The Dynamics of Role Acquisition

Russell Thornton and Peter M. Nardi
University of Pennsylvania

A developmental approach to role acquisition, containing both social and psychological dimensions, is presented in this paper. It entails four stages in the acquisition of a role: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. Each stage is discussed in terms of the variety of sources, content, and forms of expectations present, as well as the degree of consensus on the expectations and individuals' reactions to them. It is suggested that the acquisition of roles involves passage through all four stages. Implications of the formulation for sociological and psychological research regarding role acquisition are offered.

Several conceptions of how individuals acquire social roles may be found in the literature of the social and psychological disciplines. The traditional approach to role acquisition views it as synonymous with the acquisition of a new position in a social system. Role acquisition is thus considered a one-step event whereby individuals assume new social positions and conform immediately to the expectations consequently directed at them (see Linton 1936; Sherif 1936).

In more recent works, role acquisition is viewed frequently as a developmental process. Often this process is only implied, usually by asserting that psychological phenomena become important at some time during the acquisition of a new role (see Becker et al. 1961; Dornbusch 1955; Goffman 1961; Olesen and Whittaker 1968; Zurcher 1967). Some works, however, contain discussions of explicitly defined stages of role acquisition. These works give great importance to the psychological aspects of the process and tend to emphasize the interaction between individuals and roles (see Bourne 1967; Cogswell 1967; Gordon 1972; Hall 1948; Sherlock and Morris 1967; Simpson 1967).

Some problems are evident in all of these perspectives, however. Each seems to underestimate the degree of interaction between person and role during the process of acquisition. The emphasis is placed clearly on the ways in which social situations impose rights and duties on individuals.

---

1 Several of the ideas presented in this paper originated while the senior author was a research sociologist at the 1970 Summer Research Institute of the American College Testing Program. Gratitude is extended to Robert E. Herriott, director of that institute, as well as to the American College Testing Program. Other ideas were developed under grant OEG-3-71-0114 from the U.S. Office of Education to the senior author during 1971-72; this support is gratefully acknowledged. Appreciation is extended also to Neal Gross, Charles Wright, Bruce Cooper, and several anonymous reviewers for insightful comments on earlier drafts of the paper.
and the ways individuals conform passively to that imposition. The first view, for example, regards individuals as mere recipients of expectations and role acquisition as merely a performance in accord with these expectations. That people do not always conform to roles but in fact modify them is not taken into account. To a lesser degree, the same problem is evident in the implicit developmental analyses, with their perfunctory acknowledgment of interaction between individuals and social situations. Each of the works cited asserts that interaction occurs during role acquisition and may change over time, but then tends to ignore it. The imposition of external requirements is emphasized, with the implicit changes being those made in conforming to a role. The more explicit developmental analyses take cognizance of interaction and incorporate it clearly into the acquisition process, but here again the emphasis is on persons modifying themselves to fit their roles, not on how they may modify roles to fit themselves. The explicit stages of role acquisition are those individuals go through in conforming to and psychologically accepting new roles.

There are two partial consequences of these views of role acquisition. First, its complexity is deemphasized. Neither the various types of expectations which may be directed at people in new positions nor their content and requirements and the degree of consensus on them is taken into account. Second, these conceptualizations afford little possibility of explaining variations in the acquisition and performance of the same type of role by different individuals.

Certain problems are also apparent in the research and writings on role acquisition found in the literature of psychology. First, the study of the acquisition of roles other than age and sex ones enacted through the course of the social life cycle is virtually neglected. Second, many of the major theoretical and conceptual schemes of psychology do not account directly for a great deal of what occurs during a role-acquisition process. Personality theories of development, by way of example, emphasize psychoanalytic theory, restricting the possible analysis of role acquisition to the end results of identification, imitation, motivational learning, and associated processes. Traditional social learning theory also appears inadequate for explaining what is involved in role acquisition, as it neglects complex interactional learning, a seemingly important feature of acquiring roles (Sarbin and Allen 1968, pp. 544–45).

The model of role acquisition presented here develops out of these previous writings and research and represents an endeavor to overcome some of their shortcomings. In order to enhance the model's applicability, a general formulation is developed, capable of being applied (with perhaps varying degrees of accuracy) to virtually any role which may be acquired rather than restricted to a particular type of role. Even though it is general, the formulation allows for the examination of variations in the acquisition of
different types of roles and of the same type of role by different persons. The temporal dimension consists of four stages—anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal—whereby individuals move from passively accepting roles to actively engaging in and shaping them. The crucial variables around which each stage is formed consist of the source, content, and form of expectations encountered at different points in time, the degree of consensus on the content of the expectations, and individuals’ reactions to them.

SPECIFYING SOME CONCEPTS

As a prelude to the actual formulation of the stages of role acquisition, it is necessary to set forth and clarify some concepts. For our purposes, we define a role as a set of expectations impinging on an incumbent of a social position (see Gross, Mason, and McEachern 1958, p. 60). There are several possible sources of these expectations. First, they may be generalized; that is, they may come from “society at large,” for example, the various components of the mass media, the legal system or other codified sources, and people in general. Next, they may, in Merton’s terms, come from members of the role set; in other words, “that complement of role-relationships in which persons are involved by virtue of occupying a particular social status” (1957b, p. 110). Within the role set, two sources may be distinguished: people enacting the same role as the incumbent (similar-role others) and people enacting reciprocal roles (reciprocal-role others). Finally, the incumbent may be a source of expectations for his own role enactment.

The content of expectations may be behavioral, attitudinal, or cognitive; that is, they may refer to the ways in which an incumbent of a social position should behave, to the particular attitudes and values appropriate to him, or to the knowledge and skills he should have. The form the expectations take may be either overt or covert. In other words, they may be presented in an explicit, formal manner, or they may be implicit in the social structure as part of its informal properties. Hence role acquisition involves in part an increasing awareness of implicit as well as explicit expectations encompassing attitudes and values, and knowledge and skills in addition to behavior. These expectations coming from the four sources

---

2 Israel (1966) distinguishes between the technical-instrumental aspects of a role, comprising the knowledge and skills necessary to carry out the tasks, and the expressive-ideological aspects, comprising the attitudes, values, and ideals related to carrying out the technical-instrumental tasks; and Silber et al. (1961) demonstrate that coping with the anticipation of college involves both behavioral and attitudinal changes and adjustment. These references parallel our behavioral-attitudinal-cognitive dimension.
The Dynamics of Role Acquisition

we have identified may also be described in terms of the degree of consensus concerning them. Two types of consensus may be distinguished: first, consensus or dissensus within a source; second, consensus or dissensus between any two sources. Also, consensus or dissensus may be actual or only supposed by the person in question.

Now that selected features of the expectations comprised in a role have been described, the three possible reactions to them can be delineated. The first is social adjustment, the adequate meeting of role expectations and performance in accordance with them. The second is psychological adjustment, the achievement of congruity between individual psychological needs and desires and the role. Neither social nor psychological adjustment is a matter of strict conformity to role expectations, though a high degree of conformity may be present, and often is. Individuals may, however, modify their roles to fit themselves and/or develop their own private meanings for role enactment. These processes, too, constitute adjustment. A third and final reaction, adaptation, occurs if the role is internalized and assimilated so that in a sense person and role become inseparable. Social and psychological adjustment may lead to adaptation but do not necessarily do so: they provide only the conditions whereby it is possible.

FOUR STAGES OF ROLE ACQUISITION

In our formulation, the acquisition of a role entails progression through four stages—anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal. Each stage is characterized by the type of expectations which predominate and to which individuals consequently give most attention. Each stage involves interaction between individuals and external expectations, including individuals' attempts to influence the expectations of others as well as others' attempts to influence individuals. (The nature of the interaction changes during role acquisition, as we have indicated: individuals are more passive in early stages, more active in later ones.) A role is not fully acquired until an individual has anticipated it, learned anticipatory, formal, and informal expectations comprised in it, formulated his own expectations, reacted to and reconciled these various expectations, and accepted the final outcome.³

³ It could be argued (albeit in general terms only) that the extent to which any role is enacted appropriately and convincingly is dependent on a balance and regulation of expectations coming from various others and the self. If this is so, more effective performance of a particular role would seem to come from meeting all expectations adequately, rather than some more than adequately and others less than adequately. (Effectiveness is, of course, a social evaluation rather than an absolute standard and is defined in terms of others' evaluations.) The development of one's ability to achieve balance and regulation can be seen as an outcome of the role-acquisition process.
Anticipatory Stage

The first stage of role acquisition is the period prior to incumbency in a social position during which individuals generally encounter a variety of relevant expectations. Merton (1957a) describes this period as one of anticipatory socialization in which those aspiring to membership in groups begin to adopt group values, thus becoming prepared for future transitions into groups. Along the same line, Goffman (1959, p. 72) states, “And when we come to be able to properly manage a real routine we are able to do this in part because of 'anticipatory socialization,' having already been schooled in the reality that is just coming to be real for us.” Similarly, Israel (1966, p. 207) postulates, “Before his formal training starts, an individual has knowledge about his new role, this knowledge being acquired through direct and indirect learning.”

Perhaps the most important single source of role conceptions at this phase is what we have referred to collectively as generalized sources, an important example being the mass media. Other sources of role conceptions (or expectations) are, of course, also present. Specific roles may be learned about from role incumbents themselves, as in the case of a child’s contact with adults or a future physician's contact with the family doctor, or from future reciprocal-role others, as in the case of a future physician learning about physicians from patients. Obviously, from these contacts one formulates his own conceptions of what the role will be like. Nevertheless, the first view of a role typically comes primarily from generalized sources.

Seemingly because of the predominance of these sources of role information, individuals are presented usually with a very generalized and stereotyped conception of roles during this period. It is generalized in the sense that only certain features of the role are presented and many others ignored. Consequently role conceptions formed in this phase are often incomplete. The conception presented is stereotyped in that idealized ex-

4 Ample support for this view seems to exist. For example, Gershon (1966, p. 49) asserts that the mass media constitute a social structure “... through which symbolic anticipatory socialization can occur.” And Sarbin and Allen (1968, p. 546) argue: “Through the mass media of television, movies, newspapers, and books, as well as through contact with other persons, the individual acquires information about a great many roles which in the future he may be required to learn more thoroughly and to enact himself.”

5 This appears to be a common conclusion of the few studies undertaken to investigate the communication of roles by the mass media. De Fleur concludes his examination of the portrayal of occupational roles on television thus: “Television content that deals with occupational roles can be characterized as selective, unreal, stereotyped, and misleading. . . . Television tends to make use of stereotyped beliefs and conceptions, and to focus upon atypical, dramatic, or deviant aspects of others” (1964, p. 74).

6 They also tend to be ambiguous. For example, Feldman and Newcomb (1969, p. 71) report that much of the literature on preconceptions of college shows that “young
pectations tend to be emphasized. Future role enactors are exposed to behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive features of roles at this time, either overtly or covertly. However, the specific features evident during this stage tend to be those the enactment of the role should involve, rather than those it actually involves. Perhaps because of this a fairly high degree of consensus is usually perceived during the anticipatory stage. Also, individuals tend to fantasize somewhat about future roles, viewing them as more consensual than they are. We assert, then, that there is relatively little disensus on the ideal level for most roles, particularly with respect to what is perceived by the future incumbent.

Social and psychological adjustment to a role begins during this first period. Individuals develop images of what they feel will be expected of them and start to prepare themselves psychologically for what they expect the roles will be like. This anticipation is usually colored by what individuals want and need; therefore there tends to be a relative degree of congruity between individuals and their conceptions of future roles at this point. However, because it is influenced in this way, because it is idealized, and because individuals fantasize about future roles, anticipation may not be congruent with what will actually be experienced.

Although the anticipatory stage of socialization is generally considered functional for subsequent adjustment to acquired roles, research indicates that adjustment is in fact dependent on the degree of accuracy of what is conveyed and perceived. For example, studies by Thompson (1958), Johnson and Hutchins (1966), Wright (1967), and Olesen and Whittaker (1968) reflect on the relationship between the anticipatory period and subsequent adjustment. They indicate that anticipation helps only to the extent it is accurate, and that if it is not accurate it may actually impede adjustment, for performing the acquired role will necessitate unlearning as well as further learning. Thus the degree of congruity between what individuals learn to anticipate and what they subsequently experience will likely determine how quick and smooth the process of adjustment will be. Given our earlier comments about the conceptions of roles conveyed during

men and women about to enter college seem to have only a hazy picture about life that lies ahead of them for the next four years." In the entire process of professional socialization, viewed as an extended period of anticipatory socialization, there exists a similar uncertainty about future roles. Sibley (1963, pp. 104–5) finds that first-year graduate students in sociology do not have a clear conception of the roles for which they are being prepared; and Lortie (1959, p. 366) concludes that law students leave "... law school with only a hazy and incomplete conception of what lawyer's work consists of."

Charles Wright (1972, personal communication) suggests that the maintenance of a reference group supporting the misconception decreases the facility with which one may adjust to a new situation.
anticipatory socialization, this stage would seem as likely to be dysfunctional as functional.  

Formal Stage

In the second phase of role acquisition the individual, now in a social position, experiences the role as an incumbent and shifts from viewing it from an outside perspective to viewing it from inside. In contrast to the anticipatory stage, when expectations arising from society at large predominate, expectations now arise characteristically from members of the role set (both others enacting the same role and others enacting strictly reciprocal roles) and from the incumbent himself, whose expectations for his performance are formed at least partially in response to those of others.

For social roles embedded in organizational structures, the expectations encountered during the formal phase pertain frequently to the organizationally defined rights and duties inherent in the position and usually codified by the social system in which it is located (see Sarbin and Allen 1968, p. 499). We refer to these as formalized expectations because they are often stated in formal, written terms; for example, in job descriptions and handbooks for new employees. Even when the role is not located in an explicit organizational structure these expectations tend to be codified, as by law for citizens and parents, or as by professional associations for physicians and lawyers. Their form of conveyance thus tends to be overt; in other words, they tend to be listed, written, and stated directly and explicitly.

Also characteristic of the role expectations encountered now is that they are directed typically toward everyone occupying a particular social position. They are often a set of “must” behaviors, generally related to the goals of the system in which the particular position is located. (Because of this, they cannot be left to chance; hence their explicit presentation.) Here we have the Hippocratic oath governing physician-patient relation-

---

8 Support is found in a statement by Schramm, Lyle, and Parker: “There is no doubt that television’s picture of the world includes an abnormally high proportion of sexy women, violent acts, and extra-legal solutions to legal problems... inadequate fathers, of get-rich-quick careers, and of crooked police and judges... If this is the case... then obviously this is not a positive contribution to socializing... [the child]... and may require some very hard adjustments later” (1961, p. 155).

9 Levinson (1959, p. 177) speaks of these as the external forces derived from the “organizational matrix,” composed of pressure from authority, impending sanctions, and situational demands.

10 As Berlo (1960, p. 141) describes them: “The set of ‘must’ behaviors goes with the role. It is independent of the person occupying that role... These behaviors are independent of people; they are fixed by the system.”
ships, the legal obligations of one spouse to another or of a parent to a child, and the employee's duties for an organization. These expectations may also be thought of as idealized, in much the same way as those encountered during the anticipatory stage.

Though formalized expectations tend to refer to the expected behavior and knowledge and skills of role enactors rather than to their attitudes or orientations toward a role and its enactment, attitudinal elements may be present. These may take the form of allegiance to certain others (e.g., "the customer is always right"), specific emotions to be displayed (e.g., "salesperson must exude warmth, not sarcasm"), and sometimes certain likes and dislikes (e.g., "Conservative party members must dislike Communists"). Nevertheless, formalized expectations are set apart from those of the following stage by their emphasis on expected behavior and abilities, not attitudes.

A final characteristic of the expectations presented during the formal stage is their fairly high degree of consensus, particularly within each of the four sources we have identified. For example, we would expect that at this stage most people in reciprocal roles would agree in general on what an incumbent's role enactment should be. We would also expect a certain amount of consensus between sources. Typically, there seems to be little disparity at this rather abstract level among the expectations of society in general, others with reciprocal roles, others with similar roles, and even the individual himself. Such consensus would seem to exist because of the idealized nature of formalized expectations, which are not necessarily experienced in the everyday enactment of a role. Few would argue against the Hippocratic oath or the legal obligations of parents to children.

The reaction to what is encountered during this phase tends to be one of conformity. As Goffman (1961, p. 130) notes, "... it appears that conformity to the prescriptive aspects of role often occurs most thoroughly at the neophyte level, when the individual must prove his competence, sincerity, and awareness of his place." In addition to Goffman's reasons why conformity tends to be greatest at this point, we would assert that it occurs because of the relatively high degree of consensus and because individuals are only beginning psychologically to feel out the situation and what it may hold in store for them. In terms of the adjustment-adaptation feature of our scheme, people may be seen as postponing their own modes of meeting role expectations until they have become more familiar with them. They tend to adjust socially by meeting the requirements rather than modifying them, partly because formal requirements are open to little modification and partly because they are merely getting a feel for the role at this time. Psychologically, adjustment occurs through postponement of reactions to roles and situations, often by playing at roles, rather than
truly enacting them (see Turner 1956). It is only later that one's personal reactions to the role become established and real adjustment and adaptation occur.

Informal Stage

In addition to the anticipatory and formalized role expectations of the two stages discussed above, the process of role acquisition involves encounters with unofficial or informal expectations and ways of doing things. These can occur in formal contexts because of the frequent need to modify or circumvent formal requirements as well as to deal with problems or areas of concern not covered directly by them. On occasion informal expectations are in direct contradiction to formal ones.\textsuperscript{11} It is through informal systems that a new secretary knows how long a coffee break she may take, a college professor knows what unofficial restrictions there may be on what he wears to class, and any new employee learns when company rules may be bent. It is also through these that one learns which co-workers may be treated in certain ways, which attitudes and emotions are to be displayed on which occasions, and, even, which are the "proper" values to hold. Learning these types of expectations constitutes the third in our series of four stages in role acquisition.

These informal features of the new role are not usually conveyed by the system itself. They are not included in such formalized statements as job descriptions or handbooks for new employees; rather they arise and are transmitted through interaction of individuals. Peer groups, work groups, cliques, car pools, and people encountered in daily activities are important sources of informal expectations. As with formalized expectations, both people enacting similar roles and those enacting reciprocal roles are primary sources, but at this stage role colleagues probably become more important in this regard than people with strictly reciprocal roles. Also, during this phase the personal expectations generally held in abeyance earlier become important. Upon encountering the informal nature of roles, individuals begin to place greater weight on their own role expectations.

In this stage there tends to be less consensus among the various expectations encountered than in the prior stage. Various groups and individuals tend to present differing informal expectations, which may be in opposition to formally expressed ones as well as to those a role incumbent is beginning to develop and those he learned during the anticipatory phase. Dissensus occurs both within and between the various sources of expectations.

\textsuperscript{11} As De Fleur, D'Antonio, and De Fleur (1971, p. 75) assert, "In general the development of an informal structure in an association . . . results in the reinterpretation of roles that are theoretically fixed. . . ."
In many instances informal expectations do not refer to the "musts" of role performance, as do formalized ones, but to the "mays;" for they are not fixed in any explicit and rigid sense (Berlo 1960, p. 141). They provide for flexibility within roles, for spontaneity allowable without losing sight of a role's function for the system in which it is located. Often, however, informal expectations can be quite imperative, and the sanctions attached to them can be more severe than those attached to formal expectations.

Like anticipatory and formal expectations, informal ones may be either explicit or implicit and may refer to behavior, attitudes, knowledge, and skills; but they tend to be implicit and to refer to the attitudinal and cognitive features of role performance. Although groups and individuals often present explicitly informal norms and ways of doing things, it is really through everyday interaction that a neophyte learns the obscure nuances and subtleties of the enactment of a new role. Likewise, some of the attitudinal components of role enactment may be explicitly stated, but most are not, and even an explicit statement is likely to be of only a general nature.

The informal features of new roles often provide means of dealing with some of the psychological drains role performance may make on a person. Goffman's (1959) analysis of the "backstage" area of role behavior of waiters provides an illustration. He describes how waiters are allowed by the group to talk about their employer and their customers when not in their presence. They may assume attitudes of disdain or behave in a manner not suitable in "performing" or even on the "frontstage." This norm is not, however, formally stated, but learned only after a period of interaction with co-workers.

As Parsons has observed, roles allow for a certain range of variability, and it is this which enables actors with different personalities to enact the same role (see Parsons 1951, pp. 234–35; Parsons and Shils 1951, p. 24). Such leeway also provides a means of achieving adjustments to roles, and the informal stage of role acquisition is the period during which the final phases of adjustment begin (though in our view they are not fully accomplished until the succeeding stage). Because many informal expectations refer to "mays" rather than "musts" and because of the high degree of disensus concerning them, an individual now has an opportunity to start shaping a role to fit himself, his past experiences and future objectives, and to work out an individual style of role performance. Final social adjustment thus commences, and one begins to finalize his own techniques of handling the social requirements of the role. Psychological adjustment as well begins in earnest at this point. Through the freedom allowed, one can start to formulate his own meanings for a role and its performance. In fact, as will become clearer in the discussion of the following stage, effective role performance typically requires this.

879
Personal Stage

For many years role theory has been characterized by attempts to explain variation and style within roles without the insights of personality theory. The results have not been adequate. In recent years it has been realized that any strong analysis of role performance has to include a psychological dimension. The individual cannot be ignored, for his personality, past experiences, unique abilities and skills, and culturally defined values and beliefs all affect how he enacts his roles. Sanford notes the importance of some personal qualities in discussing the role performance of teachers: "Intervening between the structurally given role demands and the role-performance is the teacher's conceptions of the demands. . . . Other determinants of the teacher's role performance are the abilities, personality traits, physical and social characteristics that he brings to his task" (1962, p. 52).12 Neglecting the individual in the role-acquisition process seems even more serious, since, as we view it, it is in part a process whereby individuals and social roles, personalities and social structures become fused.

Our view is that as anticipatory, formal, and informal expectations are encountered, personal role expectations develop and are transmitted to others with whom one is in contact. Role acquisition thus comes to involve individuals imposing their own expectations and conceptions on roles and modifying role expectations according to their own unique personalities.13 Because this cannot fully occur until the various types of expectations have been experienced, we consider it the final step in role acquisition.14

12 Put in another way, "Each person brings to the group his own attitudes, prejudices, and other personality characteristics that lead him to play his assigned role in ways not prescribed by its designers" (ibid., p. 75). These personal traits are not necessarily in opposition to the role expectations one encounters—they may be congruent with them. Moreover, one's own expectations, conceptions, and needs are certainly at least a partial product of what one learns during the earlier stages of role acquisition. Then too, as Bay (1962, p. 982) states, "Different persons approach the same kind of roles with very different degrees of independence, 'willingness to play the game,' loyalty to various reference groups, personal involvement in objectives, etc." This suggests, naturally, that the imposition of individual personality upon a role will vary from person to person as well as from role to role or social system to social system.

13 Getzels (1963, p. 311) speaks of need-dispositions which influence a person's perceptions and his reactions to the social world and asserts that "in order to understand the behavior of specific role-incumbents in specific institutions, we must know both the role expectations and the need-dispositions involved. Generally, it is only after this modification has been accomplished that appropriate and convincing role enactment will occur." This is what Sarbin and Allen (1968, p. 524) call self-role congruence: "... when self characteristics are congruent with role requirements, role enactment is more effective, proper, and appropriate than when role and self are incongruent."

14 Goffman's essay on "role distance" anticipates our treatment of the personal dimension. He writes for example: "It is right here, in manifestations of role distance, that the individual's personal style is to be found. And it is argued in this paper that role distance is almost as much subject to role analysis as are the core tasks of roles them-
The Dynamics of Role Acquisition

Whereas the informal stage tends to be characterized by role dissensus, a relative degree of role consensus now begins to reappear. Individuals are usually able to influence the expectations others hold for them and to achieve some degree of consensus among others' expectations and between those and their own; in other words, they impose their own style (usually a modified style) on their role performance and others accept it in large measure. This is important for social and psychological adjustment as well as for adaptation. Social adjustment tends to occur through the modification of a role rather than through earlier conformity to it. If one is able to relate his psychological needs to the (modified) requirements of the new role, then we may say that he has adjusted psychologically to it, in contrast to his earlier postponement of a psychological reaction. In terms of the distinction between adjustment and adaptation made earlier, adaptation (in the form of internalization of the role) may now occur. It probably will occur if adjustment has been successful in terms of what the person requires of his role and what it requires of him.

It is not enough, then, to view individuals as simply carrying out formal and informal expectations in new roles. They also seek to impose personal conceptions and needs and to reconcile these with the demands of the situation. Incongruence of self and role often results in perfunctory role enactment and in problems of social and psychological adjustment. This in itself exemplifies the importance of including the personal phase in any discussion of role acquisition. Equally important, "role" is generally considered as the concept whereby the person and the social structure are linked (and thus as a point of reference for both sociology and psychology); this linkage can only be understood finally in terms of the mutual transformation of person and role.

An Overview

The formulation of role acquisition presented in this paper combines some loose ends from the literature into an interdisciplinary schema that we feel describes clearly and succinctly how individuals acquire social roles. This synthesis is effected largely by emphasizing that learning new roles and

---

selfes" (1961, p. 152). He further emphasizes (p. 130) that this showing of distance from a role occurs once the individual has been "validated" in the role (i.e., when he has conformed to the prescriptive aspects of it and has proved his competency and sincerity).

15 The individual might respond to such a situation by changing his personal value system to conform to the structural demands, by changing the social structure itself, by relinquishing the role, due to choice or force, or by meeting the formal and informal expectations with indifference and receiving little satisfaction from his role (Levinson 1959, p. 179). Conceivably, he could also formulate his own private meanings for his role enactment, meanings entirely different from those incorporated in the role.
adjusting to them are continuous, dynamic processes involving a personal dimension. Our view is that role acquisition is not a one-step process, and that norms, values, attitudes, information, and behavior are not simply conveyed and assimilated in a vacuum during that process. Centrally involved are individuals with specific (though changeable) personality characteristics who encounter a diverse series of expectations regarding their behavior, attitudes, and knowledge at different points in time.

People first develop preconceptions from exposure to anticipatory expectations presented by the mass media and by others enacting the type of role anticipated and strictly reciprocal roles. Once neophytes enter social positions, the process of learning and reacting to more formalized expectations begins. Initial success is partly dependent on the closeness of the anticipatory experiences to these actual ones. Overt and covert, behavioral, attitudinal, and cognitive, formal expectations typically are ones necessary for the achievement of the objectives of the system in which the role is located and are fixed by it.

Roles allow, however, for leeway and spontaneity, as has been noted on several occasions, and this latitude is provided to a certain degree through informal expectations learned after exposure to more formalized ones. Informal features are often derived from small group interactions among individuals of the system and are not made explicit. It is not really until the formal and informal expectations have been encountered that the final processes of adjustment begin. It is then that individuals, now familiar with new positions and their requirements, modify and mold roles around personality characteristics and the demands of other roles and achieve some balance among conflicting expectations.

IMPLICATIONS

The ultimate criterion by which to evaluate our formulation of the role-acquisition process should be its heuristic value. As a conclusion, we shall demonstrate its value in this regard by suggesting some avenues of research derived from our formulation.

Naturally, the first avenue would be to test the model itself. The model may be viewed as a series of hypotheses capable of empirical verification. Thus five hypotheses could be formulated as to how each of the five dimensions (source, content, and type of expectations, degree of consensus present, and individuals' reactions) varies with stage of role acquisition. Data could then be obtained to test our assertions about how each of these varies.

Another direction of research would be a consideration of how the acquisition of different roles varies along the dimensions of the model. Although we maintain that the formulation is applicable to different types of roles,
we also feel that important variations are evident. The four stages are not equally important for all roles. Some roles (the soldier’s, for example) are more institutionally rooted and defined than others, so that formal expectations predominate. Others, stressing a high personal and emotional commitment (the mother’s role, for example), may have more loosely defined official rights and duties, so that few formal expectations are present. The nature of the role, then, is an important determinant of the relative impact of each stage. A comparative analysis of roles along these lines should generate considerable insight into how roles differ.

There would seem to be variation in the acquisition of the same type of role as well. This is partly dependent upon the system in which the role is located. For example, some medical schools may present students with a great many rigid formal expectations and allow little leeway in adherence to them. Other medical schools may deemphasize formal requirements, allowing students much more freedom to develop their own styles. This would appear to have far-reaching implications for what types of students succeed in becoming physicians, for what problems they have along the way, and for what type of physician each becomes.

Individuals themselves will determine the relative influence of each stage. Some people are passive and let the expectations of others govern their behavior; others are forceful and impose their own expectations to a great extent, perhaps very early in the process. An analysis of variation in acquiring the same role by different individuals would be an important research topic.

Implications for effective role performance can be drawn also. We assert that role performance is generally more effective in the later stages than in the earlier ones and is generally truly effective only after completion of the personal stage. Convincing and effective role performance may come only after individuals have modified their roles to fit themselves. We would argue as well that individuals derive most satisfaction from their roles after they have been able to fuse themselves with their roles. It is this fusion which gives meaning to role performance.

REFERENCES


American Journal of Sociology


