

---

Retrospective Theses and Dissertations

---

1986

## The Relationship Between Role Conflict and Ambiguity and Types of Communication Moderated by Organization Level

Charles A. Olsson  
*University of Central Florida*

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rtd>  
University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Retrospective Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### STARS Citation

Olsson, Charles A., "The Relationship Between Role Conflict and Ambiguity and Types of Communication Moderated by Organization Level" (1986). *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*. 4868.  
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/rtd/4868>

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN  
ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY  
AND TYPES OF COMMUNICATION  
MODERATED BY ORGANIZATION LEVEL

BY

CHARLES ANDREW OLSSON  
B.S., Jacksonville University, 1980

THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Science degree in Psychology  
in the Graduate Studies Program of  
the College of Arts and Sciences  
University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
1986

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Introduction . . . . .	1
Role and the Role Episode . . . . .	3
Role Conflict . . . . .	8
Role Ambiguity . . . . .	13
Organizational Communication Types . . . . .	16
Organizational Communication Types and Role Stress . . . . .	22
Organizational Level and Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, and Communication Types . . . . .	27
Hypotheses . . . . .	31
Method . . . . .	34
Subjects . . . . .	34
Questionnaire . . . . .	34
Procedure . . . . .	35
Results . . . . .	38
Low Organization Level . . . . .	38
High Organization Level . . . . .	40
Low Organization Level vs. High Organization Level . . . . .	41
Discussion . . . . .	43
Appendix A . . . . .	55
Appendix B . . . . .	56
References . . . . .	65



LIST OF TABLES

	<u>Page</u>
Table A, Means and Standard Deviations . . . . .	62
Table B, Correlations Between Role Stress and Organizational Communications . . . . .	63
Table C, Comparisons of Role Stress/Communication Type Relationships Between Low and High Organizational Levels . . . . .	64



## INTRODUCTION

Role theory has been proposed as a framework in which to examine the behavior of individuals in organizations (Katz and Kahn, 1966; Schuler, Aldag and Brief, 1977; Lichtman and Hunt, 1971; and Homans, 1950). In recent years, there has been an increased interest in the use of role theory to define and explain the stresses associated with membership in organizations (Van Sell, Brief, and Schuber, 1981). Specifically, research indicates that two major forms of role stress exist within organizational environments. These stresses are role conflict and role ambiguity, and the literature that has steadily accumulated (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, 1970; Sales, 1969, 1970; Tosi, 1971) indicates that dysfunctional individual and organizational consequences (low job satisfaction, high turnover) result from these role stresses (Burke and Belcourt, 1974).

The importance for research in the area of role stress has been justified by the degree to which role conflict and ambiguity have been found to exist within organizations. Kahn and his associates (1964) are responsible for conducting the most extensive research to date in the area of organizational stress caused by role conflict and ambiguity. Their preliminary surveys, which were conducted to find the extent

of role stress within organizations on a nationwide basis, indicated that nearly 50% of those polled were confronted with some form of role conflict. Further, only one out of six men in the labor force of the United States reported being free of tension on the job (Kahn et al., 1964). Kahn's research also indicated that over 30% of those polled experienced some form of role ambiguity, and that over 60% wanted the organization they worked for to take steps to reduce their experienced role ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964).

The prevalence of this stress throughout organizations suggests the need for research in this field. It should be known what causes role stress, what are the individual and organizational dysfunctions caused by this stress, and what steps can be taken by individuals and organizations to either cope with the stress or eliminate it. If these research areas are not addressed, then the problems associated with this form of stress will continue to exist within organizations. Dysfunctions such as low job satisfaction, high turnover, and perceived threat and anxiety will continue as a result of this stress and prevent operations to run at an optimum efficiency level (House and Rizzo, 1972; Kahn et al., 1964; Rizzo, House and Lirtzman, 1970; Tosi, 1971; Tosi and Tosi, 1970).

The study of role stress is very complex due to the many individual and situational variables surrounding the cause and degree of stress experienced. Research to date has



primarily looked at the different personal outcomes of role stress such as satisfaction (Johnson and Stinson, 1975), performance (Schuler, 1975 and 1977), experienced anxiety and tensions (Miles and Petty, 1975; Hamner and Tosi, 1974), and withdrawal behaviors such as tardiness and absenteeism (Gupta and Beehr, 1979). Little research has been conducted to determine some of the actual causes of role conflict and ambiguity. It could be speculated that the reason for this may be due to the complex nature of role theory and the methodological problems inherent in controlling for the many situational variables that cause role stress. An area of research that has shown some promise in identifying and explaining the intervening variables which are associated with the cause of role stress is the relationship between role conflict and ambiguity and organizational communication patterns. This will be the focal point of this study: to investigate the relationship between role conflict and ambiguity and various organizational communication patterns.

Role and the Role Episode. There are a variety of different definitions of the term "role" or "role behavior". Biddle and Thomas (1966) define role as "the set of prescriptions defining what the behavior of a position member should be" (p. 29). Katz and Kahn (1966) suggest that role concepts are "the major means for linking the individual and organization levels of research and theory, it is at once the building block of social systems and the summation of the



requirements with which such systems confront their members as individuals" (p. 197).

Roles serve then as the boundary between the individual and the organization, while also representing the expectations for both. Roles can thus serve as a means to tie the individual to the organization and the organization to the individual (Schuler, Aldag and Brief, 1977). Roles then are a series of behaviors that the organization expects the individual to perform which will lead to desired outcomes for both the individual (satisfaction) and the organization (performance, productivity, profit). Roles, or patterns of behavior, can be functional for both the individual and the organization, but on the other hand, they can be dysfunctional. Kahn et al. (1964) elaborated on the dysfunctions of roles using the concepts of role conflict and role ambiguity.

Before any definitions of role conflict and ambiguity are given, the process which stimulates this stress must be reviewed. As mentioned before, role theory allows us to understand behavior in organizations, and it is through this theory that Kahn and a number of his associates have developed a model which outlines the entire role interaction process and shows how stress causing role conflict and ambiguity originates (Kahn et al., 1964; Kahn and Quinn, 1970; Kahn and French, 1970). The model, or role episode process (see Appendix A) is a complete cycle of role sending, response by



focal person, and the effects of that response on the role senders.

Kahn and French (1970) note that a role episode starts with the existence of a set of role expectations that role senders have about a focal person and their behavior on the job. The manner in which role senders behave towards focal persons is determined by their own expectations and anticipation of the focal person's responses. Members of the role set (role senders), responding to their own immediate experience, express role expectations overtly, attempting to influence the focal person's behavior to conform with the sender's expectations. This communicated influence affects the immediate experience of the focal person in that this experience includes the focal person's perception of the demands and requirements placed on him by the members of the role set, and his awareness or experience of psychological conflict (Kahn and French, 1970). The manner in which the focal person responds to the situation is determined by the nature of their experience, and this includes reaction to sent role conflict and ambiguity. With one or more members of the role set exerting pressure to change their behavior, the focal person must cope with this pressure. The focal person may attempt to direct a solution to the problem by compliance or in persuading others to modify their incompatible demands (Kahn and French, 1970). Anderson (1977) refers to these coping techniques as being problem-solving oriented



as opposed to more emotional centered coping techniques which Kahn and French (1970) also define as avoiding the source of stress using defense mechanisms which distort the reality of a conflicting or ambiguous situation. Using coping techniques to handle the pressures of work may result in the formation of affective or physiological symptoms. Sales (1969) was able to show that the presence of role stress did cause elevated serum-cholesterol levels and could be considered a risk factor in the etiology of coronary disease.

The degree to which the focal person conforms to the expectations of their role senders determines the expectations of the focal person for the next moment (Kahn and French, 1970). If the focal person is hostile in his response, the role senders will behave in different ways than if the focal person were submissively compliant in their response. If the focal person complies partially under pressure, the role senders may increase the pressure; if the focal person is overcome with tension and anxiety caused by the role pressure, the role senders may "ease up" (Kahn and French, 1970).

Kahn and French (1970) state that role episodes are processes that are cyclic and ongoing; the focal person responds to role pressure in a way that feeds back and alters or reinforces the role senders. The next role sendings by members of the role set depend on their evaluation of the responses



to the previously sent roles expectations, and thus, a new episode begins. There are variables that influence the causal dynamics of role episodes, and thus, are part of the model and include organizational factors, interpersonal relations, and personality factors (Kahn and French, 1970).

Organizational factors represent a set of variables, or organizational conditions, that define the positions of the role sender and focal person, and will determine in part their organizational experience, their expectations, and pressures the role sender will impose (Kahn et al., 1964). Some of these variables characterize the organization as a whole such as its size, number of ranks, the products it produces, or its financial base. Other variables are ecological in that they represent the relation of a certain position or person to the organization such as their rank, their responsibilities within the division of labor, or the number and positions of others who are directly concerned with their performance (Kahn et al., 1970).

Personality factors are the variables that describe why a person behaves in certain ways such as their motives and values, their sensitivities and fears, and their habits and trait characteristics. These variables will determine how the role sender exerts their role expectations towards the focal person and to what degree of pressure they will use; while at the same time determine how the focal person will react to role pressures (Kahn et al., 1964).



Interpersonal relations refers to the stable patterns of interaction between a focal person and their role senders and their orientations toward each other. Kahn et al. (1964) state that these patterns of relationships may be characterized along specific dimensions, some originating from the formal structure of the organization while others come from informal interactions and the sharing of common experiences. These dimensions are the power or ability to influence; affective bonds such as respect, trust in cooperativeness of others, and attraction or liking; dependence on one another; and the style of communication between the focal person and their associates (Kahn et al., 1964). Like the personality factors, interpersonal relations effect the manner of role sending and degree of role pressure exerted between the role sender and the focal person.

Role Conflict. The concept of role conflict is based on the different role expectations people within the organization have towards the focal person. At given points in time, these role senders may impose pressures on the focal person to perform different kinds of behavior, or roles. To the extent that these role pressures give rise to role forces within people, they will experience a psychological conflict (Kahn et al., 1964). It is these conflicting expectations that create the psychological conflict for the person who is their target. Sent role conflict is defined as the simultaneous occurrence of two (or more) sets of pressures, or



behavior expectations, such that compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult (Kahn et al., 1964).

Role conflict can be described in two forms, one as a fact in the environment of the focal person and is referred to as objective or sent role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964). A further definition of objective role conflict is the discrepancy between the focal person's expectations of role behavior and the expectations of the role sender (Kraut, 1966). The second form of role conflict Kahn et al. (1964) refer to is experience role conflict or internal conflict set in the psychological life of the focal person. Kraut's (1966) definition parallels this, but refers to this form of role conflict as subjective, or the discrepancy between the focal person's role behavior expectations and the expectations they think the role senders hold for them. Kraut (1966) took these definitions of role conflict one step further and identified a form of conflict as distortion conflict, or the discrepancy between the role sender's expectations of role behavior and the expectations the focal person believes the sender holds. Through factor analysis, Kraut (1966) was able to determine that these various forms of role conflict are not interchangeable or equivalent when determining their relationship with such job factors as satisfaction, tension on the job and job performance.



Several types of role conflict can be identified.

Intrasender conflict occurs when different prescriptions and proscriptions from a single member of the role set may be incompatible. An example is when a supervisor requests a subordinate to acquire material which is unavailable through normal channels, and at the same time, it is prohibited to violate normal channels (Kahn et al., 1964). Another type is referred to as intersender conflict, or the pressures from one role sender oppose pressures from one or more other senders (Kahn et al., 1964). For instance, this type of conflict occurs when a supervisor is caught in the middle because their superiors require tighter supervision of subordinates, while the supervisor's subordinates require looser supervision. A third type of conflict is inter-role conflict and occurs when the role pressures associated with membership in one organization (the work place) are in conflict with pressures stemming from relationship in other groups (social life, family) (Kahn et al., 1964). This is a frequent problem as job responsibilities begin to interfere or conflict with family responsibilities, and the focal person must decide which to devote their efforts and attention to, as there is a conflict between their role as a worker and their role as a family member.

Kahn et al. (1964) point out that the above are types of sent role conflicts, but that other conflicts exist which are generated by a combination of sent pressures and individual



internal forces. This conflict, referred to as person-role conflict, is caused when the needs and values of a person are in a discrepancy with the demands of his role set. An example is when a person's work role requirements violate their personal moral values, such as being pressured into price-fixing conspiracies when this act is in direct violation of their personal code of ethics (Kahn et al., 1964).

Kahn et al. (1964) go further to state that from these four basic types of role conflict, other complex forms sometimes develop. One very prevalent form of conflict is role overload and is considered a form of inter-sender conflict. Overload occurs when a variety of role senders have legitimate expectations of a focal person, but it is impossible for the focal person to meet all these expectations within given time limits (Kahn et al., 1964). Overload is experienced as a conflict of priorities, or that it may be impossible to deny any of the expectations, thus the focal person may be taxed beyond his abilities (Kahn et al., 1964).

Support of these definitions of role conflict types was shown by Miles and Perreault (1976) when they used a comprehensive model relating role conflict to its antecedents and consequences. They were able to show that when compared to antecedent (integration and boundary spanning activities) and consequences (job related tension and job satisfaction), distinct conflict types were isolated (person-role conflict, intersender conflict, intra-sender conflict, and overload).



It was demonstrated that significant differences exist when comparing conflict types to antecedents and consequences on both a univariate level, and when all the conflict types were considered simultaneously. Miles (1976), in a study comparing role conflict types and role ambiguity to role requirements such as integration and boundary-spanning activities, personnel supervision and scientific research, was able to show that both general role conflict and the inter-sender variety were directly related to the role requirement measure of integration and boundary-spanning activities and personnel supervision. Person-role conflict showed a significant relationship to the role requirement of scientific research activities; however, role overload and intra-sender conflict did not appear to be distinguishable on the basis of these selected role requirements. Burke and Belcourt (1974) were successfully able to factor out the conflict type of role overload in their study which compared role stresses to a variety of demographic variables and coping strategies. They state that it is not only the sheer volume of work that causes the conflict and feelings of stress, but also of the failure to perform which overload implies.

All these types of role conflict have one characteristic in common: members of a role set exert role pressures to change the behavior of a focal person, who is already behaving in ways to meet other previously sent role expectations. Role conflict can be thought of as inadequate role sending,



or the lack of agreement, coordination, or adequately communicated role expectations. Role senders produce a pattern of sent expectations which, when communicated, contain logical incompatibilities or which take inadequate account of the needs and abilities of the focal person (Kahn et al., 1964).

Role Ambiguity. Kahn et al. (1964) point out that members within an organization must have certain kinds of information at their disposal if they are to perform their job adequately. The communication process and distribution of information throughout the organization is closely related to the effectiveness of an organization. Kahn et al. (1964) further state that the availability of role-related information also may have an effect on the emotional well-being and adjustment an individual must make when coming into the organization. Thus, for a person to be able to adjust and stabilize themselves into an organization, certain information is required for adequate role performance, or to conform to the role expectations held by members of their role set (Kahn et al., 1964). Ambiguity implies inadequate information: incomplete or nonexistent, subject to more than one interpretation, or momentarily clear, but rapidly changes (Kahn and Quinn, 1970).

Demonstrating organizational processes using role theory, ambiguity has been shown to be a stress-causing element. Kahn and Quinn (1970) state that ambiguity is inherently stressful because it frustrates a presumed need for clarity



or structure in one's environment (Lyons, 1971; Paul, 1974; Miles and Petty, 1975). Ambiguous roles fail to serve, for both the focal person and their role senders, the cognitive, motivational, and performance-facilitating functions that make up their work activities (Kahn and Quinn, 1970). Kahn and Quinn (1970) point out that this may result in secondary stress conditions such as overload, performance decrement, and interpersonal conflict.

Like role conflict, role ambiguity has an objective and subjective form; where objective ambiguity is a condition in the work environment and subjective or experienced ambiguity is a state of the person (Kahn et al., 1964). Kahn and Quinn (1970) state that role expectations can be ambiguous to a focal person in the following areas: expectations concerning role performance may be ambiguous, expectations concerning overall responsibilities associated with a role may be ambiguous, expectations concerning the personal style of the role occupant may be ambiguous, and that expectations concerning norms within the organization may be ambiguous.

These areas of role expectations are communicated to the focal person in two primary modes of role sending. Prescriptive role sending is the initial phase of communicating role expectations in the form of an order, suggestion, request, or other form of instruction (Kahn and Quinn, 1970). The second form is evaluative role sending, where no prescriptive information is communicated to the focal person by his/her role



senders. Here the focal person initiates the role sending process which is determined by the focal person's own desires, own performance expectations, and the resources available to him to accomplish role or work behavior (Kahn and Quinn, 1970). From their initiated role behavior, the focal person receives a positive or negative evaluation of their behavior from their role senders (this evaluation also occurs after prescriptive role sending). From these informal evaluations, the focal person is left to infer the prescription from the communication (Kahn and Quinn, 1970).

Role ambiguity is an informational concept, and according to Kahn and Quinn (1970), ambiguity has its origins also in informational terms. Kahn and Quinn (1970) state that the origins of role ambiguity are based on a series of role sender/focal person expectations that are similar to the elements found in the process of information transmissions (coder, transmitter and decoder). These origins of ambiguity are the expectations sent by the role sender to the focal person, and the expectations the focal person receives and interprets in light of prior information and experience (Kahn and Quinn, 1970).

Role ambiguity is conceived as the degree to which required information is available to a given organizational position. The degree to which this information is communicated clearly and consistently to a focal person will determine the degree of experience certainty surrounding their role



requirements and their place within the organization (Kahn et al., 1964). When this needed role expectation information is lacking or not communicated clearly, the focal person will experience ambiguity.

Kahn et al. (1964) point out that subjective or experienced role conflict and role ambiguity are moderated by a variety of individual personality variables. For purposes of this study, role conflict and ambiguity will be looked at on the objective basis to which the focal person is subjected to the role stress, while at the same time, examine both forms of role stress on a wholistic or general basis and not by specific type or the specific organizational roles which stress originates (roles new to the organization, roles of assistants, roles exposed to frequent change)(Kahn and Quinn, 1970).

Organizational Communication Types. In reviewing the role episode process and the origins of role stress, it can be said that role conflict stems from conflicting role behavior expectations that are communicated to the focal person. Role ambiguity stems from role behavior expectations which are not communicated or are unclearly communicated to the focal person. It can also be said that the process which results in role stress, if not the actual cause, has its origins in the organizational communication process.

Muchinsky (1977) states that one of the most elusive organizational variables is that of communication. Like role



stress, organizational communication is a dynamic, situational phenomenon and a difficult concept to measure. However, there has been success in defining, classifying and measuring various forms of organizational communication patterns. Schuler (1979) points out that the dimensions of communication most often discussed in organizational communication literature are directionality and formality of information flows (Read, 1962; Wilensky, 1967; O'Reilly and Roberts, 1976), and gatekeeping or withholding of information (Davis, 1968; O'Reilly and Roberts, 1976). Other forms of organizational communication include overload (Porat and Haas, 1969; Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974), desire to interact, and communicative initiative and communicative receptiveness/responsiveness (Rings, 1976). Muchinsky (1977) was able to show that specific communication dimensions (accuracy of communicated information, trust, influence, downward and lateral directionalities) are significantly related to certain organizational climate factors (affective tone toward management, organization structure and procedures, responsibility). These studies provide evidence that measurement scales can be developed which can define and group communications into identifiable patterns.

Greenbaum (1974) states that organizational communication consists of various message sending and receiving phenomena affecting formal social units in which individuals work towards common goals. The concepts and principles



surrounding communication activities are numerous when looking at how it is initiated, conducted and perceived by those using it. Organizational communication should be understood as including all behavior modifying stimuli, both verbal and nonverbal. It is identified with written media (correspondence, house publications), hardware (telephone systems, computer units) and speech activities (interviewing, conferring), but also includes the gestures and facial expressions used during conversation along with the symbols and colors used in written communications (Greenbaum, 1974). Organizational communication can be defined in terms of a circular system that includes purpose, operational procedures and structure (Greenbaum, 1974). The purpose of organizational communication is to facilitate the achievement of organizational goals. Operational procedures involve the utilization of functional communication networks related to organizational goals; the adoption of communication policies appropriate to communication network objectives; and the implementation of these policies through acceptable communication activities (Greenbaum, 1974). Structural elements include the organization unit, functional communication networks, communication policies and communication activities (Greenbaum, 1974).

Using the above principles of organizational communication, Greenbaum (1974), in an attempt to assist organizations that were having a number of communication problems, was able to develop a conceptual and methodological structure for the



examination or audit or organizational communications. Using a three-stage process, Greenbaum (1974) proposed that organizational communications exist within four major communication networks. These communication networks or types of communication are regulative, innovative, integrative and informative - instructive. O'Reilly and Roberts (1974), in their attempt to develop a scale in which to define and group communication activities into types also suggested these four types of communication.

Schuler (1979) and Schuler and Blank (1976) offer the following definitions of the four major types of communications which Greenbaum (1974) proposed to exist within organizations.

Regulative communication is similar to Roberts' and O'Reilly's (1974) upward and downward communication directionality dimensions. This dimension emphasizes conformity to plans, orders and controls which are task-related. It refers to the quality of communications consistent with the classic principles of management: adherence to the chain of command; unity of supervision, directions flowing from supervisor to subordinate and from subordinate to supervisor. Regulative communication is implemented through policy statements, rules and procedures.

Innovative communication centers around problem-solving activities and the interpretation of the environment which enables the organization to adapt to its changing



environment. Individuals in boundary positions are expected to engage in innovative communication more than non-boundary individuals for they are required to use their innovativeness to be able to work within a variety of organizational functions and departments. Schuler and Blank (1979) changed the definition of innovative communication to distortive communication in order to make it more applicable to organizations. They refer to distortive communication as the suppression or filtering of information and lack of a cooperative, problem solving orientation in the organization. This dimension is similar to Roberts' and O'Reilly's (1974) gatekeeping dimension and exists when only limited amounts of information or incorrect information for task demands is provided.

Integrative communication refers to the amount of cooperative and assisting information employees provide each other and is concerned with the maintenance of the organization. This dimension is similar to Roberts' and O'Reilly's (1974) lateral directionality dimension and takes into account the needs and feelings of the individuals within the organization and is closely related to employee satisfaction.

Informative communication is characterized by the amount of task relevant information the employee receives. This communication type, which is similar to Roberts' and O'Reilly's (1974) accuracy and load (under-and-over) dimension, directly influences what an employee needs to do to



complete a task. This task oriented communication type is identified by concern for correct information, adaptability and attitudes towards initiating the goal attainment/task completion process.

A major research area that communication types has been shown to relate to is that of satisfaction and performance. These two outcomes, which are vital to the maintenance of the organization, have been researched in order to gain a better understanding of organizational communications and the effect they have on specific outcomes. Using the communication networks typology suggested by Greenbaum (1974), Schuler and Blank (1976) were able to demonstrate that specific communication types were significantly related to the organizational outcomes of satisfaction and performance. Their results demonstrated positive relationships between informative communication and employee satisfaction, integrative communication and satisfaction and performance, and a negative relationship between status-quo (integrative) communication and employee satisfaction (Schuler and Blank, 1976). This study was able to show that the type of communication the organization primarily engages in will have an effect on employee satisfaction and performance. Roberts and O'Reilly (1977) examined the relationships among a variety of communication types and several performance outcomes in organizations to determine how communications might be related to performance. Using a scale which they had developed to



measure the existence of communication types and supervisor performance ratings (Roberts and O'Reilly, 1974), they were able to confirm the link between a number of facets of organizational communication and performance (Robert and O'Reilly, 1977).

#### Organizational Communication Types and Role Stress.

Role stress, like communication types, has been extensively researched to demonstrate the relationship between role conflict and ambiguity and satisfaction and performance. Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970) found strong negative relationships between role ambiguity, role conflict and measures of job satisfaction. Keller (1975) correlated role conflict and ambiguity with a multi-dimensional measure of job satisfaction and reported that role conflict was negatively related with extrinsic satisfaction dimensions, and that role ambiguity was negatively related to the more intrinsic dimensions of satisfaction. Miles (1975) was also able to show that role conflict and ambiguity were related to and caused job dissatisfaction. Tosi and Tosi (1970) and Tosi (1974) found that role conflict and job satisfaction were negatively related, while they found no relationship between role ambiguity and job satisfaction. Rizzo, House and Lirtzman (1970), House and Rizzo (1972) and Hamner and Tosi (1974) found significant negative relationships between job satisfaction and role conflict. Kahn, et al. (1964) and Hamner and Tosi (1974) suggested that the inconsistencies found in



the research involving role conflict, role ambiguity and job satisfaction may be due to the level of organization that the individual is located at. Torrance (1954) was able to show that individuals who are not informed on task procedures or are not given clear perceptions on what they can expect from survivors (workers), will be unable to perform effectively. On the other hand, Schuler (1975) was unable to demonstrate any significant relationships between role conflict and ambiguity and performance, stating that this may be due to an ability/adaptability phenomenon.

The above research demonstrates that both role conflict and ambiguity and organizational communication types are related to the causes of employee satisfaction and performance. Schuler and Blank (1976) suggested the rationale that task demands, role conflict and role ambiguity were responsible for moderating the relationship between communication types and satisfaction and performance.

Kahn et al. (1964) suggested that communication was a critical variable in determining the cause of role conflict and ambiguity; evident by its inclusion into the role episode model as being one of the characteristics of the factors which create role stress. Kahn and his associates (1964) discussed communication as a singular dimension based on a continuum of frequency, and did not distinguish among the different types of communication that can take place between a role sender and focal person. They suggest that the more



communication there is between a role sender and focal person will result in clarified role expectations and reduced role conflict, while less communication between the two will result in increased role conflict and ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964).

Kahn et al. (1964) state that when the focal person perceives low role conflict and ambiguity this will cause them to change their involvement in the relationship with the role senders because their levels of trust, liking and respect for the role sender increases. This increased involvement with the role senders is associated with continued communications between the two and results in less role conflict and ambiguity. High role conflict and ambiguity perceived by the focal person will cause them to withdraw from the relationship or actively confront or communicate with the role senders to reduce the role conflict and ambiguity. Withdrawal responses, caused by the role stress and lower levels of trust, liking and respect for the role senders, lowers the frequency of communication between the focal person and role senders and results in higher levels of role conflict and ambiguity (Kahn et al., 1964). This can result in a vicious cycle phenomena where withdrawal coping techniques may be functional temporarily, but role senders may elicit more intense role expectation communication or fail to act as information providers or role clarifiers,



causing more role conflict and ambiguity and resulting in more withdrawal behaviors.

Schuler (1979) was able to demonstrate this vicious cycle phenomena in researching organizational communication and behavior. In his study, Schuler was able to show that there is a reciprocal (bi-directional) relationship between communication types, satisfaction and performance, and role perceptions; with role perceptions having an intervening effect. This research design is referred to as a role perception transactional process model for organizational communication-outcome relationships. Schuler used this model, based on role perceptions, to understand and predict the relationship between organizational communications and satisfaction and performance, and also provide a means to bridge organizational communication and organizational behavior (Schuler, 1979). Specifically, Schuler hypothesized that certain types of communication would be related to satisfaction and performance, but this relationship would be influenced by the degree of perceived role conflict and ambiguity. Results of the study show that communication-role perception and role perception-outcome variables were not causally related, but rather transactionally or bi-directionally related, with the suggested hypotheses (relationships between communication types and role perceptions, role perceptions and behavior outcomes, and



communication types and behavior outcomes) all being generally supported (Schuler, 1979).

In formulating these hypotheses, specifically the one dealing with the relationship between communication types and role perceptions, Schuler (1979) suggested that the use of certain communication types would influence the degree of role conflict and ambiguity. Using the communication dimensions suggested by Greenbaum (1974) and operationalized in an early study (Schuler and Blank, 1976), Schuler (1979) suggested that the more informative communication there is from the role sender to focal person, should result in a lower degree of perceived role conflict and ambiguity. Integrative communication, by providing workers with information on what other employees (on a lateral level) are doing and when, allowing these workers to complete their tasks, should help reduce role conflict and ambiguity (Schuler, 1979). Regulative communication, which differs from informative communication by the degree of openness of the communication flow and integrative communication by directionality of the communication flow, is more applicable to routine than non-routine problems and demands (Schuler, 1979). Regulative communication should be negatively related to role conflict and ambiguity by providing necessary and appropriate information. However, if the organization is changing and performs non-routine tasks, regulative communication may contribute to role conflict and ambiguity by providing a lack of necessary



information or inappropriate information to complete tasks (Schuler, 1979). Distortive information, by providing only limited amounts of information and/or incorrect information, should be positively related to role conflict and ambiguity (Schuler, 1979).

The results of Schuler's (1979) study show that informative and integrative communication were both negatively related to role conflict and ambiguity. Regulative and distortive communications were both positively related to role conflict. Distortive communication was positively related to role ambiguity, but regulative communication was not significantly related to role ambiguity (Schuler, 1979).

Schuler's (1979) model allows for the prediction of why and which dimensions of communication will or should influence behavior outcomes, and encourages thinking of a series of bi-directional relationships. Schuler provides an example of this relationship by stating that "informative communication can reduce role conflict and ambiguity which increases the flow of informative communication. The reduced levels of role conflict and ambiguity can result in increased satisfaction and performance which can then result in increased informative or integrative communication which reduces role conflict and ambiguity and leads to higher satisfaction and performance." (Schuler, 1979).

Organizational Level and Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, and Communication Types. An important moderator variable in



any research dealing with organizational behavior is that of the individual's level within the organization. The reason this variable is so often looked at is clear: individuals at different levels within the organizational structure perform different tasks, have different responsibilities (for what, for whom, and to whom), and have different or varying degrees of authority. Research in the areas of role perceptions and organizational communications are no exception, with the level of organization determining the degree of perceived role stress and form of organizational communication used.

As mentioned earlier, Kahn et al. (1964) and Hamner and Tosi (1974) stated that the inconsistencies found between role conflict and role ambiguity when investigating their relationship to job satisfaction are based on the employees' level in the organization. Hamner and Tosi (1974) indicated that at higher levels of an organization a person's responsibilities center around more unstructured tasks and problems, making role ambiguity a more crucial source of stress than role conflict. Kahn et al. (1964) supported this statement adding that role ambiguity is more stressful at higher organizational levels than role conflict because at these higher levels individuals retain the power and discretion to obtain additional resources, change rules and regulations, change the organizational structure or division of responsibility, or reduce the sources of role conflict. At higher organizational levels role conflict should be less of a concern than



role ambiguity because they have less influence over the sources of role ambiguity (Schuler, 1975).

Positions at lower organizational levels are characterized by low levels of discretion, variety, autonomy, with task responsibilities that are well understood by the incumbents; thereby making the need to reduce role ambiguity less important than the need to reduce role conflict (Hamner and Tosi, 1974). Kahn et al. (1964) point out that role conflict is more stressful at lower organizational levels because the employee is more dependent on the supervisor and has little power to influence him.

A variety of studies have been able to support the hypothesis that role conflict is more strongly related to job satisfaction at lower organizational levels than at higher organizational levels, while role ambiguity is more strongly related to job satisfaction at higher organizational levels than at lower organizational levels. Schuler (1975), Szilagyi, Sims and Keller (1976), and Hamner and Tosi (1974) all were able to determine that when investigating the relationship between role perceptions and satisfaction, that role conflict is experienced more at lower organizational levels, while role ambiguity is experienced more at higher organizational levels.

Research investigating the relationship between types of communication and satisfaction and performance has also revealed that organizational level is a significant moderating



variable. Schuler and Blank (1976), using Greenbaum's (1974) topology of communication types and performing their study at three different organizational levels (low, middle, high), were able to demonstrate that organization level does influence the degree of communication utilization, and contributes to satisfaction and performance. Specifically, informative communication contributed more to satisfaction and performance at high and middle levels than at the lower organization level (Schuler and Blank, 1976). Schuler and Blank (1979) suggest that this phenomenon may reflect a greater need and utilization of informative communication at the higher and middle organization levels due to more complex task demands, more role ambiguity, and more role conflict than exists at lower organization levels. As mentioned above, Hamner and Tosi (1974) and Kahn et al. (1964) contradict Schuler and Blank (1976) in that role conflict is more prevalent at lower organization levels. Integrative communication was found to be more satisfying at the lower and middle levels than at the higher organization level and was beneficial for performance at all three organization levels (Schuler and Blank, 1976). Status-quo communication (defined as being the opposite of innovative communication or the avoidance of problem solving situations and adaptations to change) was found to be significantly related to satisfaction variables at all three organization levels, but highly significant at the lower organizational level (Schuler and



Blank, 1976). Regulatory communication was found to have a negative relationship to satisfaction and performance at the lower organization level (Schuler and Blank, 1976). Schuler and Blank (1976) interpret this by suggesting that at lower organizational levels task demands are simple and regulatory communication may be viewed as unnecessary and unwanted control.

Hypotheses. The purpose of this study will be to investigate the relationship between the role perceptions of role conflict and ambiguity and types of communication. It is hypothesized that these relationships will be moderated by organizational level. Based on the past research conducted by Schuler (1979) demonstrating the bi-directional relationship between role conflict and ambiguity and communication types; Schuler (1975) and Szilagyi, Sims, and Keller (1976) demonstrating how organization levels act to moderate role perception relationships; and Schuler and Blank (1976) demonstrating how organization levels act to moderate communication relationships, the following hypotheses are to be investigated:

H-1. Role conflict at low organizational levels will be negatively related to informative and integrative communications and positively related to regulative and distortive communications.

H-2. Role conflict at high organizational levels will be moderately and negatively related to informative and integrative communications and moderately and positively related to regulative and distortive communications.

H-3. Role ambiguity at low organizational levels will be moderately and negatively related to informative and integrative communications and moderately and positively related to regulative and distortive communications.

H-4. Role ambiguity at high organizational levels will be negatively related to informative and integrative communications and moderately and positively related to regulative and distortive communications.

H-5. Significant differences exist between role perception/communication type relationships at different organization levels. Specifically, significant differences exist between each role conflict/communication type correlation at the low organization level and each similar role conflict/communication type correlation at the high organization level. Significant differences also exist between each role ambiguity/communication type correlation at the low organization level and each similar role ambiguity/communication type correlation at the high organization level.



The development of the hypotheses dealing with organization level acting as a moderating variable have been based on past research with role perceptions and organization level relationships and types of communication, satisfaction variables, and organization level relationships.

It is hoped that this research will add to the knowledge of role perception process and how it may be used in organizations to better understand and predict organizational behavior. Specifically, by knowing how organizational levels influence the role perception-communication type relationship, organizations may be able to pinpoint what forms of organizational communication need to be encouraged or avoided at specific organization levels. This in turn would contribute or assist in creating a work environment that would enhance employee satisfaction and avoid negative organizational outcomes such as absenteeism, turnover and low productivity.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects were 204 employees making up a single division of a large commercial bank (over 850 employees), located in the southeastern United States. Subjects range in age from 18 to 63 years. Subjects were classified as members of either the high or low organization level based on the nature of their work responsibilities. Managers and professionals with duties that involved extensive judgement and independent discretion were classified as the high organization level. Employees with non-managerial duties or duties that do not involve the use of judgement and independent discretion were classified as the low organization level. Of the total population, the high level group consisted of 51 employees (31 females, 20 males), and the low level group consisted of 153 employees (120 females, 33 males). The distribution of females was 61.8% in the high level group and 78.4% in the low level group.

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire used in this study derives its format from the ones used by Rizzo et al. (1970) and House and Rizzo (1972) (see Appendix B).



Questions 1 through 6 measure role ambiguity; questions 7 through 13 measure informative communication; questions 14 through 21 measure role conflict; questions 22 through 26 measure regulative communication; questions 27 and 28 measure integrative communication; and questions 29 through 33 measures distortive communication.

The design of the questionnaire allows it to be self administering, containing instructions on how it is to be completed and returned. For each question the respondents are asked to circle the appropriate rating ranging from 1 "very false" to 5 "very true."

The same questionnaire was used for both the high and low organization levels. To identify the difference between high and low level respondents, the pages of low level questionnaire were numbered, while the pages of the high level questionnaire were not numbered. This was done to protect the identity of the respondent.

#### Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from senior management of the test organization. Subjects were selected without their prior knowledge based on their length of service. Only those employees having completed a minimum of six months service were selected to participate. It was felt that this minimum time period would be sufficient for new employees to learn their duties and understand and use the various channels of communication. Participants would then



respond to the questionnaire without influence of the stress caused by being unfamiliar with a new work environment.

The selection of subjects, placement in either the high or low level groups, and the determination of demographic statistics was performed using the organization's personnel records.

Participation in the study was voluntary. Selected subjects were sent sealed packets containing the appropriate level questionnaire and instructions, a cover letter explaining the study and its purpose, and a return envelope marked confidential. These packets were labeled with the employee's name and sent out in a single distribution using the company's interoffice mail system. The subjects were given seven days to complete the questionnaire and return it to the organization's Personnel Department using the interoffice mail system. Using the interoffice mail system and instructing the subjects not to mark the questionnaire or return envelope with their name, protected the identity of all participants.

Subjects were instructed to circle the one answer to each question that best represented their opinion. Subjects were also instructed to answer all questions in order for their responses to be included in the analysis.

To facilitate participation, the subjects were informed on the purpose of the study, that their identity would be



protected, and that their responses were to be grouped with others and analyzed as a group, not individually.

Of the 204 questionnaires distributed, 104, or 51.0% were returned fully completed and considered usable in the analysis of the data. The high level group had 51 questionnaires distributed, and 30, or 58.8% were returned and considered usable. The low level group had 153 questionnaires distributed, and 74, or 48.4% were returned and considered usable.

## RESULTS

In order to determine the hypothesized relationships, raw scores for each questionnaire were converted into means for each of the role perception and communication variables. Using these means, Person Product Moment correlations were calculated for each role perception/communication type at the low and high organization levels. In order to interpret the magnitude of the relationships, correlation coefficients of .50 or less are considered moderate relationships. Using .50 as a critical value, correlation coefficients of this size have 25% of the variance in one variable being predicted from the variance in the other variable.

### Low Organization Level

Table A shows the means for role conflict,  $\bar{x} = 2.34$ ; and role ambiguity,  $\bar{x} = 1.91$ . The standard deviations for these measures are, respectively, .64 and .60. Table A further shows the means for informative communication,  $\bar{x} = 3.34$ ; integrative communication,  $\bar{x} = 3.18$ ; regulative communication,  $\bar{x} = 2.81$ ; and distortive communication,  $\bar{x} = 2.34$ . The standard deviations for these measures are, respectively, .75, .96, .79 and .57. These means suggest that within the sample group there are low perceptions of role stress; with a



greater use of informative and integrative communications, and a lesser use of regulative and distortive communications.

Table B shows that a negative and significant relationship exists between role conflict and informative communication,  $\underline{r} = -.63$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ ; and a moderately negative and significant relationship exists between role conflict and integrative communication,  $\underline{r} = -.37$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ . Moderately positive and significant relationships exist between role conflict and regulative communication,  $\underline{r} = .49$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ ; and distortive communication,  $\underline{r} = .48$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ . Table B further shows that a negative and significant relationship exists between role ambiguity and informative communication,  $\underline{r} = -.56$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ ; and a moderately negative and significant relationship between role ambiguity and integrative communication,  $\underline{r} = -.40$ ,  $\underline{p} < .01$ . The relationship between role ambiguity and regulative communication is moderately positive but not significant,  $\underline{r} = .15$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ . The relationship between role ambiguity and distortive communication is moderately positive and significant,  $\underline{r} = .24$ ,  $\underline{p} < .05$ .

With the exception of the role ambiguity/regulative communication relationship, these results suggest that when there is an increase use of positive forms of communication, there is a decrease in role stress perceptions. When there is an increase in the use of negative forms of communication, there is an increase in role stress perceptions.



High Organization Level

Table A shows the means for role conflict,  $\bar{x} = 2.46$ ; and role ambiguity,  $\bar{x} = 2.03$ . The standard deviations for these measures are, respectively, .70 and .62. Table A further shows the means for informative communication,  $\bar{x} = 3.16$ ; integrative communication,  $\bar{x} = 3.38$ ; regulative communication,  $\bar{x} = 3.31$ ; and distortive communication,  $\bar{x} = 2.44$ . The standard deviations for these measures are, respectively, .66, .89, .81 and .60. These means suggest that within the sample group there are low perceptions of role stress; with a greater use of informative, integrative, and regulative communications, and a lesser use of distortive communication.

Table B shows that negative and significant relationships exist between role conflict and informative communication,  $r = -.62$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and integrative communication,  $r = -.63$ ,  $p < .01$ . Positive and significant relationships exist between role conflict and regulative communications,  $r = .57$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and distortive communication,  $r = .62$ ,  $p < .01$ . Table B further shows that moderately negative and significant relationships exist between role ambiguity and informative communication,  $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ; and integrative communication,  $r = -.45$ ,  $p < .05$ . The relationship between role ambiguity and regulative communication is moderately positive but not significant,  $r = .22$ ,  $p = 0$ . The relationship



between role ambiguity and distortive is moderately positive and significant,  $\underline{r} = .41$ ,  $\underline{p} < .05$ .

With the exception of the role ambiguity/regulative communication relationship, these results suggest that when there is an increase use of positive forms of communication, there is a decrease in role stress perceptions. When there is an increase in the use of negative forms of communication, there is an increase in role stress perceptions.

#### Low Organization Level vs. High Organization Level

To determine if significant differences exist for each role perception/communication type relationship between the low and high organization levels, Fisher  $\underline{zr}$  Transformations were calculated. Fisher  $\underline{zr}$  Transformation calculations are used to measure significant differences between two correlation coefficients of two independent samples. By converting  $\underline{r}$ 's to  $\underline{zr}$ 's, it can be determined whether  $\underline{r}_1$  is significantly different from  $\underline{r}_2$  and whether the two samples can be considered random samples from a common population.

Table C shows that significant differences do not exist between low organization level role conflict and high organization level role conflict for informative communication,  $\underline{zr} = .65$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ ; integrative communication,  $\underline{zr} = -.27$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ ; regulative communication,  $\underline{zr} = -.32$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ ; and distortive communication,  $\underline{zr} = -.84$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ . Table C further shows that significant differences do not exist between low organization level role ambiguity and high organization level role

ambiguity for informative communication,  $\underline{zr} = .07$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ ; integrative communication,  $\underline{zr} = -1.56$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ ; regulative communication,  $\underline{zr} = -.50$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ ; and distortive communication,  $\underline{zr} = -.89$ ,  $\underline{p} = 0$ .

These results reflect that differences do not exist between the low and high organization levels when comparing similar role conflict/communication type relationships and similar role ambiguity/communication type relationships; and that the factors that influence these relationships are different.



## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to look at the relationship between role perception and communication types and the moderating effect of organization level. The empirical design of the study is correlational, thus the causal properties of the relationship cannot be discussed since it is not known which of the two primary variables, role perceptions, or communication types used caused the positive or negative relationships. It should be noted, however, that Schuler (1979) was able to demonstrate that these two variables are related to each other in a transactional manner. Certain role perceptions are caused by specific communication types used, and that the use of certain communication types are caused by specific role perceptions.

The first two hypotheses examined the relationship between role conflict and the four forms of communication at the low and high organization levels. The predicted directionality of the relationships were confirmed with role conflict being negatively related to informative and integrative communications and positively related to regulative and distortive communications. These results, which support Schuler's 1979 study, suggest that within both the low and



high level sample groups, high perceptions of role conflict are associated with the use of regulative and distortive communications; while lower perceptions of role conflict are associated with the use of informative and integrative communications. In organizational practices, it should be thought that the use of instructive communication necessary for task completion, or communication that assists individual groups working as a unit to complete a task, would be associated with lower levels of role conflict at both organization levels. Additionally, communication practices and policies that suppress information or provide inappropriate information needed for task completion, would be associated with higher levels of role conflict at both organization levels.

As to the strengths of the role conflict/communication type relationships, the hypothesized strengths are not supported. At the lower organization level, the relationship between role conflict and informative communication was strong, while integrative, regulative and distortive communication relationships were moderate. At the high organization level, all role conflict/communication type relationships were strong. The rationale behind the hypothesized strengths of the role conflict/communication type relationships was that at the low level these relationships would be stronger than the high level based on the research of role conflict and satisfaction (Schuler, 1975; Szilagyi, Sims and Keller, 1976; and Hamner and Tosi, 1974) and organizational



communications and satisfaction (Schuler and Blank, 1976). Schuler (1975), Szilagyi, Sims and Keller (1976), and Hamner and Tosi (1974) found that role conflict contributed more to employee satisfaction at the low organization level than at the high level because task demands are well structured and defined, and a stronger possibility exists for roles to be conflicting at the low organization level. Schuler and Blank (1976) were able to demonstrate positive relationships between informative and integrative communications with job satisfaction, and a negative relationship between status-quo communication and job satisfaction. Schuler and Blank further suggested that role stress perceptions are responsible for moderating the relationship between communication types and job satisfaction.

The results of this study indicate that role conflict/communication type relationships are stronger at the high organization level. It could be speculated that this may be a result of higher level jobs being restructured to incorporate more task demands in an effort to complete work assignments with smaller staffs. This is a common business practice used to make manpower more cost efficient and would lead to higher levels of perceived role conflict if these additional roles, and how they interact with organizational communications, come into conflict.

The second two hypotheses examine the relationship between role ambiguity and the four forms of communication at



the low and high organization levels. Again, supporting Schuler's (1979) study, the predicted directionalities of the relationships were confirmed, with role ambiguity being negatively related to informative and integrative communications and positively related to distortive communications. These results suggest that within both the high and low level groups, high perceptions of role ambiguity are associated with the use of distortive communication; while lower perceptions of role ambiguity are associated with the use of informative and integrative communication. The application of this data in organizational practices is similar to the lower organization level.

There was a lack of significant positive relationships between role ambiguity and regulative communication at both the low and high organization levels. This corresponds to the results of Schuler's (1979) study where regulative communication and role ambiguity were also not significantly related. A possible explanation may be due to inconsistencies within the regulative communication/role perception relationship. Schuler (1979) found that regulative communication was negatively related to role stress by providing necessary and appropriate information needed to complete tasks. However, in organizations that are changing or where tasks are non-routine, regulative communications are positively related to role stress. The inconsistency of the relationship may rest within individual perceptions of the work environment



(changing vs. non-changing) and of tasks performed (routine vs. non-routine).

Deregulation within the financial industry has resulted in new laws and regulations in which financial institutions operate. Additionally, deregulation has created mergers between financial institutions, creating work environments that are changing with new responsibilities being given to employees. At the time of the study the test organization had recently gone through a merger and was completing the restructuring of its internal operations. Based on Schuler's (1979) findings, a combination of new financial regulations and new responsibilities as a result of the merger could create inconsistent employee perceptions about the use of regulative communication to clarify their job responsibilities. This could be a rationale to support non-significant role ambiguity/regulative communication relationships at the low and high organization levels.

Regarding the strengths of the role ambiguity/communication type relationships, the predicted strength of the relationship between lower level role ambiguity and informative, integrative and distortive communication were realized with the relationships being moderate. Schuler's (1975) findings supported the contention that at the low organization level task demands are well structured, and a lower probability would exist for employees to find themselves in ambiguous role situations at this level. In developing the hypothesis,



it was believed if role ambiguity is not a heavily experienced role perception at the lower level, then the types of communication examined were also not heavily used during ambiguous situations.

At the high organization level it was hypothesized that role ambiguity/informative and role ambiguity/integrative relationships would be strong, again supporting Schuler's (1975) relationship between task demands and experienced role ambiguity. It was found that these relationships were only moderate. Role ambiguity at the higher level appears not to be as strong of moderator variable in stress as previous studies indicate. Speculating as to why the strength of these relationships is moderate could have their answer in the regulatory aspect of the financial industry. With government regulations involved in many of the decisions made by higher level employees, ambiguous roles and the use of informative and integrative communications to reduce role ambiguity may not be as strong at this organizational level.

The final hypothesis was developed to determine if significant differences exist between each role perception/communication type correlation at the low organization level and each similar role perception/communication type correlation at the high organization level. This hypothesis is not supported; significant differences between similar role perception/communication type correlations at the low and high organization levels were not found.



Previous research (Schuler and Blank, 1976) has shown that perceived role stress and the use of organizational communications moderate perceived job satisfaction and performance at different organization levels. This hypothesis was developed to show that when examining role perception/communication type relationships, the organization level must be accounted for. Factors such as job responsibilities and work environment affect levels of job satisfaction and performance at different organization levels; and as Kahn et al. (1964) and Hamner and Tosi (1974) suggested, the inconsistencies in role stress/satisfaction research may be due to the influence of organization level.

The results of this study suggest that organization level is not a moderating variable when examining similar role perception/communication type relationship at different organization levels. A possible explanation for the non-significant results could be due to the company's communication policies. The test organization used similar communication procedures for all organization levels; with information communicated up, down and laterally throughout the company using verbal and written communications. With no differences in the methods that low level and high level employees use to receive and issue communications, it could be suggested that organization level has no significant impact when comparing similar role perceptions/communication type relationships. The means for each role perception and



each communication type support this rationale, as they are generally the same between the low and high organization levels. In terms of organizational practices, when implementing change strategies that promote positive communication and reduce role stress, it would not be necessary to develop separate communication policies for each organization level.

The results of this study open other possible avenues for future research; research that needs to be conducted to determine the causal properties of role stress/communication type relationships. Longitudinal studies would demonstrate which variable, role stress or organizational communications, causes the negative and positive relationships. From these results, specific organizational change strategies can be developed that would promote the use of positive communications and reduce perceived role stress.

Kahn's (1964) role perception model shows that role perceptions are caused by a series of interactions in different environments. Schuler (1979) and Greenbaum (1974) discuss how organizational communications are complex and vary depending on factors such as purpose, intent of the sender, environment in which communications are made and the status of the receiver. Thus, the factors that effect perceived role stress and the use of different communication types are complex and individualistic. A suggestion for future research would be to isolate the above-mentioned communication variables, as well as specific environmental factors, to



learn more about how specific work environments (production vs. analytical) affect perceived role stress. Additionally, future research should be directed towards examining the factors, such as task demands, that influence similar role perception/communication type relationships at different organization levels. Results from this type of research would provide more specific data on which to formulate effective change strategies within specific types of industries or within different divisions and organization levels of a single industry.

Another area of research should examine the relationship between role ambiguity and regulative communication within organizations that are experiencing changes in the work environment and tasks performed. Further data that supports Schuler's (1979) contention that changes within the organization create inconsistent perceptions of this role stress/communication type relationship, would be beneficial to reduce role ambiguity created by changes such as mergers. Controlling the use of regulative communication so that employees see it as a positive form of communication would assist in reducing perceived role ambiguity.

In this study organization level was not a moderator in role stress/communication type relationships. Previous studies have shown that role perceptions and organizational communications when related to satisfaction and performance measures are moderated by organization level. Future



research should examine how organization-wide communication policies affect the stress perception/communication type relationship at different organization levels.

Finally, it is suggested that further research be conducted to support Schuler's Transactional Process Model relating role perceptions and the use of organizational communications to satisfaction and performance. The goal of any change strategy is to affect positive change to improve the environment for increased job satisfaction and worker productivity. Clearly identifying the bridge that exists between organizational communications, perceived role stress and satisfaction and performance; methods to affect desired positive changes can also be identified.

Studies such as this one are important when attempting to develop effective strategies to create or enhance a positive work environment. Examining the relationship between organizational communications and perceived stress, our knowledge regarding the complex process of employee motivation can be expanded by identifying how forms of communication and employee roles interrelate and effect employee satisfaction and performance.

With communication being a key factor in creating an environment that reduces role stress and facilitates positive organizational outcomes (satisfaction and performance), organizations need to develop communication policies that promote positive forms of communication. Specifically, the



use of informative communication is increased through department meetings where members provide status reports on current projects. Additionally, written communication policies, where information about programs and procedures is shared throughout all levels of the organization, also promotes informative communication. To facilitate informative and integrative communications, management needs to practice open-door communication that encourages employees to seek information needed to complete assignments. Integrative communication increases when departments, required to work as a team to complete a project, are brought together during planning stages to jointly establish production schedules. Planning activities and information sharing allows the departments to understand what information and materials will be required of each other in order to complete the project. These communication practices, used as change strategies in organizations using negative forms of communication, increase the possibility of reducing role related stress within the work environment.

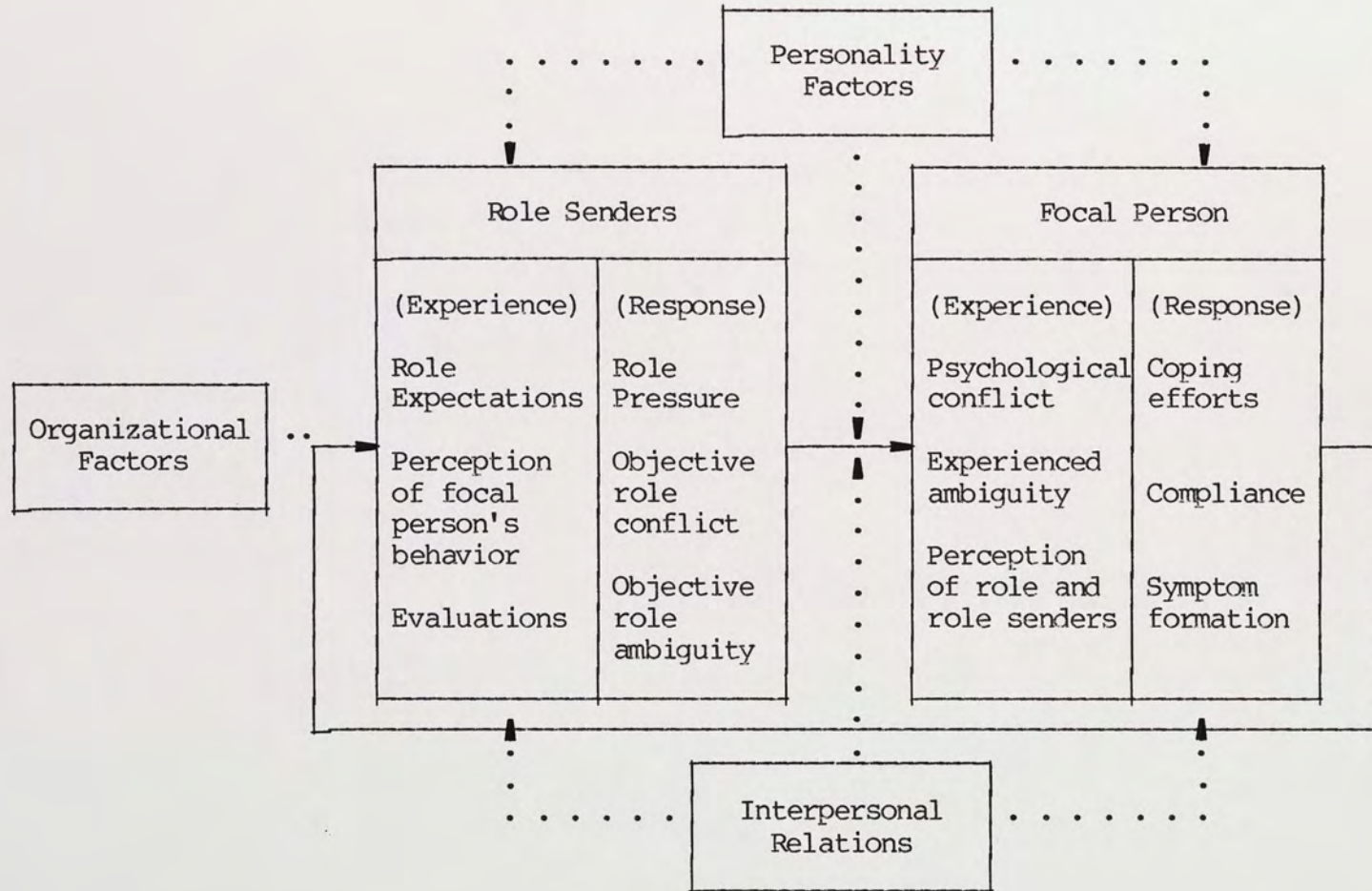
Industry today finds itself in an intense competitive environment; successful organizations are ones that can obtain optimal performance from their employees. However, to be profitable and competitive, organizations are reducing costs by streamlining their operations, working with reduced staffs and placing additional responsibilities on employees as the organization grows. This creates a more complex work

environment, and the roles employees take become more varied and harder to define. The resulting increase in perceived stress will affect levels of employee satisfaction and productivity. To prevent this, organizational practices that promote positive forms of communication will be necessary. Studies that examine the specific nature of stress/communication relationships will make it possible to identify forms of communications that reduce role related stress and allow for the development of communication practices that enhance positive organizational outcomes.



APPENDIX A

THE ROLE EPISODE MODEL AND THE FACTORS INVOLVED  
IN THE CAUSES AND ADJUSTMENTS TO ROLE CONFLICT AND AMBIGUITY<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>From Kahn, R., Wolfe, D., Quinn, R., Snoek, J.D., & Rosenthal, R. Organizational Stress: Studies in Role Conflict and Ambiguity. New York: Wiley, 1964.

APPENDIX B

INTRODUCTORY LETTER, DIRECTIONS, AND QUESTIONNAIRE



Dear (Company Name) Employee:

May I have a few minutes of your time to complete a questionnaire?

My name is Chuck Olsson, and I work for (company name) as a Personnel Representative. I am also a student enrolled at the University of Central Florida, currently working towards my Masters Degree in Industrial/Organizational Psychology. My final requirement for graduation is the completion of a research thesis, and I would like you to be a participant in my study.

The purpose of my research is to examine the relationship between how we communicate at work and the stress we occasionally experience. Results from studies such as this can further our knowledge of work related stress and how it can be reduced.

You and over 200 other (company name) employees (both management and non-management) have been personally selected to participate, based on the length of time you have worked for (company name).

The purpose of this study, and your participation in it, is purely research oriented. The information you will provide me will be held in complete confidence and in no way will you be identified as a participant. The questionnaire has been designed to protect your identity. Completed questionnaires will not be made a part of your personnel file. Your responses will be combined with others, and the results are to be analyzed on a group basis, not individually. Senior management has given me approval to conduct this study.

I am only interested in your opinions; please do not discuss your responses with other employees or your superiors. Please return your completed questionnaire to the Personnel Department by inter-office mail using the enclosed envelope. I am working under a semester deadline and will need your questionnaire returned no later than: (date).

I believe studies such as this are very important and the results significant when examining new ways to improve our work environment.

Thank you very much for your time; your help is great appreciated.

Sincerely,

Chuck Olsson

DIRECTIONS

1. PLEASE DO NOT IDENTIFY YOURSELF ANYWHERE ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE.
2. IT IS VITAL THAT YOU ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS. INCOMPLETE QUESTIONNAIRES CANNOT BE USED.
3. PROVIDE ONLY ONE RESPONSE PER QUESTION.
4. CIRCLE THE RATING THAT BEST REPRESENTS YOUR OPINION TOWARDS THE QUESTION.
5. UPON COMPLETION, CHECK TO MAKE SURE YOU HAVE ANSWERED ALL THE QUESTIONS; RETURN THE COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE TO PERSONNEL BY INTER-OFFICE MAIL.
6. PLEASE RETURN YOUR QUESTIONNAIRE BY: (DATE)



QUESTIONNAIRE

Please provide a single response to each question and answer all questions. Circle the response that best represents your opinion.

1. I do not have clear, planned goals and objectives for my job.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true
  
  2. I do not know exactly what is expected of me.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true
  
  3. I do not know what my responsibilities are.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true
  
  4. Explanations are not clear of what has to be done.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true
  
  5. I do not feel certain about how much authority I have.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true
  
  6. I do not know that I have divided my work time properly.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true
- 
7. Communications are prompt and timely.  

1	2	3	4	5
very false	false	neutral	true	very true

8. Information is available when needed.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
9. Communications flow both up and down.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
10. Communications are complete.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
11. The channels of communication are well understood.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
12. Communications are accurate.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
13. Feedback on how things are going is the rule rather than the exception.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
- 
14. I have to do things that should be done differently.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
15. I work under incompatible policies and guidelines.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
16. I receive an assignment without the manpower to complete it.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true
17. I have to break a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.  
 1                    2                    3                    4                    5  
 very false        false            neutral            true            very true



18. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
19. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and materials to perform it.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
20. I work on unnecessary things.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
21. I have to work under vague directives or orders.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
- 
22. Management expects me to be able to provide them with detailed information on the spur of the moment.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
23. Management requires a great deal of detailed information from people at my level.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
24. I am required to report detailed administrative information to my superiors.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
25. I have to keep aware of details because superiors expect me to answer detailed questions.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
26. I am required to report detailed technical information to my superiors.  
 1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true
-

27. When in trouble, my group gets support and assistance from other groups.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

28. My work group receives a good deal of cooperation from other groups.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

---

29. Information is dealt with secretly.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

30. There are times when my supervisors expect me to make job progress appear further advanced than it really is.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

31. Work is completed only to find that it does not fit with the requirements of the overall task, and therefore must be redone.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

32. In order to get a job done, it is necessary to make it appear more urgent than it really is.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

33. If a project (or task) is going badly, it would be better to keep it quiet.

1                      2                      3                      4                      5  
 very false      false      neutral      true      very true

---

Official Use Only: Do Not Mark. RC \_\_\_\_\_ RA \_\_\_\_\_

INF \_\_\_\_\_ REG \_\_\_\_\_ DIS \_\_\_\_\_ INT \_\_\_\_\_

---



TABLE A

## MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS

	Low Organization Level		High Organization Level	
	x	S.D.	x	S.D.
Role Conflict	2.34	.64	2.46	.70
Role Ambiguity	1.91	.60	2.03	.62
Informative Communication	3.34	.75	3.16	.66
Integrative Communication	3.18	.96	3.38	.89
Regulative Communication	2.81	.79	3.31	.81
Distortive Communication	2.34	.57	2.44	.60

TABLE B

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN ROLE  
STRESS AND ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

<u>r</u>		Informative Communications	Integrative Communications	Regulative Communications	Distortive Communications
Low Organization Level	Role Conflict	-.63**	-.37**	.49**	.48**
	Role Ambiguity	-.56**	-.40**	.15	.24*
High Organization Level	Role Conflict	-.62**	-.63**	.57**	.62**
	Role Ambiguity	-.45*	-.45*	.22	.41*

\*  $p < .05$ \*\*  $p < .01$



TABLE C

COMPARISON OF ROLE STRESS/COMMUNICATION  
TYPE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LOW AND HIGH ORGANIZATION LEVELS

<u>zr</u>	Informative Communications	Integrative Communications	Regulative Communications	Distortive Communications
Role Ambiguity / Low vs. High	.65	-.27	-.32	-.84
Role Conflict / Low vs. High	.07	-1.56	-.50	-.89

\*  $p < .05$  (For relationships to be significantly different at the .05 level, then  $\underline{zr} \geq + 2.58$ )

\*\*  $p < .01$  (For relationships to be significantly different at the .01 level, then  $\underline{zr} \geq + 1.96$ )

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, C. R. (1977). Locus of Control, coping behaviors, and performance in a stress setting: A longitudinal study. Journal of Applied Psychology, 62, 4, 446-451.
- Biddle, B. J. & Thomas, E. J. (Eds.) (1966). Role theory: Concepts and research, New York: Wiley.
- Burke, R. J. & Belcourt, M. L. (1974). Managerial role stress and coping responses. Journal of Business Administration, 5, 2, 55-68.
- Davis, K. (1968). Success of chain-of-command oral communication in a manufacturing management group. Academy of Management Journal, 11, 279-287.
- Graves, D. (1972). Reported communication ratios and informal status in managerial work groups. Human Relations, 25, 159-170.
- Greenbaum, H. H. (1974). The audit of organizational communication. Academy of Management Journal, 17, 729-754.
- Gupta, N. & Beehr, T. A. (1979). Job stress and employee behaviors. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 23, 373-387.
- Hamner, W. C. & Tosi, H. L. (1974). Relationship of role conflict and role ambiguity to job involvement measures. Journal of Applied Psychology, 59, 4, 497-499.
- Homans, G. C. (1950). The Human Group. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- House, R. J. & Rizzo, J. R. (1972). Role conflict and ambiguity as critical variables in a model of organizational behavior. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 7, 467-505.
- Johnson, T. W. & Stinson, J. E. (1975). Role ambiguity, role conflict, and satisfaction: Moderating effects of individual differences. Journal of Applied Psychology, 60, 3, 329-333.



- Kahn, R. L. & French, Jr., J. R. P. (1970). Status and conflict: Two themes in the study of stress. In J. E. McGrath (Ed.), Social and psychological factors in stress. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.
- Kahn, R., Wolfe, D., Quinn, R., Snock, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. (1964). Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity. New York: Wiley.
- Kahn, R. L. & Quinn, R. P. (1970). Role stress: A framework for analysis. In A. McLean (Ed.), Occupational mental health. New York: Rand-McNally.
- Katz, D. & Kahn, R. L. (1966). The social psychology of organizations. New York: Wiley.
- Keller, R. T. (1975). Role conflict and ambiguity: Correlates with job satisfaction and values. Personnel Psychology, 28, 57-64.
- Kraut, A. I. (1966). A study of role conflicts and their relationship to job satisfaction, tension, and performance. Dissertation Abstracts International, 26, 7476.
- Lichtman, C. M. & Hunt, R. G. (1971). Personality and organizational theory: A review of some conceptual literature. Psychological Bulletin, 76, 271-294.
- Lyons, T. F. (1971). Role clarity, need for clarity, satisfaction, tension, and withdrawal. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 6, 99-110.
- Marett, C. B., Hage, J., & Aiken, M. (1975). Communication and satisfaction in organizations. Human Relations, 28, 611-626.
- Miles, R. H. (1975). An empirical test of causal inferences between role perceptions of conflict and ambiguity and various personal outcomes. Journal of Applied Psychology, 60, 3, 334-339.
- Miles, R. H. (1976). Role requirements as sources of organizational stress. Journal of Applied Psychology, 61, 2, 172-179.
- Miles, R. H. & Perreault, Jr., W. D. (1976). Organizational role conflict: Its antecedents and consequences. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 17, 19-44.



- Miles, R. H. & Petty, M. M. (1975). Relationships between role clarity, need for clarity, and job tension and satisfaction for supervisory and nonsupervisory roles. Academy of Management Journal, 18, 877-883.
- Muchinsky, P. M. (1977). The interrelationships of organizational communication and climate. In Proceedings National Academy of Management, pp. (370-374). Orlando, Florida: Pergamon Press.
- O'Reilly, III, C. A. & Roberts, K. H. (1976). Interpersonal communication and objective and perceptual assessments of performance in organizations. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Los Angeles.
- O'Reilly, III, C. A. & Roberts, K. H. (1977). Communication and performance in organizations. In Proceedings National Academy of Management, pp. (375-379). Orlando, Florida: Pergamon Press.
- Paul, R. J. (1974). Role clarity as a correlate of satisfaction, job related strain and propensity to leave - male vs. female. Journal of Management Studies, 11, 233-245.
- Porat, A. & Haas, J. (1969). Information effects on decision making. Behavioral Science, 14, 98-104.
- Read, W. (1962). Upward communication in industrial hierarchies. Human Relations, 15, 3-16.
- Rings, R. L. (1976). A comparative analysis of a selected organizational communication variables in a public utility company. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio University.
- Rizzo, J. R., House, R. J., & Lirtzman, S. I. (1970). Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. Administrative Science Quarterly, 15, 150-163.
- Roberts, K. H. & O'Reilly C. A. (1974). Measuring organizational communication. Journal of Applied Psychology, 59, 3, 321-326.
- Sales, S. M. (1969). Organizational role as a risk factor in coronary disease. Administrative Science Quarterly, 14, 325-335.
- Schuler, R. S. (1975). Role perceptions, satisfaction, and performance: A partial reconciliation. Journal of Applied Psychology, 60, 6, 683-691.



- Schuler, R. S. (1977). Role perceptions, satisfaction, and performance moderated by organization level and participation in decision making. Academy of Management Journal, 20, 1, 159-166.
- Schuler, R. S. (1979). A role perception transactional process model for organizational communication-outcome relationships. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 23, 268-291.
- Schuler, R. S., Aldag, R. J., & Brief, A. P. (1977). Role conflict and ambiguity: A scale analysis. Organizational Behavior and Human Performance, 20, 111-128.
- Schuler, R. S. & Blank, L. F. (1976). Relationship among types of communication, organizational level, and employee satisfaction and performance. IEEE Transactions on Engineering Management, 23, 3, 124-129.
- Szilagyi, Jr., A. D., Sims, Jr., H. P., & Keller, R. T. (1976). Role dynamics, locus of control, and employee attitudes and behavior. Academy of Management Journal, 19, 259-276.
- Tosi, H. (1971). Organizational stress as a moderator of the relationship between influence and role response. Academy of Management Journal, 14, 7-20.
- Tosi, H. & Tosi, D. (1970). Some correlates of role conflict and ambiguity among public school teachers. Journal of Human Relations, 18, 1068-1075.
- Van Sell, M., Brief, A. P., & Schuler, R. S. (1981). Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of literature and directions for future research. Human Relations, 34, 1, 43-71.
- Wilensky, H. L. (1967). Organizational intelligence. New York: Basic Books.