

The Relationship among Role Conflict, Role Ambiguity, Role Overload and Job Stress of Chinese Middle-Level Cadres

Zhou Yongkang¹, Zeng Weixi², Hu Yalin¹, Xi Yipeng¹, Tan Liu¹

¹School of Culture and Social Development Studies, Southwest University, Chongqing, China

²School of Political Science and Public Administration, University of Electronic Science and Technology, Chengdu, China

Email: zyk@swu.edu.cn, zwx213@hotmail.com, lindahuyalin@gmail.com, 646251040@qq.com, 280092605@qq.com

Received January 14th, 2014; revised February 15th, 2014; accepted February 24th, 2014

Copyright © 2014 Zhou Yongkang et al. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. In accordance of the Creative Commons Attribution License all Copyrights © 2014 are reserved for SCIRP and the owner of the intellectual property Zhou Yongkang et al. All Copyright © 2014 are guarded by law and by SCIRP as a guardian.

This research aims to explore the relationship among role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload and job stress of middle-level cadres in Chinese local government. Through a questionnaire survey of 220 cadres, the results showed that time pressure was significantly correlated with role conflict and role overload; job anxiety and job stress were significantly and positively correlated with role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload; role ambiguity had a significant and positive effect on job anxiety and job stress; role conflict and role overload had a significant and positive effect on time stress, job anxiety and job stress.

Keywords: Role Conflict; Role Ambiguity; Role Overload; Job Stress; Job Anxiety

Background

Since mid-20 century, stress problem has become a focal point of research in western management science, psychology and other disciplines. Because of the significant influence of job stress on both individuals and organizations, researches on the topic of stress have also become a growing concern with the development of economy. In recent years, the increasing of government officers' job stress and psychological stress has become a common phenomenon in China, which has frequently caused many events and caught the attention from the whole society. According to incomplete statistics, in 2009, suicides account for the majority of 13 unnatural deaths of Chinese government officers. Moreover, there were 10 Chinese officials who committed suicide in the first half of 2010; 5 Chinese officials committed suicide in less than 2 months in 2013, which aroused great concern of public opinion. So what caused the occurrence of such events? How can we avoid its happening to the largest extent? All of these deserve us to think and study seriously.

Job Stress

Job stress, which is also called occupational stress, generally refers to the stress that caused by work or factors related to work. Like many other concepts in psychology research, researchers also use inconsistent definitions when they study on job stress. Some researchers regard the job stress a stimulus variable, but some regard it as a response variable. Some researchers regard job stress as an environment variable, but some regard it as an outcome of interaction between individuals and environment. For example, Lazarus and Launier (Lazarus

& Launier, 1978) hold the opinion that stress is any situation beyond normal appropriate reactions, emphasizing the source of stress. However, Quick suggested that stress reaction is the general, regular and unconscious mobilization of the organismal natural ability resources when facing stress source, emphasizing the consequence of stress (Quick, 1984). Some researchers emphasize that job stress mostly refers to individuals' uncomfortable feelings caused by changes of normal lifestyle (Summers, 1995). Also, there are some researchers who suggest that job stress refers to some individuals' reactions to work environment which may threat themselves, and these reactions will cause physiological and psychological splittings (Jamal, 1990).

Role Conflict, Role Overload, Role Ambiguity

In previous studies, factors causing job stress can be divided into two categories: one is related to job tasks, simple or complex tasks, diversified or monotonous, or physical conditions of work environment; the other is related to role characteristics, such as role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload. Role conflict occurs when people are confronted with incompatible role expectations in the various social statuses they occupy. Conflict may also occur when people disagree about what the expectations are for a particular role (Muchinsky, 2000). Role overload describes situations in which employees feel that there are too many responsibilities or activities expected of them in light of the time available, their abilities, and other constraints (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Role overload occurs when people feel inconsistency between the time required to finish the task and the time available for them. Time inconsistency means that employees feel there are too many things to do in

the allotted time, which might be the most important cause for role overload. Meanwhile, the absolute amount of work events can also bring role overload. Generally, role ambiguity has been defined as the degree to which clear information is lacking. 1) the expectation associated with a role; 2) method for fulfilling known role expectations; and or 3) the consequences of role performance (Graen, 1976; Kahn et al., 1964).

Relationships among Role Conflict, Role Overload, Role Ambiguity and Job Stress

Role conflict and ambiguity appear to cause lower productivity, tension, dissatisfaction, and psychological withdrawal from the work group (Van Sell et al., 1981). Role overload and role ambiguity have negative impacts on employees with the increasing of stress. When role overload and role ambiguity co-exist in work environment, effective works will become more difficult. When job stress is beyond employees' endurance, work attitude and behavior will deteriorate (Erera-Weatherley, 1996). Some researchers treat role conflict as the potential work stressor (Jex & Bliese, 1999). Dobrevva-Martinoval and other researchers also suggest that role conflict in work stressor correlated significant negatively with positive psychosocial adjustment indexes like work satisfaction, affection commitment, but correlated significant positively with psychological adjustment index like tension which reflected someone's mental health (Dobrevva-Martinoval et al., 2002). Şenol-Durak and his colleagues (2006) have developed Work Stress Scale for Correctional Officers (short for WSSCO), from which the result showed an internal consistency among role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload and stress is positively correlated with depression, anxiety, and hopelessness (Şenol-Durak et al., 2006). Glazer and Beehr have built an organizational stress framework to examine relationships between role stressors (ambiguity, overload, and conflict), anxiety, commitment (affective and continuance), and turnover intention. The result indicated that three role stressors were expected to predict anxiety, continuance commitment and indirectly predict intention to leave, and it was tentatively concluded that stress is a culture-general process (Glazer et al., 2005).

At present, under the background of China's giant social transformation, people are experiencing more and more job stress, role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload. On the basis of previous research achievement, we are mean to do a research on middle-level section cadres which is a special group in Chinese local government departments, especially in terms of the relationships between role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload and job stress among them.

Methods

Subjects

All the subjects are middle-level cadres in Beibei, Chongqing with 165 males, 55 females. Their average age is 41.7. 220 valid questionnaires were collected.

Measurement Tools

Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale

Role Conflict and Ambiguity Scale developed by House, Schuler & Levanoni was adopted (House, Schuler, & Levanoni, 1983). There were 11 items in role conflict sub-scale, such as

"my power matches up the assigned responsibilities", and "I do not know what I am expected to do". There were 7 items in role ambiguity sub-scale, such as "I often get involved in such situations full of conflicting requirements", and "I must do different things under different circumstances". Both sub-scales are in the form of Likert five scoring system and Cronbach's α is .858 respectively.

Role Overload Scale

Role Overload Scale developed by Bacharach et al. was adopted (Bacharach et al., 1991). 3 items were included, such as "I am busy with my work" and so on. Likert five scoring system was adopted and Cronbach's α is .789 in this measurement.

Job Stress Scale

Job Stress Scale developed by Parker was adopted (Parker et al., 1983). There were two dimensions, one of which is time pressure with 4 items, and the other is work anxiety with 5 items. Both are in the form of Likert five scoring system. Cronbach's α of each sub-scale is .789.

Procedures

Most of the questionnaires were completed under the guidance of testing personnel and taken back on the spot; the rest were mailed in documents to the subjects and mailed back after finished. Finally, the collected data was entered into computer and SPSS13.0 software was adopted for statistical analysis.

Results

Correlation Analysis of Role Conflict, Ambiguity, Overload and Job Stress

As is shown in **Table 1**, the correlation of role conflict, overload and time pressure is significant and there is a significant positive correlation between role ambiguity, conflict, overload and job anxiety, stress. Based on interview materials, we have found that role ambiguity, conflict and overload do commonly exist among middle-level cadres, most of whom experienced more stress and anxiety due to this. It was revealed that role ambiguity, conflict and overload are closely correlated with high level of individual stress, low work satisfaction, low trust and low self-confidence (Kahn et al., 1992).

Regression Analysis on Role Ambiguity, Conflict and Overload and Job Stress

Regression analysis was conducted with role ambiguity, conflict and overload as independent variables and time pressure, job anxiety and job stress as dependent variables. And the results are shown in **Table 2**.

Table 1.

Correlation matrix among role conflict, ambiguity, overload and job stress.

Variables	Role Ambiguity	Role Conflict	Role Overload
Time Pressure	.133	.428**	.511**
Job Anxiety	.310**	.531**	.391**
Job Stress	.269**	.566**	.526**

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

Table 2.
Regression analysis results of role ambiguity, conflict, overload and job stress.

	Time Pressure	Job Anxiety	Job Stress
Regression			
Constant	.425	-.071	.152
role Ambiguity	.088	.251**	.180**
Regression			
Coefficient			
Role Conflict	.271**	.333**	.302**
Role Overload	.491**	.277**	.374**
The F Value of			
Regression Equation	29.596	32.758	50.744
<i>p</i>	.000	.000	.000

Note: * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$.

As shown in **Table 2**, role ambiguity has a significant regression effect on job anxiety and job stress; while role conflict and overload have a significant regression effect on time pressure, job anxiety and job stress. Overall, job stress among middle-level cadres resulted from role ambiguity, conflict and overload. According to interview materials, we have found that role conflicts experienced by cadres are mainly work-family conflicts, especially some female subjects experienced more psychological stress and anxiety in this respect. They felt guilty because they do not have enough time and energy to take care of their children and family. Role overload commonly existed among cadres in the terms of quantitative and qualitative way. Many cadres described this situation as “to be kept constantly on the run”. On the other hand, complicated assessment indicators in their work brought role overload to them in qualitative ways. Moreover, complex interpersonal relationship also resulted in role ambiguity for many level cadres, which caused a strong sense of job burnout, job anxiety and job stress among them.

Discussions

In China’s large government organization system, officials who work inside have experienced various role conflicts, role ambiguities and role overloads because of complex scale and structure, lack of balance mechanism, various complex interpersonal relations and the involvement of hidden rules. Middle-level cadres lie in the position connecting top and bottom in government departments. With regard to their identities, they are not only “commanders”, but “executors”. As to their responsibilities, they must act well not only as “coaches”, but also as “athletes”. In terms of their abilities, they must not only own vocational qualities like “experts”, but also comprehensive qualities like “eclectics”. Exactly in these multiple roles, they have to consider their work performances and varieties of relations with superior leaders and subordinates, which has rendered the feature of “one little and three many” in their work and life—little leisure time, but many conferences, official businesses and accompany affairs. China’s current political system is a kind of mobilized system from above to the bottom. This political system, which is similar to championship system, is operated by administrative process of contracting out, quantitative assessment, performance ranking and promoting talents. Administrative “contracting out level by level” implicates that

government’s public and administrative affairs are contracted out from central government to lower-level local government. When what lower governments bear exceeded their capacities, they will transfer the affairs to the most fundamental local government. Once the sub-contract target is issued, officials from different levels will enter into a political championship stadium. In each political championship, most efficient monitor way of higher-level governments is to rank according to assessment results of various targets, and announce them through news media. The advanced will be praised and promoted, but the lagged will be criticized. Consequently, in order to show political achievements, official successors have to surpass the predecessors by promoting assessment index, or even by cheating. At present, “veto power” is prevalent in different areas. Apart from one child policy and environment protection, it seems that letters and visits, social security, city hygiene, production safety and attracting investments have all taken a ride of “veto power”. All of these have made stresses endured by cadres who take leading responsibilities of task execution expand in times. Meanwhile, they may also feel severe role conflicts, role ambiguities and role overloads, which produce obvious job stress and psychological tension and anxiety. Some may even suffer from “role schizophrenia” seriously. Many officials transfer their roles in various social situations, and they have to speak out of both sides of their mouths in lots of occasions. Their inner worlds are often torn up by two kinds of completely opposite value system. Unhealthy officialdom ecology has resulted in massive psychology stress which cannot be relieved easily. Meanwhile, under the background of Chinese unique culture of etiquette and favor, individuals must manage to suppress and conceal many personal characteristics in order to merge into the roles to be accepted by others, families and societies. For example, speak what they should speak, do what they should do (Yang Yiyin, 2001). Although many middle-level cadres bear massive pressure from various aspects, they have no choice. Consciously or unconsciously, their role consciousness often conceals their personal real feelings. With the restriction of identities, they cannot build too many or closed relations. And their interpersonal relations are often official and vocational relations with more rational factors involved but less emotional factors. The psychological support and well-being they can gain from their interpersonal relations are much less than ordinary ones (Wang Dongya, & Li Guangmin, 2012).

According to the discussion above, we can see that role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload and resulting job stress that middle-level cadres in Chinese local government have experienced has close relations with current Chinese political operation system. For instance, in cadre's selection system, educational background, work experience, vocational quality and etc sometimes are not decisive factors when it comes to the promotion of officials, but "whether you are assisted by the higher-level officials" is more important. However, there are lots of uncertain factors on how to find favors in eyes of the higher-level. In order to deal well with interpersonal relations in officialdom, many officials make so much effort at great pains, which caused their psychological pressure. Based on this phenomenon, competitiveness, openness and procedural justice should be enhanced in cadre selection. Also, public opinion should be respected more and ordinary citizens should be involved in the selection. In this case, officials may be promoted in accordance with the rules so as to reduce their pressure caused by unpredictable future. Only if a new cadres' stress mechanism is established, hidden rules in officialdom could be get rid of, cadres' unnecessary pressure from systematical and mechanical aspects could be unloaded, and the stress of the official group in China could be systematically relieved.

Conclusions

- 1) Time pressure correlates significantly with role conflict and role overload.
- 2) Job anxiety and job stress have a positive significant correlation with role ambiguity, role conflict and role overload.
- 3) Role ambiguity has an obvious positive influence on job anxiety and job stress.
- 4) Role conflict and role overload have a significantly positive influence on time pressure, job anxiety and job stress.

REFERENCES

- Bacharach, S. B., Bamberger, P., & Conley, S. (1991). Work-home conflict among nurses and engineers: Mediating the impact of role stress on burnout and satisfaction at work. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 12, 39-53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/job.4030120104>
- Dobrevá-Martinová, T., Villeneuve, M., Strickland, L., & Matheson, K. (2002). Occupational role stress in the Canadian forces: Its association with individual and organizational well-being. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue Canadienne des Sciences du Comportement*, 34, 111-121. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/h0087161>
- Erera-Weatherley, P. I. (1996). Coping with stress: Public welfare supervisors doing their best. *Human Relations*, 49, 157-170. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001872679604900202>
- Glazer, S., & Beehr, T. A. (2005). Consistency of implications of three role stressors across four countries. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26, 467-487. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/job.326>
- Graen, G. (1976). Role-making processes within complex organizations. In M. D. Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial organizational psychology*. Chicago, IL: Rand McNally.
- House, R. J., Schuler, R. S., & Levanoni, E. (1983). Role conflict and ambiguity scales: Reality or artifacts? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 68, 334-337. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.68.2.334>
- Jamal, M. (1990). Relationship of job stress and type-A behavior to employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychosomatic health problems, and turnover motivation. *Human Relations*, 43, 727-738. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001872679004300802>
- Jex, S. M., & Bliese, P. D. (1999). Efficacy beliefs as a moderator of the impact of work-related stressors: A multilevel study. *Journal of applied psychology*, 84, 349-361. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.84.3.349>
- Kahn, R. L., Byosiére, P., & Dunnette, M. D. (1992). Stress in organizations. In L. M. Hough (Ed.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology, Vol. 3* (pp. 571-650). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., Snoek, J. D., & Rosenthal, R. A. (1964). *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: John Wiley.
- Lazarus, R. S., & Launier, R. (1978). Stress-related transactions between person and environment. *Perspectives in Interactional Psychology*, 287-327. http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4613-3997-7_12
- Muchinsky, P. M. (2000). *Psychology applied to work* (6th ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Parker, D. F., & DeCotiis, T. A. (1983). Organizational determinants of job stress. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 32, 160-177. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073\(83\)90145-9](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(83)90145-9)
- Quick, J. C., & Quick, J. D. (1984). *Organizational stress and preventive management* (pp. 2-6). New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Rizzo, J. R., House, R. J., & Lirtzman, S. I. (1970). Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 15, 150-163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2391486>
- Şenol-Durak, E., Durak, M., & Gençöz, T. (2006). Development of work stress scale for correctional officers. *Journal of occupational rehabilitation*, 16, 153-164. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10926-005-9006-z>
- Summers, T. P., DeCotiis, T. A., & DeNisi, A. S. (1995). A field study of some antecedents and consequences of felt job stress. In R. Crandall, & P. L. Perrewé (Eds.), *Occupational stress: A handbook* (pp. 113-128). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Van Sell, M., Brief, A. P., & Schuler, R. S. (1981). Role conflict and role ambiguity: Integration of the literature and directions for future research. *Human Relations*, 34, 43-71. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/001872678103400104>
- Wang Dongya, & Li Guangmin. (2012). A research on "pressure" of mainland officials. *The Phoenix Weekly*, 6, 26-30.
- Yang Yiyin (2001). One of us (zijiren): A case study on the classification of Chinese relationships. *Indigenous Psychological Research in Chinese Societies (Taipei)*, 13, 277-316.