Chapter 3

Role Stress
3.1 Concept of Role

Human behaviour in an organisation is influenced by various physical, social and psychological factors. An important aspect of organisation that integrates an individual with the organisation is the role assigned to him/her within the overall structure of the organisation. It is through the role that an individual interacts and gets integrated with the system. In fact, an organisation can be defined as the system of roles.

Role is a set of obligations generated by the ‘significant others’ and the individual occupying an office. It denotes a set of functions one performs in response to the expectations of the ‘significant others’, and one’s own expectations from that position or office (Pareek, 1993). Each role has its system. This consists of the role occupant and those who have a direct relationship with him, and thereby, certain expectations from the role incumbent. These ‘significant others’ are role senders. They send expectations to the role. As role occupant also has expectation from his role, he too is a role sender. Thus a role is not defined without the expectations of the role senders, including the expectations of the role occupant himself.
The organisation and individual come together through role. Role, thus, integrates an individual and the organisation. The organisation has its structure and goals. Similarly, the individual has his personality and needs. These two interact with each other and get integrated in a role (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 Role as Interaction Between Individual and Organisation

Source: Pareek, 1993
3.2 Role Stress

Role is a set of functions that an individual performs in response to the expectations of the significant person of a social system and his own expectations about the position he occupies. For effective performance these expectations are to be articulated and then shared with one another and integrated. However, if the expectations remain ambiguous or are in conflict with one another, they have a potential of generating role stress. According to Pestonjee (1992) there are three important sectors of life in which stress may arise. These are - job and organisation; the social sector and intrapsychic sector. Thus, job and organisation is an important sector wherein stress may emerge. Consequently, organisational role, i.e. the totality of the work environment and its interface with the individual, has the potential for generating stress for a person.

Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) in their pioneering study presented a comprehensive and integrated model of stress. They postulated that the quest for identity is a central concern for many individuals and considered a specific type of stress in the form of role stress. Constructs like role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload were put under the rubric of role stress. According to Kahn et al. (1964) role stress has consequences on the variables like job-related tension, emotional reaction etc. In fact, role ambiguity and role conflict were among the first psychological stressors to be studied in the workplace. It was the theoretical and empirical description of these two stressors in "Organisation stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity" (Kahn et al., 1964) that brought the
two concepts at the centrestage of research. The next major study on role stress was "Role conflict and ambiguity as critical variables in a model of organisational behaviour" (House & Rizzo, 1972).

Role conflict has been defined as two or more sets of pressure resulting in a situation wherein compliance with one would make it difficult to comply with the other. Role ambiguity is referred to a kind of inadequate role sending (role demand) or lack of required information. Role overload is defined as a special case of role conflict in which all the role demands cannot be met in available time.

Udai Pareek (1993) has done pioneering research in the field of organisational role stress. He has identified as many as ten different components of organisational role stress. The ten constituent role stressors of organisational role stressor are as follows:

3.2.1 Role System and Role Stress

To better understand the phenomenon of role stress it is instructive to understand the concept of role system. There are two role systems; role space and role set. Role Space is the dynamic relationship amongst various roles an individual occupies and his own self. It has three main variables: self, the role under question, and the other roles he occupies. Any conflict amongst these are referred to as the role space conflicts or stress. Role Set consists of important persons who have varying expectations from the role that he occupies. The conflict that arises as a result of incompatibility among these expectations of 'significant others' are referred to as role set conflicts. The concept of
role, and the related concepts of role space and role set, thus, have an in-built potential for conflicts.

3.2.1.1 Role Space Conflict

Self-Role Distance

This stress arises out of conflict between the self-concept and the expectations from the role, as perceived by the role occupant. If the person occupies a role that he may subsequently find conflicting with his self-concept, he feels stressed.

Pestonjee and Singh (1983) studied the psychodynamics of people working in the field of computers. The study took job satisfaction and morale as dependent variables, and alienation, participation, involvement and role stress as independent variables. It found that self-role distance exerted a negative influence on job, management, and social relations areas of job satisfaction in particular and overall satisfaction in general along with all the dimensions of morale. This indicates that feeling of incongruence between self concept and the role one has to perform affects attitude towards fairness of employer’s policies and behaviour, adequacy of immediate leadership, sense of participation, and regard for and identification with the organisation unfavourably.

Inter Role Distance

An individual develops expectations of his socialisation and identification with the significant others. He may perceive certain incompatibilities
between the expectations of his organisational role and other roles he occupies. This leads to inter role conflict.

For information technology professionals this is representative of the conflict between his role as employee working in high pressure, cutting edge jobs and the other social and family roles. There are times when professional demands are in conflict with the demands of social and family roles. Often, in the initial stages of career, the family and friends don’t get the required attention and time. There are some IT jobs such as Information Technology Enabled Services (ITES) that entail shift work. This may not only disturb the sleeping and eating patterns of the employees but also their personal and social life. In a study on computer professionals, G. P. Singh (1987) found that systems personnel in private sector scored significantly higher on inter role distance than systems analysts in public sector. Also, the inter role distance was found to be general contributor of role stress in computer professionals. Pestonjee and Singh (1987) also found significantly high inter role distance in private sector managers as compared to the public sector managers. Pestonjee and Singh (1983) studied the psychodynamics of people working in the field of computers as software and hardware personnel. They found that inter role distance adversely affected job satisfaction and morale in the areas of job, management, personal adjustment, social relations, fairness of employers policies and
behaviour, adequacy of immediate leadership and regard for organisation. It also affected employee's identification with the organisation.

**Role Stagnation**

As an individual grows older, he grows in the role he occupies in an organisation. The new role demands that the individual outgrows the previous role and takes charge of the new role effectively. Some organisations may not have a systematic manpower development strategy. Employees working in such organisation may thus experience role stagnation when they are promoted.

Pestonjee and Singh (1987) studied the stress-strain relationship for systems analysts and managers of both public and private sector organisations. They found that private sector systems analysts scored significantly higher on role stagnation.

**3.2.1.2 Role Set Conflict**

As noted above, role set conflicts may arise as a result of conflicting expectations of 'significant others' and the person himself. These conflicts may take the following forms:

**Role Ambiguity**

An individual experiences this conflict when he is not clear about the various expectations that people have from his role. This may occur due to lack of information available to the role occupant or due to
inability to understand the cues available to him. Role ambiguity may be in relation to the activities, priorities, norms or general expectations.

Singh (1987) did a study on computer professionals. The researcher found role ambiguity to be remote contributor of role stress among managers, systems personnel and operation personnel in both public and private sector.

Role Expectation Conflict

An individual experiences this conflict when there are conflicting expectations or demands from the different role senders (Role senders are ‘significant others’ who have expectations from the role). Pestonjee and Singh (1987) found role expectation conflict to be remote contributor of role stress among managers and systems analysts in both public sector and private sector organisations.

Role Overload

When the role occupant feels too many expectations from significant others in his role set, he experiences role overload. It has two aspects - quantitative and the qualitative.

Pestonjee and Singh (1987) found public sector managers to be suffering from role overload. Singh (1987) found private sector systems personnel having significantly higher role overload than public sector systems personnel. The study also found public sector managers scoring significantly high on role overload.
and perceived their workplace as significantly lower in expert influence climate.

**Role Erosion**

When the role occupant feels that the functions that he would like to perform are being performed by some other role, he experiences role erosion stress. It creates a feeling that some important functions of his role are shared or taken away by other roles within the role set.

Pestonjee and Singh (1987) found role erosion to be dominant contributor of role stress in managers and systems analysts in private sector as well as public sector computer professionals.

**Resource Inadequacy**

This stress is experienced when the resources required by the role occupant - information, people material, finance and/or facilities are not available for the effective performance of the role. Pestonjee and Singh (1987) found resource inadequacy to be dominant contributor of role stress among managers and systems analysts in private sector and public sector organisations.

**Personal Inadequacy**

When a role occupant feels that he is not prepared to undertake the job effectively, he experiences this stress. He may feel that he does not have required knowledge, skills or training. He may find himself in
a situation where he does not get enough time to prepare himself for the assigned role.

Pestonjee and Singh (1987) reported personal inadequacy to be remote contributor of overall role stress among managers and systems analysts in private sector and public sector.

**Role Isolation**

In a role set the role occupant may feel that certain roles are psychologically more close to him, while others are at a distance. The main criterion of distance is the frequency and ease of interaction. When linkages are strong the role-role distance will be low, resulting in low role isolation stress. When such linkages are weak, role isolation stress is high. Singh (1987) reported role isolation to be dominant contributor of overall stress among managers, systems personnel and operation personnel in both private as well as public sector organisation.

Over the years, several research studies have been conducted on the phenomenon of organisational role stress. It has far reaching impact on the performance of employees and as a consequence on the organisations. In the forthcoming chapter, a review of studies on role stress has been presented.