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Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity and Job Satisfaction of County Extension Agents in the Georgia Cooperative Extension Service

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Introduction

Today's workers are faced with continual change. Budget cuts and downsizing, frequent organizational change and new technological developments that require new skills are common occurrences. In addition, networking across traditional boundaries is increasingly necessary to develop innovative solutions for today's complex problems.

Previous research has shown that roles in changing organizations can be ambiguous because role expectations change frequently (Kahn et al., 1964). During periods of change, organizational members may experience a lack of understanding of their new roles (role ambiguity) as well as role conflict while roles and responsibilities are renegotiated. Difficulties in attempting to satisfy conflicting or incompatible job demands (role conflict) and unclear expectations (role ambiguity) are two causes of occupational stress (Rizzo et al., 1970) and have been shown to be associated with decreased job satisfaction (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Lamble, 1980; Igarria & Guimaraes, 1993).

The Georgia Cooperative Extension Service is a non-formal, community-based educational program that addresses a broad range of individual needs and community issues through educational programming at the county level. Rapid population growth, population shifts from rural to urban and suburban areas, economic depression in rural areas and new social problems challenge County Extension Agents (CEA's) to work across subject matter and organizational boundaries to develop innovative programs to address continually evolving needs. Another effect of population growth is that the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) must serve larger populations in growth counties, usually with no increase in staff, while greater population diversity results in a wider variety of expectations among clientele.

Other changes in the Georgia CES included top level administration and the adoption of new program initiatives that challenged CEA's to work outside their traditional disciplines. Budget shortfalls also required that some positions be left unfilled for long periods of time making it necessary for remaining county staff to assume additional responsibilities.

At the time of the study, each county had least one CEA and most had at least two. CEA's are responsible for supervising the work of the secretaries, large numbers of volunteers and

sometimes para-professionals. Although Extension Agents operate somewhat autonomously, they are accountable to the County and District Extension Directors. They must also maintain relationships with and satisfy expectations of others outside the formal chain of command.

The role requirements of the CEA coincide closely with those that Kahn et al. (1964) identified as likely to cause role conflict, role ambiguity and role stress. They are (a) roles in changing organizations, (b) roles for which there are considerable differences in expectations among various members of the role set, (c) roles that require innovative solutions to non-routine problems, (d) roles that require coordination across departmental or organizational boundaries, (e) roles with responsibility to more than one supervisor and (f) roles that require the supervision of others. White (1986) found that role overload was related to budgetary shortfalls and the need to accomplish more with less money and fewer staff. When vacant positions are finally filled, a period of ambiguity and conflict may follow as role expectations are learned and negotiated.

Need for the study. Understanding of the causes of role stress is still limited, although the relationship of role conflict and role ambiguity to low job satisfaction is relatively well documented (Khan et al., 1964; Lamble; 1980; Rizzo et al., 1970). Furthermore, the personal and job related characteristics that Kahn et al. (1964) identified as predictors of role conflict and role ambiguity have been largely ignored (Newton and Keenan,1987). In addition, most previous studies were conducted in industrial settings. Only two studies that examined a CES setting were located (Lamble, 1980; Lovell, 1980). Since CEA's work with a considerable autonomy, the question was whether the same relationships exist between role conflict, role ambiguity and job satisfaction for CEA's as for industrial employees and which factors affect these relationships.

Research Questions. In this study, the relationship of role conflict and role ambiguity to job satisfaction was investigated for professional employees in an informal adult education setting, the Georgia CES. The following research questions were posed.

- 1. What personal and job related characteristics are related to role conflict, role ambiguity and job satisfaction for Georgia Extension Agents?**
- 2. Are role conflict and role ambiguity related to job satisfaction for Georgia Extension Agents?**
- 3. How can staff development be utilized to help Extension Agents effectively deal with role conflict and role ambiguity and related issues?**

Methodology

The population for this study included all 461 CEA's employed by the Georgia CES at the time of the survey. Since job characteristics are thought to influence role conflict and role ambiguity (Kahn, et al., 1964), location of work was selected as one of the independent variables and counties were classified as urban, suburban, rural growth or rural decline

using a system developed by Bachtel, Mandell and Lee (1988). Sampling with replacement was used and data was collected from 50 CEA's in each location category for a total of 200 subjects.

Data Collection. A mailed questionnaire was utilized for data collection. Subjects were asked to return a separate postcard to the researcher at the same time as the questionnaire to maintain anonymity while allowing for follow-up on non-respondents. The response rate was 86.6%. Since the means for gender and position were virtually identical for the population and sample, the sample was representative of the population.

Instrument. The questionnaire was developed to gather data on: (1) role conflict and role ambiguity, (2) job satisfaction, (3) programming and (4) in-service training received. Additional items were designed to obtain data on personal and job related characteristics.

Role conflict and role ambiguity were measured by a 7-point Likert-type scale using a slightly modified version of the scales developed by Rizzo et al. (1970). These scales were selected because they have been widely used in research on role conflict and role ambiguity (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Lambie, 1980 and Lovell, 1980). The reliability of the role conflict/role ambiguity scales was established by Schuler, et al., (1977) although, it has also been questioned (Tracy and Johnson, 1980; Shepherd and Fine, 1994).

A slightly modified version of the revised Job Descriptive Index (Bowling Green State University, 1985) was used to measure job satisfaction. Data were also collected on twenty-three independent variables that are representative of personal and job characteristics that were previously found to be related to role conflict and role ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964).

Data Analysis. Role conflict, including role overload which can be considered as a special type of role conflict (Kahn, 1964), and role ambiguity were treated as independent variables with job satisfaction and as dependent variables with various personal, interpersonal, organizational and program characteristics. House and Rizzo (1972) had previously treated role conflict and role ambiguity as both a dependent and an independent variable. The various dimensions of job satisfaction were treated as dependent variables.

Even though the role conflict and role ambiguity scales had been widely used, Rizzo (personal communication, August, 1988) recommended that factor analysis be used to develop sub-scales specific to the group. Using varimax rotation factor analysis, factor patterns containing as few as three items were retained if they met the established 0.4 theta reliability criterion. The reliability of the scales that emerged was tested using theta reliability, a special case of Cronbach's alpha (Armor, 1974). Factor analysis, multiple regression and the chi-square test of independence were utilized to test the hypotheses.

Findings and Discussion

There are both similarities and differences in the factor patterns for the role conflict/role ambiguity items that emerged in this study as compared with the patterns reported by Rizzo et

al. (1970) and Lamble (1980). A major difference is that three significant patterns emerged rather than two and each pattern contained fewer items.

The pattern labeled "role ambiguity" contained six items, all of which were also retained in the factor patterns reported by Rizzo et al. (1970) or Lamble (1980) or both. The pattern labeled "role conflict" contained seven items, two of which were unique to this study and were not reported by either Rizzo et al. (1970) or Lamble (1980). The factor pattern labeled "role overload" was unique to this study. The three items in this pattern loaded on both role conflict and role ambiguity or neither in the comparative studies.

An indication of the level of role stress for CEA's in Georgia was provided by the mean scores for role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload. On a seven-point scale from never (1) to always (7), except for positively worded items where the coding was reversed, the mean score for the role conflict items was 3.68. Similar, although not identical items, administered to managers and engineers using a seven-point scale with seven as high (Rizzo et al., 1970), yielded mean scores of 4.19 and 3.86 respectively. CEA's mean score for the role ambiguity items was 3.19, while the means for managers and engineers (Rizzo et al., 1970) were 3.79 and 4.03 respectively. Therefore, role conflict and role ambiguity appears to be slightly lower for CEA's than for the managers and engineers studied by Rizzo et al. (1970).

The distributions of the subject's total scores for the role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload scales provide additional insight into the occurrence of role stress in the Georgia CES. Although the mean item scores do not appear to be unusually high for the total sample, the distributions of the total scores indicate that role conflict, ambiguity and overload are high for a number of individuals within the sample. Furthermore, role conflict appears to be widespread.

Job Satisfaction. The Job Descriptive Index (Bowling Green State University, 1985) was scored prior to the factor analysis to obtain an indication of the job satisfaction of the study population relative to the norms which have been established for the instrument. A comparison with the norms shows that CEA's satisfaction with work, supervision and co-workers appears to be about average. Female CEA's, however, are slightly less satisfied with co-workers than either male CEA's or females in the normative studies. Both male and female CEA's are much less satisfied with pay and promotions than would be expected. Furthermore, male CEA's are considerably less satisfied with pay than female agents. Female CEA's however, are considerably less satisfied with promotions than male agents.

Role conflict emerged as a significant predictor in six of the eight job satisfaction models while role ambiguity emerged as a significant predictor in two models. Gender, years of Extension experience, recent changes in program responsibilities, number of professionals interacted with on a regular basis, number of support staff worked with on a regular basis, responsibility for supervision and training received on youth issues also emerged as significant predictors of job satisfaction. Male and younger CEA's were generally more satisfied than were female and older CEA's. Less experienced CEA's were more satisfied with interaction among co-workers, supervisor's ability and promotions than were more experienced counterparts.

Personal and Job Characteristic. Several independent variables emerged as statistically significant predictors of role stress (role conflict and role ambiguity) and job satisfaction. These included changes in county work location, educational level, number of support staff worked with on a regular basis, responsibility for supervision and training received on youth issues. Recent changes in work location, the number of support staff and responsibility for supervision are consistent with the characteristics Kahn, et al. (1964) identified as likely to cause role stress.

CEA's who supervised other employees scored higher on the role overload scale than CEA's who did not supervise others. Except for responsibility for supervision, which Newton and Keenan (1987) also identified as a strong contributor to role overload for engineers, there has been little research on role overload. In this study, scores on role overload increased as the number of support staff decreased. This does not support the theory that role stress is related to the number of people supervised. For CEA's, having a larger support staff who share the work load may offset the role stress of having more people to supervise.

The finding that CEA's with master's degrees scored higher on the role ambiguity scale than employees with bachelor's degrees would seem to contradict the beneficial effects of education. It should be noted, however, that there was no attempt to correlate role conflict, role ambiguity or job satisfaction with job performance. It is possible that during the course of their studies CEA's develop a greater awareness of issues and program development models which results in ambiguity as they attempt to balance the expectations of traditional clientele with their new ideas.

Glisson and Durick (1988) also found that educational level and role ambiguity were positively related for human service organization workers. Human service workers, like Extension Agents, face many demands with few resources and tend to work in relatively small groups. A meta-analysis by Fisher and Gitelson (1983) also revealed a consistent and positive relationship between education and role ambiguity, although the relationship was weak. However in Newton and Keenan's (1987) study of engineers in the UK, education and role ambiguity were not related.

Recommendations and Implications

Since role conflict and role ambiguity were identified as useful predictors of job satisfaction for CEA's, there is a need to test more rigorously the relationships uncovered in this study. The impact of future organizational change and the impacts of in-service training programs developed to address the issues identified in this study should be monitored by multiple tests over time.

The higher levels of role conflict and lower levels of job satisfaction among women raises questions as to whether further research might reveal different predictors of role stress and job satisfaction for women than for the total sample. In further developing the models, more

specific role and organizational characteristics that are associated with CES should be considered.

CEA's have a great deal of autonomy but the freedom to make one's own choices has advantages as well as disadvantages. People in autonomous roles often experience more role stress because of the opportunities and demands. Since role conflict and role ambiguity were important predictors of job satisfaction, it is important to help CEA's manage and use them constructively as role conflict and ambiguity can be either constructive or destructive (McGrath, 1976). Ambiguity provides autonomy as well as a mechanism for providing flexibility to adapt to rapidly changing situations (Weick, 1977) while conflict can provide the stimulus for innovative approaches (Thomas, 1976).

In this era of declining resources and downsizing, CES must recognize the need to engage in system wide priority setting and strategic planning. Just as businesses increasingly depend on employee expertise to shape the business strategy (Torraco & Swanson, 1995), CEA's should be trained to facilitate a planning process that involves all segments of the clientele base in establishing strategic directions. In depth training on issues identification, priority setting, planning and group process techniques should be system wide.

The finding that CEA's who had received less training on youth issues scored higher on the role ambiguity scale than CEA's who had received more training on this topic provides important support for staff development programs prior to the implementation of all new programs.

The higher levels of role ambiguity among CES's with masters degrees raises questions regarding what differences exist between those with MS degrees who experience higher levels and lower levels of ambiguity.

The relationship of role conflict and role ambiguity to satisfaction with co-workers and supervisors also indicates a need for training in interpersonal communications and conflict management. Ideally, this training should include the entire county team and district team in the same session, including support staff.

The decrease in job satisfaction with increasing tenure and low satisfaction of females on certain dimensions of job satisfaction is a particular concern. Since opportunities for promotions are limited, and females may not have the mobility to take advantage of the few that become available, other incentive programs might be utilized. One possibility is an officially recognized mentoring program for new employees which provides practical training to new employees while recognizing the competencies of experienced employees who are selected as mentors.

This study also revealed that a large number of CEA's had responsibility for supervising other employees or volunteers. Because supervision was a significant predictor of role stress, all CEA's who supervise others should participate in supervisory training sessions instead of just County Extension Directors.

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