 1982) and compliance to norms that persons attribute to others (Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; van de Vliert 1979). Much of this conformity appears to be instrumental; thus, persons are more likely to conform when others can view their behaviors, have power, and are thought likely to exercise sanctions over the person. Moreover, instrumental conformity is efficacious, and persons who conform are also likely to accrue status or "idiosyncrasy credits" for their actions (Santee & VanDerPol 1976, Thelen et al 1981, Hollander 1985). But not all normative conformity is instrumental, and Schwartz (1977) offers research confirming that persons will also conform to moral norms.

Although research support for normative conformity appears to be im-

pressive, it fails to deal with several crucial issues. For one, research provides little evidence that others will actually sanction the person for nonconformity nor even that assumptions about sanctions are necessary for instrumental conformity. For another, little seems to be known yet concerning the determinants or effects of internalized conformity. But above all, the evidence does not tell us when persons will fail to conform to norms. Clearly, some persons violate norms. Some do this unknowingly, some do it secretly, some continue to do it until discovered, some continue to do it in spite of sanctions or apparent guilt, but programmatic research on nonconformity to norms seems hard to find.

Other theorists argue that conformity is associated with beliefs, and two traditions of research have appeared that support their arguments. One concerns *self-fulfilling prophecies*, a concept first suggested by Merton (1948) who noted that some beliefs cause others to behave, inadvertently, in ways that encourage conformity to those beliefs by the person. This idea has spawned substantial research (see Jones 1977, Snyder 1984), and the evidence supports the proposition that others' beliefs can generate conformity. But again, this form of conformity seems to be a contingent matter. To illustrate, Rosenthal & Jacobson (1968) suggested that schoolteachers inadvertently encourage pupils to conform to teacher-held beliefs for success and failure. Subsequent studies have confirmed the effect but have also found that it appears only for certain teachers and is likely to disappear once those teachers are alerted to its presence (Brophy & Good 1974).

Another belief-oriented tradition concerns influence strategies that are presumed to induce changes in self-concept in persons who are exposed to them. A number of such strategies have been suggested, among them *altercasting*, *labeling the person*, the *foot-in-the-door-technique*, and others. Most of these have been found effective in producing conformity, but again the effects are contingent, and it is not always clear from the research that the conforming response was, in fact, induced by shifts in beliefs (see Gove 1975, Shrauger & Schoeneman 1979, DeJong 1979). Nevertheless, conformity is sometimes easier to achieve through manipulation of beliefs than through normative means. This fact was illustrated in a study by Miller et al (1975) who report achieving more conformity, among school children, with altercasting than with strategies based on normative advocacy. Miller et al argue that this effect was obtained because persons resent and resist the sanctions they associate with normative conformity but have few defenses against attributions of favorable identities.

Yet another group of theorists have argued that conformity may occur because of preferential (or "attitudinal") processes. The latter theories do not usually concern themselves with others' preferences, nor is much attention given to the possibility that persons may attribute preferences to others. How-

ever, it is argued that when a person is exposed to others' actions, the person forms, or shifts, preferences for behavior, and it is the latter that induces conformity. In support of this argument, many studies have reported investigations of "attitude change" and the impact of "attitudes" on behavior (Seibold 1975; Ajzen & Fishbein 1977; Eagly & Himmelfarb 1978; Cialdini et al 1981). Regarding the former, shifts in preferences have been found to follow exposure to behavior modeling, advocacy, and the contingent use of sanctions and threats. Regarding the latter, whereas earlier reviewers questioned whether preferences affect behavior (Deutscher 1966, Wicker 1969), recent reviewers have found abundant evidence that preferences can affect conduct (Calder & Ross 1973; Schuman & Johnson 1976; Fishbein & Ajzen 1975). However, preferential conformity is by no means a certainty; indeed, it is more likely to occur when preferences are socially supported in some way. By no means will persons always do what they prefer to do.

Which, then, is a stronger generator of conformity: norms, beliefs, or preferences? Moreover, what happens when the person holds norms, beliefs, or preferences that are at odds? Unfortunately, studies concerning such questions have only begun to appear (see Fishbein & Ajzen 1975; Schwartz 1977; Triandis 1977; Bank et al 1985; Biddle et al 1985). So far the available evidence indicates that all three modes of expectation can have independent effects and that those effects vary from situation to situation. Other research, however, suggests that Americans today are generally less driven by norms and more affected by preferences than they were in earlier generations (see Turner 1976, Zurcher 1977). If confirmed, this may reflect the decline in importance of community, church, and family in our lives and the ascendancy of mass-media influences. One hopes that the next decade will produce more research on the comparative origins and effects of expectation modes.

In sum then, the evidence suggests that persons often conform to expectations that are held by others, are attributed to others, or are held by the person for his or her conduct. Conformity is by no means a certainty, and its appearance reflects somewhat different processes depending on the modality of the expectation involved. In fact, recent studies suggest that if conformity occurs it probably results from the resolving of several, modally distinct expectations, which may or may not favor the conforming response. Simple assumptions about conformity are no more useful in role theory than simple assumptions about consensus.

Is conformity a good thing? Our answer will depend on the context and criterion of goodness. Thelen et al (1981) note that persons gain status through conformity only when that response is not perceived as "calculating." Duckro et al (1979) report that, despite widespread assumptions concerning its necessity, therapist conformity to client-held expectations is *not* required for success in counseling. Conformity seems a useful response where coordination of be-

haviors or safety are at stake (Ley 1982, Epstein & Cluss 1982, Schoen 1983), but in other contexts it may prove useless or counterproductive. Social systems must evolve in order to survive in a changing world, and evolution requires the programming of nonconformity.

### *Role Conflict*

What happens when others do *not* hold consensual expectations for a person's behavior? One possibility is that those others are formed into sets of persons whose expectations are distinct and incompatible. In such cases, it is argued, the person will be subjected to conflicting pressures, will suffer stress, will have to "resolve" the problem by adopting some form of coping behavior, and that the person and system will both be disrupted. These ideas have given rise to the concept of *role conflict*, which is normally defined as the concurrent appearance of two or more incompatible expectations for the behavior of a person. The ideas associated with role conflict are attractive and appear to capture some of the subjective problems associated with participation in the complex social system. But role conflict theory has also attracted criticism, and critics have sometimes viewed research on role conflict as an activity that diverts our attention from concern for the real conflicts that appear in social systems or from the possibility that persons might cope by changing those systems.

Be that as it may, a lot of research on role conflict has appeared over the past three decades. Most if not all studies have focused on normative role conflict, and discussions of these findings have largely reflected the theory of instrumental conformity. And whereas early studies tended to focus on actual disparities in the expectations that were held by others, recent research has more often examined conflicts among expectations that are attributed by the person to others.

What have we learned from role conflict research? A host of studies have found role conflicts in the formal organization and have suggested that role conflict is associated with stress in that context (for reviews see Stryker & Macke 1978, van de Vliert 1979, Van Sell et al 1981, Fisher & Gitelson 1983). Moreover, role conflicts have also been associated with various indices of personal malintegration in the work place, such as poor job performance, lower commitment to the organization, and higher rates of accidents and resignations. Many writers have also argued that women in Western societies are subjected to conflicts between expectations associated with traditional roles, such as home-making, and those for occupational or professional careers. These arguments have also been supported by studies demonstrating the prevalence of role conflicts and associations between role conflicts and stress for women (Stryker & Macke 1978; Lopata 1980; Skinner 1980).

Findings such as these appear to suggest that role conflict is a frequent experience and is inevitably stressful, but one should be cautious about accept-



ing these conclusions. Investigators have not thought to study role conflicts in many settings, so the real range and effects of such phenomena are as yet unexplored. And role-conflict research has also been subject to conceptual and methodological confusion. As it happens, role conflict is only one of several structural conditions that are thought to cause problems in social systems. Others have included *role ambiguity* (a condition in which expectations are incomplete or insufficient to guide behavior), *role malintegration* (when roles do not fit well together), *role discontinuity* (when the person must perform a sequence of malintegrated roles), and *role overload* (when the person is faced with too many expectations). As well, the person may have difficulty in performing a role because of lack of skill or incongruence between expectations and his or her personal characteristics. Each of these conditions may produce stress for the individual. Unfortunately, most have been confused with role conflict by one or more authors, and instruments presumably designed to measure role conflict have sometimes involved operations that are more appropriate for the study of these other phenomena. Bank & Janes (submitted) argue that these confusions have caused investigators to overestimate the relationship between role conflict and stress. Sieber (1974) argued that persons will sometimes prefer to take on multiple roles, despite the fact that this nearly always exposes them to increased role conflict. And, in support of this proposition, Sales et al (1980) and Bank & Janes both report weak, positive relationships between role conflict and satisfaction for women who are simultaneously mothers and university students.

Certainly some role conflicts are stressful, however, and when this happens how does one cope with the matter? Gross et al (1958) posed a theory of role-conflict resolution which suggested that persons would choose among the incompatible norms and that their choice could be predicted if one understood the degree to which the person considered others powerful and their norms legitimate. This theory has since been studied by many researchers, and a summary of their work appears in van de Vliert (1979, 1981) who concludes that three steps may be taken to resolve stressful role conflict: If possible, choice among norms (in which case, anticipated sanctions and judgments of legitimacy come into play); if that is not possible, a compromise among norms; if all else fails, withdrawal from the situation. Most of the research reviewed by van de Vliert was focused on role conflicts in the organization, and the range of coping strategies considered appears limited. Fortunately, other theories consider a broader range of coping strategies. To illustrate, Hall (1972) discusses three types of response: negotiating with others to change their expectations; restructuring one's views so that the problem is less worrisome; and adjusting one's behavior. Hall and others (see Harrison & Minor 1984) have applied this typology to the coping behaviors of women who experience role conflict.

To date, role conflict research has not focused on several questions that

appear central to our understanding. It does not tell us how frequently the person is likely to encounter role conflict, nor with what structural factors role conflict is likely to be associated. It has given but little attention to role conflicts that involve incompatible beliefs, preferences, or internalized norms. As a rule, it has not explored relationships between role conflicts and true conflicts-of-interest among persons. And it provides little evidence bearing on the presumed relationship between role conflict and social malintegration. Some years ago Goode (1960) suggested that role strain was endemic in complex social systems and provided a positive force that promoted system evolution. It would appear that Goode's conjectures have yet to be tested.

### *Role Taking*

The theory of *role taking*, first articulated by Mead (1934), suggests that adequate development of the self and participation in social interaction both require that the person "take the role of the other." This theory focuses attention on the importance of attributed expectations, but scholars have often differed over the exact meaning of Mead's concepts. In the case of role taking, differing interpretations have produced two distinct traditions of effort. Some scholars have thought that successful role taking meant *accuracy* of attributed expectations, that persons are more effective role takers when the expectations they attribute to others match those that others actually hold. Other scholars have thought that successful role taking involved *sophistication* of social thought, that the person is a better role taker if he or she presumes that others also hold expectations that map the thoughts and actions of other persons. These two interpretations have spawned independent traditions of research that are conducted in apparent ignorance of one another. Both traditions have assumed that role-taking ability was a blessing and that successful role taking would facilitate personal development and social integration. Has any evidence appeared that would justify such assumptions?

Many early studies of role-taking accuracy constituted a search for the presumed trait of "empathy," conceived as a general ability to judge persons' expectations accurately. If some persons do have such a trait, they would surely make better group leaders, counselors, therapists, or confessors. This belief stimulated a good deal of early research, but by the mid-1950s, critical papers began to appear that questioned the methods of the research (Cronbach 1955, Gage & Cronbach 1955). These papers noted that artifacts might appear in scores from empathy scales and suggested that such scores might represent not one but several judgment components. These criticisms were devastating, and research on the presumptive trait of empathy has largely disappeared today.

Not all such research reflected a search for the trait of empathy, however. Other studies appeared from researchers representing several traditions in role

theory (see Chowdhry & Newcomb 1952; Stryker 1956; Wheeler 1961; Biddle et al 1966; Preiss & Ehrlich 1966; Howells & Brosnan 1972; Thomas et al 1972; Kandel 1974). These latter studies involved research with all three modes of expectation and reported considerable variation in subjects' role-taking ability. Moreover, this variation was found to be associated with contextual conditions. Persons who interact regularly or have similar backgrounds were found to take one another's roles more accurately than those who do not. Persons of low status were also found to be more accurate role takers (possibly because they have greater need to predict others' conduct), although greater role-taking accuracy was also found among those chosen for group leadership. Role-taking accuracy was found to be low when the subject and others had reason to restrict communication concerning crucial topics. These findings imply that accurate role taking is neither universal nor requisite for successful interaction in all cases. Unfortunately, this research tradition, too, seems to have declined during the past decade.

Research on the sophistication of role taking has been conducted by cognitive and developmental psychologists and is now a substantial enterprise (for reviews see Enright & Lapsley 1980; Underwood & Moore 1982; Eisenberg & Lennon 1983). These studies also report considerable variation among subjects in role-taking ability, but studies have associated that variation with personality variables in the main. Role-taking sophistication is greater among older and more mature subjects, and role taking correlates positively with altruism. Some persons have thought that role-taking sophistication would be greater among women than among men, but the evidence does not bear this out. Women and young girls *are* found to respond more emotively to the plights of others, however.

In sum, research on role taking appears to be more fragmented than research for the other three concepts I have reviewed. Research on role-taking accuracy is suggestive, but early studies within the tradition were often flawed, and research on the problem seems to have declined recently. Research on role-taking sophistication is more active but is focused largely on personality variables. Both traditions suggest that role-taking ability varies among persons, but neither has yet generated much information about the presumed positive effects of role taking for the person and social system.

Role-taking ideas have had considerable impact within developmental psychology. They have had less impact on discussions of social integration, however, and many contemporary theories about the latter are based on assumptions about negotiation, exchange, power, or the economy and presume little about role taking. This does not mean that assertions about the advantages of role taking are right, nor are they necessarily wrong. It will take more focused research to establish the effects of role taking within the social realm.

## ISSUES AND PROPOSITIONAL THEORY

Many commentators have remarked on the absence of an explicit, explanatory, propositional theory for the role field. Why has such a theory been slow to develop?

A couple of reasons are suggested by problems associated with the history of the role field. Propositions are hard to generate when a field is plagued by conceptual and definitional confusions, and by employment of its terms by persons who promote radically different perspectives. Clearly, the development of role theory will accelerate as the field adopts a set of agreed-upon definitions for basic concepts and sloughs off associations with perspectives from which it clearly differs.

Other reasons for the weak development of propositions may be found in the reviews of empirical research just completed. For one thing, much of role theory seems to be driven by simple assumptions about such phenomena as consensus, conformity, role conflict, and role taking, and yet the evidence suggests that these simple assumptions are not always valid. In addition, the reviews suggest a lack of integration between the efforts of theorists and researchers in the role field. An interest in applying role concepts to solving human problems seems to have generated much of the research. In so doing, researchers have produced practical information, particularly information about the impact of role phenomena on the individual. But basic research issues for role theory have remained underresearched, particularly those concerning the effects of role phenomena in the social system. Propositional development would benefit were research to be linked more closely to key questions in role theory.

These reasons for the weakness of theory are serious but correctable; were they the only ones troubling the role field an integrated propositional theory might have already appeared. Unfortunately, role theory has also been hampered because its proponents disagree over major issues that concern the stance and scope of the field. One issue concerns whether role theory is to focus attention on the person as an individual or the person as representative of a social position. Symbolic interactionists and cognitive theorists prefer the former approach, functionalists and structuralists the latter. The former approach leads one to think of roles as the evolving, coping strategies that are adopted by the person, the latter conceives roles as patterns of behavior that are typical of persons whose structural positions are similar. Neither stance is necessarily "correct," but propositions about individuals may not be those that one would make about representatives of a social position.

Other issues concern the assumptions that one makes about expectations. A few role theorists avoid the expectation concept altogether. Others assume that roles are an amorphous amalgam of thought and action and take no position on

the possible relationships between these two realms. Most role theorists assume that expectations are formed in response to experience and that roles are largely generated by expectations, but even these latter differ over the mode of expectation they discuss and the explanations they advance for social integration. Each of these stances will also generate a propositional system that differs from the others.

And still other issues are implied by constraints created by definitions of role concepts used by theorists. For some authors, roles are tied to functions, for others they are inevitably directed towards another actor in the system; for yet others, roles are those behaviors that validate one's position or that project a self image. Constraints such as these also lead to somewhat different versions of propositional role theory.

The fact that role theorists differ over issues of stance and scope reflects not only the histories of perspectival thought but also the fact that various groups of role theorists are wrestling with different forms of social systems. Thoughtful contributors have stated role propositions for the family, the jury trial, the kinship, the classroom, the counseling session, the doctor-patient relationship, the formal organization, the community, the political forum, the ethnic, racial, and sexual identity, the society and nation-state. But assumptions that seem reasonable in one of these arenas seem foolish in others. This suggests that, in part, the role field will evolve in the near future as a set of propositional theories for specific social systems—theories that may have little in common with one another.

But this is not the total picture. Centripetal forces are also at work within role theory, not the least of which are a common vocabulary and a set of shared, basic concerns. But if role theory is to accommodate the differing stances that have appeared within the field—if it is to develop propositions that apply to many contexts—role theory must separate its basic concepts from context-specific assumptions and be prepared to incorporate a wide range of insights that have appeared in the differing, limited, current versions of itself. This suggests the gradual evolution of an integrated version of role theory in which some propositions concern the roles of individual actors *and* some concern roles that are common to persons in the same social position, a role theory in which roles may be generated by norms, beliefs, *and* preferences, a theory that can examine role sectors, role functions, *and* self-validation. Not all of these insights need be applied to a given context, of course. But the integrated version of role theory must be prepared to accommodate such insights and is likely to explain a lot more about human conduct than current, limited versions of theory.

What, then, should one conclude about role theory in the mid-1980s? In several senses role theory is alive, well, and prospering. Interest in role ideas remains high among theorists, and authors continue to apply those ideas in new

and innovative ways. Research that uses role ideas is vigorous, and insights from role theory are widely applied in discussions of social problems and their alleviation. But confusion and malintegration persist in role theory. The latter partly reflects problems associated with the development of the field, unwise perspectival commitments, and lack of integration between the efforts of theorists and researchers. Some of role theory's problems also reflect the fact that proponents are trying to deal with differing forms of social systems and in so doing make assumptions that are inappropriate in other realms. Role theory will prosper as proponents recognize these problems and expand their efforts to accommodate one another's insights within an integrated version of the field.

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