

# Roles

MARK VAN VUUREN

*University of Twente, Netherlands*

The dominant treatment of roles in organizational studies define a role as “the set of behaviors that others expect of individuals in a certain context” (Floyd & Lane, 2000, p. 157). Although role theory has intriguing communicative features in itself (see below), the unique contribution of a communication perspective to roles is a more nuanced approach to the expectations and interpretations surrounding role interactions than the dominant approach provides (Bechky, 2006). An exploration into its possible etymological backgrounds can help to understand how roles play roles in organizational contexts.

## Research approaches

### *A structuralist/functionalist approach*

In philosophy, one perspective suggests that the concept of “roles” comes from the world of theater, where different people have a part to play in a performance. A script prescribes that, given a certain role, one is expected to act in a particular way. Actors play a part that is handed out to them on a “roll” of paper. This roll specifies the expectations placed on an actor, effectively telling the actor what are the needed and appropriate actions of a character within the overall script. Here the script is dominant and roles are handed out as rather static decrees. The notion that the expectations form a script which disciplines the role player is central to the structuralist/functionalist approach of roles (Biddle, 1986). One is expected to follow the script and act in line with the norms. A role serves as a normative rule, demarcating appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. A role is treated as a fixed entity, and the people who take on a specific role are assumed to act in accordance with it. The script serves the goals of the larger social system. This social system generates the behavioral expectations, making roles the building blocks for achieving the system’s needs and goals (Vandenberghe, Bentein, & Panaccio, in press). Individuals acquire their roles by conforming themselves to the general lines of actions in a process of socialization (Jablin, 2001; Kramer & Miller, 2014). Such conformity to roles stems from the anticipation of rewards (or punishments) given by all the others engaged in the social system.

It is reasonable that this approach to roles, with its focus on fitting in with a larger script, is prominent in organizations. Organizations do emerge where goals are beyond the capacity of a single individual. Facing such a challenge, where others are needed

to get things done, those involved will break down the superordinate goal into parts that can be handled by individuals. This also shows that roles cannot be understood without their context. Even though a part is reduced to the size where an individual can be reasonably expected to handle it individually, the task calls for interactions between the people involved. All the actions have to add up to a whole; they must fit together to lead to the desired result. Essentially, each person can only play an individual part as long as others contribute their parts. So, a role is at the same time discrete (as a piece) and connected (to a larger whole). In line with the broader functionalist approach, this perspective locates roles in the system, including the collective memory of the organization and the minds of people. Communication about roles relies strongly on references to the structure and culture of the organization, as the legitimacy of the part is derived from its connection to the authoritative “whole.” An important assumption of this perspective is the existence of the whole to which the different parts relate. The interactional approach denies this claim, and proposes different dynamics for the development of roles.

### *An interactional approach*

An alternative explanation for the word *role* stresses the dynamic nature of a role, through the Latin verb *rotulare* (meaning enrol, turn round, rotate: *rotu* means wheel). The idea of continuous movement suggests both turns and returns, where the enactment of a role includes activity and passivity, improvisation and stability. This interactional approach diverts from the functionalist approach by questioning its claim that there is a script available before the action takes place. Without a script, it makes no sense to expect the handing out of roles with designated parts to play. The interactional approach describes organizational reality as it unfolds itself from interaction to interaction. Rather than the overall structure from which roles are derived, an interactional view stresses that the script emerges as an outcome from people doing things together. People improvise their way through organizational life, making the relationship between script and role more dynamic: a role still might have some obvious characteristics ascribed to it vis-à-vis other roles, but the performance of a role and the interactions with others provide cues for understanding how the script unfolds itself.

Radicals can be found in both camps. In some extremely manager oriented corners of organization studies, it can be hard to move beyond rationalistic views on organizing, including the reification of scripts and roles. The advantage of such submissive descriptions of employees as compliant role takers, following the orders handed out by leaders, is that it can lead to neat organization theory. However, such reifications cannot explain the complexities of everyday working life. Even without having to commit oneself to a radical relativist position, role making dynamics suggest that a script is always under construction. Researchers observed that people with exactly the same job description can end up doing different things, as they are active crafters of their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). People perform their roles by crafting their tasks (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010), improvising when confronted with new situations (van Vuuren, 2011), making the best of opportunities to make a difference

(Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010), or avoiding responsibilities when stressed, bored, or angered (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2010). The script is never finished and role making processes are always ongoing. This calls for a performative take on organizing. From a communication point of view, roles play roles in all stages of the interaction process. When one enters a new organizational environment, one has to find out what is expected and which role one has to take. Initial interactions hint at obvious, necessary, or forbidden actions. Especially in a new situation, a role consists of a rather generic chunk of responsibilities: “We do not take on items of conduct one at a time, but rather a whole harness load of them” (Goffman, 1997, p. 35).

Over time, each turn during interactions contains the potential for negotiation between interlocutors who are playing their respective parts. The initial impersonal chunks of roles get personalized through experiences with the responsibilities. New details can be filled in that were not clear at the beginning. In interactional approaches all situations are new by definition, as the constellation of this time and this space are unique. Taking a role inevitably means adapting that role to the situation one encounters. The outcome of this process becomes a memory, raising new challenges and expectations. Negative evaluations of role performance can fuel pressure, criticism, doubt, or withdrawal. Positive evaluations can lead to new invitations or higher expectations: today’s surprise tends to be tomorrow’s norm. The past thereby leaves a footprint in the present. Even though the metaphor of a script overstretches the reach of this agency, memories make a difference and raise expectations.

Organizational roles encapsulate both these dynamics between roles and scripts: a role which follows a script, and the performance of roles that produce an unfolding script. To summarize briefly, an organizational role (including the performative notion of roles) can be defined as the ongoing configuration of expectations and interpretations of behavior associated with a particular position within an organizational context.

Of course, descriptions of these approaches are definitely not exhaustive. Notable substreams of research include two research traditions that blend parts of both the functionalist and the interactional approaches. A *symbolic interactionist* approach explains how roles function as meaning making devices (Mead, 1934). Through social interaction, people learn to understand a social system, the positions of others, and their own position in relation to the others. Through interactions, meanings are created and modified, and individuals learn to anticipate other’s behaviors (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013). The symbolic interactionist approach explores the situational dynamics in which roles are negotiated between people and how they together create a situation-specific conceptualization of appropriate behavior. This approach is as normative as the functionalist approach, because it defines the norms as appropriate action in a particular situation. At the same time it acknowledges the interaction perspective, as the role is not a given in the situation but is negotiated between participants, who align their respective roles in mutual recognition of each person’s contribution to the whole. Within the symbolic interactionist approach, individuals learn to see themselves within the larger picture in which they function.

A comparable, yet slightly different approach is called the *resource-based approach* (Baker & Faulkner, 1991). Where the symbolic interactionist approach sketches how people receive an overview of the broader context and then acquire a role within

that whole, the resource based approach reverses the relationship between roles and positions. Roles are not designated, but serve as ways to have agency within the environment. Roles become resources, which facilitate the making of claims to impact the surroundings. The positions are an outcome of the role rather than the medium of the role. This research based approach helps to explain the emergence and functioning of temporary organizations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). For example, film crews are project based groups which form organizations based on the roles different people have available for making a film (Baker & Faulkner, 1991).

### **Challenges of (multiple) roles**

Sometimes a role fits like a glove. But more often than not, it can be hard to act in a certain role. Role expectations can be quite challenging. A broad range of responsibilities can be felt by someone who appropriates a certain role. These responsibilities can be inherited from predecessors, for example. There is no certainty that the new role bearer will bring the same competences to the floor as the one who left.

#### *Roles and stress*

The fit between a person and the context is an important factor for the stability and growth of social systems and also for the success and satisfaction of the individual (Kristof-Brown & Billsberry, 2013). A mismatch may exist between the role requirements and the capabilities, ambitions, or priorities of the person who has to fulfill the role. Frequently, the mutual expectations of the ways roles should be performed may not be as clear (*role clarity*) and explicit (*role ambiguity*) as one would like. This is called *role confusion* and is identified as a notable source of stress. Over time, people may learn how to establish a workable fit between this person and that role, but it may take a while. Often combining different roles will be challenging. The stress accompanied by role strain (i.e., when obligations within a role are incompatible) is easily treated as a lack of professionalism where the role is seen as a fixed set of requirements.

#### *Roles and identity*

Another challenge arises from taking on a role that does not fit the person directly. This implies that playing the role is doing something other than staying true to oneself. Role playing becomes “faking” as soon as it raises issues about authenticity. This conflict can emerge when tensions emerge between the role one has to play and one’s sense of self. The violations of personal values when acting in a certain role are a case in point (e.g., a politician who wants to change the world for the better faces the need to compromise in a political coalition).

During role execution, there are identity issues at stake. Navigating through different possible roles within a role set to select the most fitting one for a particular situation is a form of identity work. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) provide an example of how

roles provide contexts in which people engage in identity work. By relating herself to the role expectations, the heroine in their story is weaving a narrative of who she is. Part of this identity work is done through the reflection of how she feels about performing certain roles. When there is a good fit between the role activity and her sense of self, she uses this information to create a narrative of who she is becoming. Thereby, roles do not only identify certain analogies between types of work within an organizational context, but also create a sense of self. It is not surprising, therefore, that the concept of roles appears regularly in research on identity and identification (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Sometimes roles and identity are even used interchangeably. The difference is subtle yet important. The prototypical behavior assumed in roles facilitates recognition and identification. By association of certain actions with prototypical categories, people are identified as being comparable to the prototype. So even though acting in a role can be identified, the role itself is an action. An identity is the sense of self, which is broader and more fundamental than a role.

### *Role conflicts*

When different roles collide, conflict in roles can emerge as well. In those instances where roles are incompatible, it is not called *role strain* but *role conflict*. It is typical for organizational roles to be just some of a whole constellation of roles one holds. Sometimes these roles are hard to combine, triggered by contrasting priorities and lacking overlap in action routines to make easy decisions. Complex positions will often lead to role conflicts, given the inherent competing values faced by organizations. The treatment of risk is a case in point. Risk avoidance can be an essential role-defining feature, in cases where reliability and predictability are needed. At the same time, the essence of innovation lies in the willingness to take risks and make mistakes. So as soon as a position calls for both innovation and reliability, tensions will likely arise. Experiencing the paradoxical situation where both risk taking and risk avoidance are called for by the same person creates a conflict where one has to make a choice.

This type of tension arising in role conflicts shows another area of challenges that comes with the normative nature of roles. This raises questions about who benefits from the way a role is executed. Critical scholarship shows how organizational roles filter opportunities, reducing the range of possible answers to complex questions. Choices made in role description, whether explicit or implicit, may not be for the benefit of all people involved. Role taking seen from this side is a form of consent through which sectional interests can be presented as universal interests. In a critical essay on roles and organizing, Latour (2013) explains how role taking means to position oneself “under a script,” which delegates instructions to the role taker. But this is part of a sequence – performing a role can only be accomplished through appropriation, interpretation, and improvisation. In that sense, Latour says we are never completely “under” or “above” a script. This idea fits squarely with the insistence in communication studies that the individual and the system are in a constant process of negotiation as they move through time and space.

### *Role sets and negotiations*

The interpretation and managing of different roles can be challenging in different ways. Part of the complexity, and the way forward in this change, is a consistent assumption through all the different approaches to roles: in other words, roles are defined in relation to other roles. Without a patient, there is no doctor. The role relationship thus establishes the relationship, including the positions, the expectations, and the authority. Taking on a role contributes to the division of responsibilities and enables a predictable pattern of behavior. From a functionalist stance, a role is the chunk that one individual can bear. Through roles, individuals know what to expect of themselves and others in the cultural context. Although cultures prescribe roles, clusters of role relationships create organizations. A hospital can be seen as a cluster of typical roles, including doctor, patient, nurse, cook, and visitor. Or in teams, there are different team roles identified, including chair, specialist, coordinator, and so on. Interactional approaches focus on the negotiation between the different roles and the ways individuals appropriate, abandon, adopt, and adapt roles in order to make sense of specific situations.

In practice, in many groups the role of a leader is pivotal. Someone is expected to take the role of a leader. In line with the relational perspective, claiming a leader role means granting someone else a follower role. In order to end up in a functional relationship, this person has to claim the follower position and grant the leader position to the other (DeRue & Ashford, 2010). Others will assume that the leader acts in particular ways, and will align their roles to this. The ongoing process of aligning and negotiating roles as leaders and followers has been a topic of communication research for decades (e.g., Fairhurst, 2007; Graen & Scandura, 1987; Kelley & Bisel, 2014). Many studies have explored the emerging patterns of ways in which leader–member relationships develop over time (see Bauer & Erdogan, 2015) and create understandings of appropriate roles. As a general pattern of role negotiation cycles, three phases can be identified: role taking (where an individual is informed about expected behaviors), role making (in which modifications are made by individuals to their roles), and role routinization (where the participants commit themselves to the balanced outcome of the negotiation). The process of role negotiation sometimes becomes explicit, as in Kramer's (2009) ethnographic study of a theater production.

Apart from treating roles as comprising an overall position, a role can refer to particular types of actions one takes within a role set (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2010). A typically role set that includes an amalgam of several roles, is the leadership role. Mintzberg's (1990) ten management roles can function as an illustration. Typically several roles are assumed from managers, including leader, liaison, figurehead, monitor, disseminator, spokesperson, entrepreneur, resource allocator, disturbance handler and negotiator. These roles together show the multifaceted character of the general role of a leader. The variety of functions within a general position shows that the different roles in a role set pose questions each time: which role fits this situation? What difference does it make? Appropriating a role allows one to do things that were not permitted if one did not act within this role. As a spokesperson a manager has actions to perform that differ from the role of negotiator. What is allowed in one role

(e.g., giving a statement of affairs) may not be allowed in the other role (e.g., when the definition of the situation is the issue that needs to be negotiated).

## Future directions

In spite of the fundamental importance of roles for organizational life, there seems to be a declining research interest in the concept within organizational communication. The shrinking number of references to “role” in the subject indexes of the subsequent *Handbooks of Organizational Communication* serve as an indication of this. However, the tide may be turning now that organizational forms are becoming more fluid (Dobusch & Schoeneborn, 2015) and professional categories becoming more and more important for individual’s self-definitions (Anteby, Chan, & DiBenigno, in press). The importance of roles is on the rise, because the more organizations become networks and lack the power to impose their expectations, the more professionals will have to rely on their roles for coordinating their tasks. To create what is necessary for accomplishing goals, one will need a sharp eye on role dynamics. Future scholarly work on roles is needed, therefore, especially in the area of new organizational forms. The more fluid social collectives that arise are by definition not in a position to provide the clarity of role structures for potential members. On the contrary, facing temporary, partial, virtual, and networked organizations (Bechky, 2006; Koschmann, 2013), people will have to identify their roles first – in order to structure these organizational settings. This reversed process calls for research that rethinks the concepts of role clarity, role complexity, and role sets in exciting new ways. The ongoing configuration of expectations and interpretations of behavior associated with professionals positioning themselves within ever-changing organizational contexts is a process that communication scholars should explore.

SEE ALSO: Actor–Network Theory; Authority; Conflict, Organizational; Control; Coordination; Coworker Communication; Culture, Organizational; Decision Making Processes in Organizations; Employee–Organization Relationship; Groups and Teams in Organizations; Identification, Organizational; Identity, Individual; Leadership in Organizations; Organizational Identity; Performance; Power; Recruitment; Sensemaking; Socialization; Stress

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**Mark van Vuuren** is associate professor in the Department of Organizational Communication at the University of Twente. His research interests include professional identity dynamics, job crafting, and the ways professionals collaborate in technologically innovative projects. He has written books on job crafting and implicit communication, and his articles have been published in journals such as *International Journal of Management Reviews*, *Journal of Organizational and Occupational Psychology*, and *Human Studies*.