

Role-Imposition or Role-Improvisation: Some Theoretical Principles

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Précis: Two assumptions are made. First, role-improvisation and structural determination of role content are viewed as opposing processes inherent in all situations. Second, the relative importance of these processes is assumed to differ from case to case. Conditions effecting outcomes of the opposition between role-improvisation and imposition are specified in a series of theoretical principles. These principles constitute boundary conditions linking interactionist and structural perspectives.

I THE PROBLEM

One of the most enduring issues in sociology has been whether roles and role related behaviour are emergent properties improvised by the people involved in a relationship, or are imposed upon actors by the broader socio-cultural setting in which the relationship is embedded. Scholars have reached general agreement that what may be termed role-improvisation and role-imposition are distinct processes, each of which accounts for some social phenomena. And both processes are, to varying degrees, operative in all social contexts. Given this consensus, recent debate has shifted to questions of the relative pervasiveness of the two processes in different empirical contexts. Structuralists argue that the problematic nature of social order makes role-imposition a theoretically important process, and that substitution of personnel in complex systems demonstrates the ubiquity of the process. So, for example, there can be complete turnover of clients in a store, students in a school, or workers on an assembly line, with little fundamental

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change in the character of the organisation (Parsons and Shils, 1953, pp. 146-153). Interactionists argue that role-imposition is less pervasive and less complete than usually imagined. And when role-imposition is viewed as the exception rather than the rule, pre-occupation with this process derails efforts to understand the truly generic improvisational features of roles and role development (Blumer, 1969).

Although role-improvisation and role-imposition are thought of as competing dynamics (Turner, 1967), no systematic effort has been made to identify the conditions under which these processes are differentially facilitated or restrained. Yet, specifying conditions which modify the relative probabilities of these processes is an important theoretical objective for two reasons. First, facilitation and restraint of role-improvisation and role-imposition constitute boundary conditions on interactionist and structural theories, respectively. Secondly, the inherent opposition of these processes is an important interface linking role relationships (micro settings) with broader social structure (macro settings). Conditions influencing which process will be dominant are simultaneously indicative of the ways in which social structure sets parameters upon the development of roles, and conversely, the ways in which relationships set parameters upon the organisation of collective activity (Banton, 1965).

The boundary conditions being discussed are not wholly unknown to sociologists. Such boundary conditions are occasionally mentioned in works elucidating interactionist and structural perspectives. Indeed, a substantial number of empirical studies chronicle conditions under which role-improvisation and role-imposition have assumed varying forms, and have occurred in varying degrees. The interesting theoretical task now becomes articulation of general principles which explain these findings. This codification contributes to theoretical development by clarifying associations among roles and other sociological phenomena.

The object of this article, then, is to call attention to those conditions which are sufficiently general and pervasive to suggest theoretical principles. In particular, the goal is to articulate these insights at a higher and more theoretically useful level of abstraction than is typical in the literature (following the strategy suggested by Turner and Beeghley, 1981). Empirical findings concerning the opposition of role-improvisation and role-imposition can be subsumed under ten general principles. These, in turn, are consistent with, and derivable from, three of the axiomatic maxims which role theorists widely regard as accepted truths.

II PRINCIPLES OF CUMULATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Three axioms on role-making are relevant to the opposition of role-

imposing and role-improvising processes. Axiom 1, that role-making is a developmental process, was the first tenet of American sociology. The idea that meaning must be constructed over time underscores George Herbert Mead's pioneering work in symbolic interaction, and it underscores an important American research tradition (*circa* 1920-1940) exploring the distinctive character of primary groups. (For a recent re-statement of Axiom 1 see Shibutani, 1978.)

Axiom 1: (Cumulative Development) Improvisation of Complementary Roles is Cumulative

Roles are complementary when one party's rights are another party's obligations, and vice versa (Gouldner, 1960). Throughout this paper, complementarity is assumed to be part of the definition of "roles" (Turner, 1968 p. 554). Role-improvisation is defined as the extent to which the organisation and meaning of roles are invented by the people immediately involved in a relationship. It is important to clarify that improvised roles *may* become routinised and repetitive. They are improvised only in the sense that they are not culturally standard versions. (Whether improvised roles are likely to become routinised, or must be continually re-improvised, is an issue addressed in Principle 6.) Hence, Axiom 1 suggests that actors re-interpret, redefine, and re-structure their relationships during the on-going process of interaction. Contrary to the common sense view that prolonged contact over-socialises people and stifles creative exchange, the human propensity to improvise increases with familiarity and with amount of time spent interacting.

Numerous principles are derivable from the Cumulative Development Axiom, but Axiom 1 is probably best illustrated by the Continuity Principle.

Principle 1 (Continuity): Other Things Being Equal, the Greater the Continuity of Personnel in Role Relationships, the More Likely is Role-improvisation

Continuity of personnel is defined as the extent to which incumbency in a situationally specific set of complementary roles remains unchanged. Continuity, then, is an important expression of the Cumulative Development Axiom because it focuses attention on renewed relationships, and the cumulative construction of social meaning.

Cumulative role development is facilitated when roles are occupied over long periods of time by the same persons. For example, children going through a school together often improvise unique and lasting systems of complementary relationships. Conversely, advanced division of labour is in large part predicated upon discontinuity of personnel. Volume sales outlets are characteristic — some role incumbents (clients) are always changing. Although greetings, amenities, and other enacted behaviour may differ from

individual to individual, focal characteristics assigned to each role are likely to assume standardised forms which are imposed upon the customer and salesperson from outside their dyadic relationship. Only when continuity unforeseeably increases, as in the case of the "regular customer", can improvised roles be expected to displace imposed roles with any degree of patterned regularity.

The Continuity Principle can be stated at lower levels of abstraction by calling attention to specific empirical manifestations of continuity. For instance, the more frequently the same incumbents participate in a complementary relationship, the more likely are their roles to assume improvised form. So many such empirically based propositions can be derived that it becomes impractical to list them here. Nevertheless, readers should exercise liberal license in deriving such propositions whenever they might prove useful.

When considered in its many empirical forms, the Continuity Principle suggests explanations for a variety of hitherto baffling phenomena. For example, the atomisation and demise of working class consciousness in the post-Second World War period may be a function of geographic mobility. To the extent that workers previously lived and worked in inter-generationally stable communities, continuity probably fostered the development of shared definitions and trust required for collective political action. Principle 1 also suggests an explanation for the observed tendency of organisational structure to become more formal and less improvisational when control passes from the hands of the original founders, and assumed continuity declines (Znaniecki, 1965, Ch. 12).

A second principle derivable from the Cumulative Development Axiom is equally valuable for its generalisability.

Principle 2 (Exposure): *Other Things Being Equal, the Less Exposed a Relationship is to Observation by Persons Outside the Relationship, the Greater the Relative Likelihood of Role-improvisation*

To the extent that roles are exposed, people are hindered, constrained, or diverted — by their involvements with audience groups — from allowing relationships to cumulatively evolve, develop, and change (Znaniecki, 1965, Ch. 9).

The Exposure Principle, like the Continuity Principle, has a large number of empirical referents and accounts for a correspondingly diverse set of phenomena. For example, the more visible police procedures are, the greater the extent to which police "play it by the book" (Preiss and Ehrlich, 1966). And the more accountable teachers are, the more likely their performance is to reflect the criteria used in evaluation (e.g., eliciting student discussion).

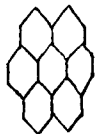
The versatility of the Exposure Principle becomes apparent when examin-

ing marital relations. In some marriages, spouses share the same circle of friends and acquaintances. The more tightly woven this network is the more exposure role-relations receive, because the external activities of each spouse are more visible to his/her partner and because the marital relations of the two are more visible to outsiders. And the more exposed the relationship is, the more traditional it will tend to be (Bott, 1957).

Bott's work suggests an interesting analogy to honeycombs, which are exceedingly strong (i.e., resistant to structural change) because of their structural design rather than the material from which they are made. Folklore would have it that marriages in which partners have the greatest number of extra-marital associations are most likely to experience improvisation and change. But the opposite can also be true. Those marriages which are most traditional are those where both partners have numerous external relationships, all of which are interdependent. Spouses in traditional marriages tend to have numerous interdependent dyadic relationships. Because of this

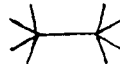
Figure 1: *Exposure and the Development of Marital Roles*

Traditional Marriage



Interdependent Dyads
Sanction Imposed Roles

Non-Traditional Marriage



Dyadic Independence
Fosters Role-Improvisation

(Each straight line represents a dyadic relationship)

interdependence, and because of the nature of complementary roles (refer to definition introduced earlier), modification of one person's role requires re-definition of the roles of numerous others. For this reason, role-improvisation tends to meet with stiff resistance. But in marriages characterised by dyadic independence, a change in one role requires adjustment in the role of only one other person. Since sources of resistance to change are limited in number, improvised roles are more easily operationalised.

It should be noted, at this point, that different aspects of roles are not equally subject to imposition. For example, traditional family roles are typically inflexible in the allocation of cooking chores along sex lines. But such traditional division of labour tends to shield the chef's activity from view, thus insuring a degree of autonomy, freedom and flexibility in the execution of an imposed task. Efforts to prescribe minute details of role performance limit freedom to improvise in obtaining the best product, and tend to generate transitory affect (the subject of Principle 7 under Principles of Tenability).

Thus far our attention has been focused on the extent to which role performance is exposed to viewing by persons outside of a relationship. But exposure within a relationship is rarely uniform. Many dimensions of each person's life are shielded from the view of role partners. For example, we often work with people without coming to know what kind of family members they are. This kind of anonymity is a variable property which influences the relative probabilities of role-improvisation and role-imposition. As such, it suggests another derivation of the Cumulative Development Axiom.

Principle 3 (Anonymity): Other Things Being Equal, the Greater the Anonymity Enjoyed by Participants in a Relationship, the Greater the Relative Likelihood of Role-imposition

Degree of anonymity is defined as the extent to which knowledge which role-partners have about a role-holder is limited. Hence, our interaction tends to be confined to standard forms when we know a person along only one dimension. Turner (1970, p. 198) points out that this principle is common knowledge which people can employ in constructing their relationships. For instance, teachers often maintain a degree of anonymity in order to protect their professional roles from being compromised.

III PRINCIPLES OF TENABILITY

A second axiom evident in the literature is the Tenability Axiom (Turner, 1980). This axiom is an underlying assumption in Exchange Theory and has been variously employed by all other theoretical schools.

Axiom 2 (Tenability): Roles Tend to Develop in Ways Which (a) Free People from Problematic Concerns, (b) Maximise Benefits, and (c) Minimise Costs

Tenability suggests a number of principles which have been alluded to in the literature. Perhaps the most important and often overlooked focuses attention on organisational capacity to meet people's needs. While systems cannot be personified as having needs, role incumbents most definitely do have needs which they rely upon collectivities to assuage. Hence, smooth and fair system operation, in a structural-functional sense, can become important concerns for people (Gouldner, 1960).

Principle 4 (Structural Failure): The More Role-holders Depend Upon One Another in Meeting their Needs, and the Less they Depend Upon the Broader Setting in which their Relationship is Embedded, the Greater the Likelihood of Role-improvisation

Tenability is maximised when people participate in collective units that

provide gratification, assuage needs, and obviate problematic concerns. When people perceive that their needs are provided for by an anonymous system, they are inclined to accept imposed roles as requisites for efficient and effective division of labour. But when individuals must rely for their needs upon those with whom they interact directly, any inhibitions against inventive role-making tend to dissipate.

Structural failure most commonly assumes the form of organisational inefficiency. When those systems which are expected to assuage a person's needs break down on a periodic basis, mounting alienation is generated. Shibutani's recently released study of demoralisation in an army unit draws particular attention to this dynamic. Over a period lasting approximately two years, the members of one unit were shuffled about, inadequately supplied, poorly housed, left on temporary assignment, inaccurately informed about future assignments, and made to perform unnecessary tasks. Over time, members of the unit lost any feeling that their participation was significant, either within the immediate or broader settings. When people stop assuming that superiors — or, by implication "the system(s)" — have their best interests in mind, improvised roles can be expected to displace imposed roles (Shibutani, 1978). This position is consistent with the finding that importance and strength of informal norms among gang members are functions of the extent to which members must depend upon one another (Short and Strodtbeck, 1965).

A second principle derivable from the Tenability Axiom, and one which has been a recurrent theme in the literature, is the Power Principle.

Principle 5 (Power): Other Things Being Equal, the More Equal is the Distribution of Power, the More Likely is Role-improvisation

Power is defined as the degree to which one person can gain compliance from another (Emerson, 1972).

The Power Principle has not been extensively used in empirical research. However, it is a central theme in a number of seminal role theoretical works. Merton posits that the probability of clearly and unequivocally defined relationships being imposed is a positive function of power imbalance (Merton, 1957). Such relationships are unlikely to change unless the resources which role-holders control are modified or unless coalitions shift (Emerson, 1972). So where a clear imbalance of power exists, the process of role-imposition is expected to prevail.

Where the distribution of power is relatively balanced, improvisation is likely. However, a corollary to the Power Principle must be introduced if level of stability of improvised roles is to be accounted for.

Corollary (Principle 6 — Stability): Where the Distribution of Power is

Relatively Balanced, the Stability of Improvised Roles is an Inverse Function of Frequency of Oscillations in Power

Equality of power distribution facilitates role-improvisation (Principle 5). But improvised roles can either be stable or subject to constant re-definition. When power vacillates, typically because turnover in personnel has the effect of funneling numerous persons with different resources through the same structural position, role content is unstable and must be continually re-negotiated.

The Stability Principle is most clearly reflected in Anselm Strauss' examination of psychiatric care. Doctors have considerable technical training, but staff have day-to-day information about patient progress. The importance of patient information possessed by staff members helps check the power of doctors, and considerable role-improvisation occurs as a result. Improvised roles tend to be stable where medical staff work in teams (e.g., Chicago State Hospital in the early 1960s). Yet, roles are unstable where staff rotation is practiced (e.g., Michael Reese Hospital in the early 1960s). Since rotation means a day-to-day change in the complement of medical staff working together, there are constant shifts in balance of power predicated upon the commitment, expertise, experience, and current information about patients, possessed by members of that day's staff. Parameters for each person's behaviour must be continually re-negotiated because the balance of power constantly shifts among supervising doctors, interns, nurses, and aids (Strauss, *et al.*, 1964).

A third principle derivable from the Tenability Axiom differs from the first six principles introduced, in that vacillation between improvised and imposed roles is indicated.

Principle 7 (Transitory Affect): Other Things Being Equal, the More Transitory Affect is Generated in a Relationship or Setting, the More Frequent, Prolonged, or Pronounced will be Periods During Which Imposed Roles are Relaxed in Improvised Ways

Transitory affect is defined as the extent to which a relationship engenders fluctuating levels of emotion for people. Relationships characterised by transitory affect tend to be emotionally trying, and therefore have low tenability. Tenability is maintained, and the relationship preserved, by periodically relaxing normal role requirements. These periods of relaxation in role requirements are often referred to as "exempting periods." The most straightforward sociological account of the generation of affect is found in Shibutani (1978). However, as will become clear in the following passages, theorists of most persuasions recognise the crucial association between affect and role-making.

Parsons noted that integrative problems are aggravated as a matter of

course when the primary energies of role-holders are directed toward instrumental ends. Re-integration is accomplished during exempting periods. During these periods people are released from some obligations and credited with some new rights for a time, so that tensions can be released and collective solidarity reaffirmed (Parsons, *et al.*, 1953). This role shift is particularly noticeable in the case of superiors who can be expected, during exempting periods, to release subordinates from expectations normally imposed, while allowing subordinates to take special liberties which might be considered unacceptable transgressions during normal periods (Goffman, 1961 pp. 128-129). The time, place, and duration of exempting periods, number of participants, extent of participation, precise expectations to be relaxed, and new rights to be granted, are all matters for improvisation. Once improvised, these patterns can become stable.

Exempting periods can apply to individuals, as in the case of the "sick role" (Parsons, 1951 p. 446). They can also be collectively declared. On an organisational level, medical staff conducting surgery generally declare an exempting period after completion of an operation (Goffman, 1961, p. 125). On a broader level, members of communal groups often declare exempting periods to reaffirm group membership and collective belonging (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969). But exempting roles cannot stay in effect for too long without generating more integrative problems than they solve, nor without endangering instrumental objectives. People who withdraw on a permanent basis from normal obligations have new role content imposed upon them by others (Gordon, 1966).

Even when transitory affect is not generated, the shared experience of problematic concerns threatens tenability and clears the way for exempting periods. This phenomenon has been noted in cases as varied as the adaptation of infantrymen to combat (Shils and Janowitz, 1948) and reactions of office associates during the Boston blizzard of 1960 (Brown, 1965, p. 75).

Principle 8 (Shared Fate): *Other Things Being Equal, the Greater the Extent to Which People Collectively Experience an Uncommon Fate, the More Frequent, Prolonged, or Pronounced will be Periods During Which Imposed Roles are Relaxed in Improvised Ways*

Here, the emphasis is that tenability is threatened by the problematic nature of external exigencies, rather than strains inhering in the organisational or operation of the group.

IV PRINCIPLES OF PRIVACY

Thus far, roles have been discussed as holistic entities, more or less subject

to imposition and improvisation. Consequently, the axioms and principles introduced in the preceding passages fail to illuminate the important distinction between role related activity on one hand, and non-role related behaviours emitted during the period of role enactment, on the other hand. While the former can be improvised or imposed, the latter are more likely to be improvised than they are to be imposed. This distinction between types of behaviour is posited as an axiom, and its most fully developed derivations are stated as principles (for a recent statement of Axiom 3, see Crozier, 1964).

Axiom 3 (Privacy): In any Situation, Incumbents are Held Accountable for Some Behaviours, while Other Behaviours are Socially defined as Insulated from Observation or Comment

Discoveries made in organisational research pose what appears to some observers to be an anomaly. Increasing complexity of organisation fosters behavioural improvisation (because large, impersonal organisations tend to demand less conformity than small, personal ones) at the same time that it necessitates greater role-imposition. But this seeming contradiction in outcomes is fully understandable in terms of the Privacy Axiom and Principle 9 (Dubin, 1979).

Principle 9 (Routinisation): Other Things Being Equal, the More Routinised are Role Relationships, the Greater Privacy Afforded People, and the More Narrow are the Parameters over which Imposed Roles Extend

Routinisation increases visibility and accountability for some role related activities, making it highly likely that those activities will assume an imposed rather than improvised form. Since the number of others with whom a person can interact increases with routinisation and narrowness of defined role, continuity of personnel might be expected to decline, thus giving even further impetus to role-imposition. But in the very process of focusing attention upon narrowly defined imposed-role activities, routinisation diverts attention away from other aspects of behaviour emitted along with, and in the same environment as, the routinised activity. This allows for considerable improvisation, providing that imposed-role activities are faithfully executed (Brim, 1960; Dubin, 1979). It might also be suggested that role specificity insulates imposed aspects of a role from content change in the same way that privacy protects improvisational discretion on the part of the role-holder. The less diffuse the role, the more inclined a person might be to treat required behaviour as immune from change.

A second series of findings from organisational literature suggests that imposed roles can only be expected to operate after a relationship is actually invoked.

Principle 10 (Signalling): *Other Things Being Equal, the Further Removed Two Actors are in a Structurally Differentiated System, the More Information that Must be Exchanged before Organisationally Imposed Roles are Activated*

An important way in which collectivities protect the privacy of members is by mediating relations with outsiders; especially with superiors (Shils and Janowitz' 1948 examination of the fighting effectiveness of Wehrmacht units is particularly enlightening in this respect.) Consequently, persons operating in differentiated systems are not used to, do not like, and may not know how to deal with persons who are structurally distant (Crozier, 1964). Organisational roles linking structurally distant incumbents can be activated, but only with extensive signalling of identification and intentions (Meyer, 1979).

V CONCLUSIONS

Two approaches have traditionally dominated role theory. Structuralists argue that roles are imposed upon people by the broader system in which their role relationships are embedded. Interactionists argue that people construct their own roles through interaction and improvisation. This article opens with the assumption that role-imposition and role-improvisation are opposing processes that, in varying degrees, are operative in all situations. Principles influencing the relative probabilities of these processes are gleaned from past theory and research. High continuity of personnel, low external exposure, low anonymity of role relationships, high structural failure to provide for needs of actors, and high balance of power, all increase the probability of role-improvisation relative to role-imposition. Where empirical values are reversed (e.g., low continuity of personnel), role-imposition becomes more probable relative to role-improvisation. Transitory affect and shared fate result in cycles of relative improvisation during which group integration is increased. Routinisation and structural differentiation increase the social space across which improvisation is likely to occur, while increasing the dominance of imposition over a narrow range of activity. Signalling increases the likelihood that imposed roles will be activated, and oscillations in power increase the likelihood that improvised roles will need to be re-improvised.

Principles are derived and articulated at a high level of abstraction in order to maximise generalisability and focus attention upon a few of the more generic properties of roles and the environments in which roles are embedded. Most important, the principles derived represent an attempt to specify boundary conditions between interactionist and structural theories, and as a consequence, the interface between micro and macro settings. For

example, the capacity to create and maintain complex patterns of social organisation is dependent upon the development of roles which allow strangers to interact with one another meaningfully.

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