Organizational Role Theory and the Multi-Faceted Worker

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Abstract

The focus of this research is to expand the explanatory power of Organisational Role Theory, and in particular, identify the non-work roles that impact on an employee's working-life and understand how this can inform the tenets of Organisational Role Theory.

Introduction

Organizational Role Theory (ORT) was developed in the 1960s and provides insight into the processes that affect the physical and emotional state of an individual in the workplace that affects their workplace behaviour (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn & Rosenthal, 1964). As employee behaviour is directly related to their work performance, understanding the determinants of employee's behaviour in the workplace can allow organizations to maximize employee performance. However, given that ORT was developed in the 1960s in an organizational context that is markedly different and arguably less complex than that experienced today. The failure of ORT to similarly advance has been noted by George (1993: 355) when she states that:

> [ORT] has been relatively dormant during the past three decades…The breadth and generality of organizational role theory may be both its major attraction and its greatest flaw'.

Literature Review

ORT focuses on the manner in which individuals accept and enact an array of roles in task-oriented and hierarchical systems (Biddle, 1986; Madsen, 2002). In an organisational context, role behaviours are the recurring patterns of actions that are considered important for effective functioning in that particular role and in that particular organisation (Biddle, 1986). As suggested by Katz and Kahn it focuses on the roles within the organization and the interaction between roles and the impact this has on achieving organizational goals (1966). As a theory of human behaviour, ORT is underpinned by four basic assumptions associated with Role-taking, Role-consensus,

Role–compliance, and Role-conflict.

The first assumption relates to role-taking. This assumption states that an individual will 'take' or accept a role that is conferred upon them by their employer. In the organizational context it is assumed that an individual will 'take' the role required by their employer when they accept an employment position (Katz & Kahn, 1978). Katz and Kahn (1966) also suggest that employees may be required to enact an array of roles, and that this may be problematic if the resultant complexity of results in an employee being unable to enact them according to the expectation of others.

The second assumption relates to the existence of role-consensus between employers and their employees. This assumption states that for organisations to function optimally, there needs to be consensus regarding the expectations of enacted roles and the manner in which they interact. Role-consensus serves to underpin the commonly held norms and conceptions that give rise to consistency in behaviour and an adherence to the organization's culture (Biddle, 1986). In the organizational context there is assumed consensus on behalf of the organization when they enter into an employment relationship. As Kerr (1978) argues, the assumption is that organizational roles are pre-defined, agreed upon and static and consensus can be reached. However, this fails to account for the complexity of roles faced by employees, such as roles changing over time and the taking of multiple roles (Kerr, 1978).

A major advancement in the role-consensus assumption lies in the emergent working-life balance literature. This body of literature is based on the premise that role-consensus is limited due to the apparent inability of organisations to understand the roles employees enact outside the work-place, and the nature of their interaction with work-place roles. However, the contribution of this research is limited; despite the name given to the 'work/life balance' literature, its research focus

has been firmly based on the work-family interface (Mellor, Mathieu, Barnes-Farrell & Rogelberg, 2001; Pocock, 2003; Rotondo, Carlson & Kincaid, 2003). This narrow focus has tended to overlook the array of additional roles that employees enact outside of the workplace, despite evidence from other disciplines that they in fact exist (Marks & MacDermid, 1996; Nordenmark, 2004). Elloy and Smith (2003) recognise this 'gap' in ORT, surmising that a more holistic approach to Human Resource Management (HRM) requires a greater awareness of the total context of employee's lives, not just the hours they spend at work 'plus the requirement of being a parent'. As Smithson and Stokoe (2005) argue it is important for organizations to acknowledge other non-work roles of employees as:

> 'a mother is not 'just' a mother: she will have other roles not shared with all other mothers in the workplace' (165)

The third assumption relates to role-compliance. This assumption states that each role has a set of behaviours that are well defined and consistently adhered to by employees. In the organizational context this compliance is underpinned by the job description that sets the objectives of each position and dictates the behaviours expected in each position to achieve these objectives. Role compliance is also directed by HR policies and the setting of performance objectives (Jackson & Schuler, 1992). Where there is non-compliance the organization can try and enforce it through the use of 'overt' or 'covert' sanctions (Katz & Kahn, 1966).

The final assumption relates to the role-conflict. This assumption states that conflict will arise when role expectations embedded in one role conflict with the expectations associated with another role (Miles & Perreault, 1976). Whilst there has been widespread academic acceptance of the role-conflict construct and the scales to measure it (Rizzo, House & Lirtzman, 1970; Schuler, Aldag & Brief, 1977), there is divergence on the factors that serve to mediate role conflict. Some theorists focus on organizational elements such as participation in decision making (Fisher &

Gittelson, 1983), communication networks (La France, Boster & Darrow, 2003), and internal control mechanisms (Floyd & Lane, 2000). Whilst, other theorists have focussed on the personal characteristics of individuals such as personality types (Kahn et al., 1964), individual needs (Johnson & Stinson, 1975; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 2000) and individual approaches to conflict (Tidd & Friedman, 2002).

The literature review above indicates that three issues have served to limit the usefulness of ORT to contemporary academics and practitioners alike. The three issues that serve as the research opportunity for this paper are that:

1. The role-taking assumption does not account for other impacting roles that may influence an employee's decision to accept a role that is conferred upon them by their employer;

2. The assumption that employees are one-dimensional which limits the organization is reaching a consensual understanding with employees; and

3. The divergence in the literature as to factors that mediate role conflict for the employee limits the organization's ability to minimize the negative effects of role conflict and potentially harness the positive aspects it may provide.

Given the research opportunity identified above, the aim of this research is to identify the non-work roles enacted by employees, and the manner in which these impacts need to be incorporated into the assumptions underpinning ORT. As such, the research question under review in this research was:

What are the non-work roles that impact on an employee's working-life?

It is anticipated that this research will have implications for the manner in which non-work roles are to be managed by both the individual and the organisation in order to minimise their potential

negative impact on employees' working-life.

Research Method

This exploratory research comprised two stages. The first stage included a questionnaire-survey that focused on the issues surrounding ORT's assumptions. The questionnaires were completed by full-time employees from an array of firms in the Hobart business community. The surveys were structured using open-ended questions that allowed the respondents to provide qualitative feedback regarding the non-work roles they felt impacted on their working-life. The recurrent issues arising from this questionnaire were then explored in more depth in the second stage of the research, which comprised semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews consisted of standard questions to allow for comparison across respondents, but also allowed latitude for exploration of issues that were unanticipated. Consequently, allowing respondents to comment on issues that they considered important to them within the scope of this research.

The data was then transcribed into MS Word documents and then imported into the NUD*IST qualitative data software analysis program for analysis. The data underwent first-round coding, which involved the creation of nodes based on the four theoretical tenets of ORT from the literature. The transcriptions were then scrutinised for significant terms, concepts, and issues located therein and coded to the appropriate node. In order to maximise reliability of this process, double-coding was implemented. After the initial nodes were populated, each individual node was then explored for recurring themes. These themes were then coded into additional nodes, and populated accordingly. Again, double-coding was implemented to maximise the reliability of the re-coding process.

Discussion

The results of this research indicated that there is an array of non-roles that employees enact outside the workplace which impact on their working-life. The non-work roles that were identified ranged from 'parent' to 'student' to 'sportsperson' to 'personal carer' and other 'charitable roles'. The non-work roles that were identified were categorised into five broad groups: Family-based, Sporting-based, Charity-based, Education-based, and Socially-based. As shown in Table 1, these categories were then refined further to identify their most important characteristics. The identification of these characteristics were important for the analysis of the 'consensus' concept, as it had implications in the manner that these roles impacted on the individuals' work roles and the manner and extent to which they impacted on the employee's working-life.

Table 1: Classification of Non-Work Roles

Family-Based Roles • Immediate Family (spouses, children, parents, siblings) • Extended Family (grandparents, nieces, nephews, aunties, uncles, cousins) Sporting-Based Roles • Playing (formal v informal) • Coaching (school v association) • Umpiring (school v association) Charity-Based Roles • Individual (personal v association based) • Work Associated Education-Based Roles • Individual • Work Associated Socially-Based Roles • Friendship Based • Acquaintance Based • Association Based

Respondents identified that their Family-based roles were the most significant to them, which was expected as this is well documented in the 'work-life balance' literature. Interestingly, there appeared to be little consensus on the non-work roles that individuals rated as being the most significant after their Family based roles. There appeared to be a relationship between the significance attached to the non-work role by the employee and the level of emotional investment they reported having in that role. Some respondents reported their non-work roles 'defining' them and providing sources of 'validation' for their life-style. This research has informed the role-taking assumption issue by identifying the non-work roles that employees enact and indicated that employee's may value these non-work roles highly, and may seek to change their work role to accommodate them where conflict occurs. This directly informs the assumption as it indicates employees may not be willing to take on any role conferred upon them by their employer. This also directly informs the role-consensus assumption as it highlights the non-work roles that employees enact which increases the magnitude of the norms and expectations that need to be recognised to reach informed mutual consensus.

This research suggests several implications for managers in the workplace. Firstly, HR practitioners need to understand that emotions tied to their non-work roles have a 'nominal monetary value' that at some point exceeds the employee's hourly wage. Several respondents reported changing their employer if the perceived impact between their non-work roles and the working-life was too great and they perceived a lack of employer assistance. Despite a plethora of research suggesting the need for organisations to become aware of their employees lives outside the workplace, this research indicated that the majority of respondents felt their employers were largely unaware of their non-work roles and the impact that it had on their working-life.

It was also identified that of the employers who were aware of these non-work roles and their impact on the working-life, this was constrained to the work-family interface. This suggests that the individual employees manage the impact of non-work roles in their workplace, not their

organisations. Some respondents reported that organisational support networks (i.e. child care facilities, child placement services, child-sick leave entitlements etc.) assisted them in meeting some of their Family based roles, but not nearly all of them. Other respondents also noted some organisational support for their sporting roles (i.e. flexible hours to help them attend training sessions) and for their charity roles (i.e. allowing blood-drives, and free-dress days etc.). However, the great majority of respondents reported a lack of 'care' from their organisations about non-work roles important to the well being of the respondent (i.e. socially-based interaction, club membership etc.). This implies an opportunity for the organisation to increase the quality of the employee's working-life by demonstrating a commitment to the employee's overall well being along a number of 'new' dimensions. Indeed, it was interesting to note that the respondents of organisations that actively assisted in managing their array of non-work roles reported feeling more committed and loyal to their employer as a result.

This research also indicated specific ways in which 'role conflicts' impacted negatively upon the employees' working-life and commitment to their workplace. The most prevalent issue was that employees felt that they were subject to increasingly greater work demands, and that they had to work an increasing number of unpaid overtime to ensure their work performance is satisfactory. Whilst the respondents were somewhat pleased with their organisation's efforts to accommodate their Family based issues, they also reported that the increased demand on their time was often predicated on the provision of 'family friendly policies'. As a result, the respondent's reported dissatisfaction with the manner in which their organisations were managing their Family based non-work roles:

> I find that whilst the business says they are doing all they can to help with my family commitments, what they are actually doing is making it easier for me to work even longer hours away from my family.

> I now have less time to do anything else other than work; I used to play sport and be involved in its administration as a financial officer. Now I just work and go home, and come back to work again.

As such, it would appear that some HRM efforts to manage their employees' non-work roles actually services to diminish their job satisfaction. This coupled with a general ignorance of other non-work roles implies that the apparent deficiencies of ORT as an informant to HRM practice is a real one that requires further investigation.

Conclusion

This research explored the array of non-work roles that impact on an employees' working-life. It appears that five distinct categories of non-work roles exist, each impacting on employees' working life (i.e. their job satisfaction and commitment to their organization etc.). Of the five categories acknowledged in this research, the respondents identified significant organisational assistance with only one (the Family-based roles), but only insofar as they related to facilitating the employee to work longer hours. As such, organizational efforts at 'assistance' were perceived with cynicism, and in some cases hostility. The respondent group were generally aggrieved with the lack of organisational assistance with other non-work roles, and their responses indicated that a 'money value' for their emotional involvement in these non-work roles existed, but was not at all understood by their organisations. As such there is an opportunity to further explore the non-work roles of employees and the way in which HRM can more effectively manage the notion of 'consensus' to improve the quality of the employee's working-life and non-work life. There is also an opportunity to explore the impact of the various non-work roles on employee job satisfaction by profession, age, gender, industry and years on the job.

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