

# **ROLE CONFLICT, ROLE AMBIGUITY, AND INTENTION TO QUIT THE ORGANIZATION: THE CASE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS'**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This purpose of this study was to evaluate the effect of role ambiguity and role conflict on intention to quit the organization in a law enforcement setting. The overall model shows significance with an  $R^2$  of 0.187, suggesting role conflict and role ambiguity explain almost 19 percent of the variance of intention to quit. This figure may actually be suppressed due to self-selection. The two hypotheses are supported suggesting that role ambiguity is a significant predictor of intention to quit the organization while role conflict is a weaker predictor of intention to quit the organization. Implications for law enforcement and other governmental organizations are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

This study of law enforcement officers examines the degree to which they are affected by role ambiguity and role conflict, and how those variables affect officers' intention to quit the organization.

Most professionals are salaried workers who are employed by a professional organization (Wallace, 1995). Law enforcement officers are part of a bureaucratic professional organization. There are multiple subunits within the department that officers' may belong to such as; patrolman, detective, or vice squad. Regardless of the subunit, officers' intention to quit the organization is important, as turnover has been recognized as having high importance in professional organizations including law enforcement (Doerner, 1995; Harris & Baldwin, 1999; Blau, Tatum, & Ward-Cook, 2003). Intention to quit the organization is related to actually leaving the organization. This is based on the theory of reasoned action (Fishbein & Azjen, 1975) which links attitudes, behavioral intentions, and behavioral action. In this case, the intention to quit a law enforcement organization is a mediating factor between attitudes affecting the intent to quit and actually leaving the law enforcement organization.

The attitudes affecting intention to quit can necessarily be either internal (e.g. job satisfaction, pay satisfaction, perceived organizational support) or external (e.g. environment, working conditions). I will be evaluating two internal attitudes, role conflict and role ambiguity, that indirectly affect intention to quit the organization. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between the two previously mentioned variables and intention to quit the organization.

### **Role Ambiguity**

The construct, as seems apparent by its title, is often hard to define. In spite of this lack of a well-defined construct (Breugh & Colihan, 1994), the generally accepted concept is that role ambiguity occurs when individuals lack a clear definition of their role expectations, and the requirements/methods to complete their job tasks (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Law enforcement officers may encounter role ambiguity for a variety of reasons. They are frequently entering situations where there is no possibility for complete information, therefore, it is difficult to receive clear instruction, or apply training received to a specific situation. This lack of information may raise the uncertainty regarding expectations associated with the role (Gupta & Jenkins, 1985; Lewis & Cooper, 1988).

With the lack of a clear definition as noted above, for the purpose of this paper, role ambiguity will be defined as: the ambiguity on the job that occurs due to lack of clear role expectations, requirements, methods, and information in situational experiences.

### **Role Conflict**

Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970) define role conflict as the incompatibility of requirements and expectations from the role, where compatibility is judged based on a set of conditions that impact role performance. Role conflict is more intense in jobs where more abstract

thinking and decision-making are required (Menon & Aknilesh, 1994). As noted previously, law enforcement officers need to respond to situational cues and as such, may make different decisions under similar circumstances depending on how the situation develops. Role conflict has also been defined as the extent to which a person experiences pressures within one role that are incompatible with pressures that arise within another role (Kopelman, Greenhaus, & Connolly, 1983). In the context of law enforcement, this could be viewed as the pressures of being a public servant (i.e., the pressures from the community) versus the pressures from the local government (i.e. political pressures) being at odds with each other.

For the purposes of this paper, we will use the Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970) definition of role conflict: the incompatibility of requirements and expectations from the role.

### **Intention to Quit the Organization**

Empirical studies have linked job satisfaction and performance to an individual's intent to quit the organization (Clegg, 1983; Cotton & Tuttle, 1986; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997; Bishop, Scott, & Burroughs, 2000). With the high cost of turnover, many organizations are interested reducing the number of employees who leave the organization voluntarily (Firth, et al., 2004). Many researchers (Saks, 1986; Kramer, et al., 1995; Kalliath & Beck, 2001) have attempted to answer the question of what determines an employee's intention to quit recognizing the importance for practitioners. However, to date, there has been little consistency in the findings of the researchers. Firth, et al. (2004) suggest that it may be due to the diversity of the constructs and consistency (or lack thereof) of the measurements. Becker (1992) developed his own scale by combining two other scales demonstrating the lack of consistency among scales. For the purposes of this paper we will define intention to quit an organization as: the mediating factor between attitudes affecting intent to quit and quitting an organization.

### **HYPOTHESES**

Intention to quit an organization occurs when demands are placed on an individual (in our case a law enforcement officer) when antecedent conditions (pay, job satisfaction, etc.) are perceived as being positively related to wanting to leave the organization. Role conflict occurs when there is an incompatibility between the expectations of a role and the requirements of the role. We have also suggested that role ambiguity, the lack of information going into a situation may lead to differing expectations about what should be done and how, occurs in situations of incomplete information. These factors serve as a foundation for our hypotheses,

Hypothesis 1: Role ambiguity is positively related to intention to quit the organization.

Similar to role ambiguity, role conflict suggests to an officer an incompatibility between requirements and expectations of their role, therefore we hypothesize that,

Hypothesis 2: Role conflict is positively related to intention to quit the organization.

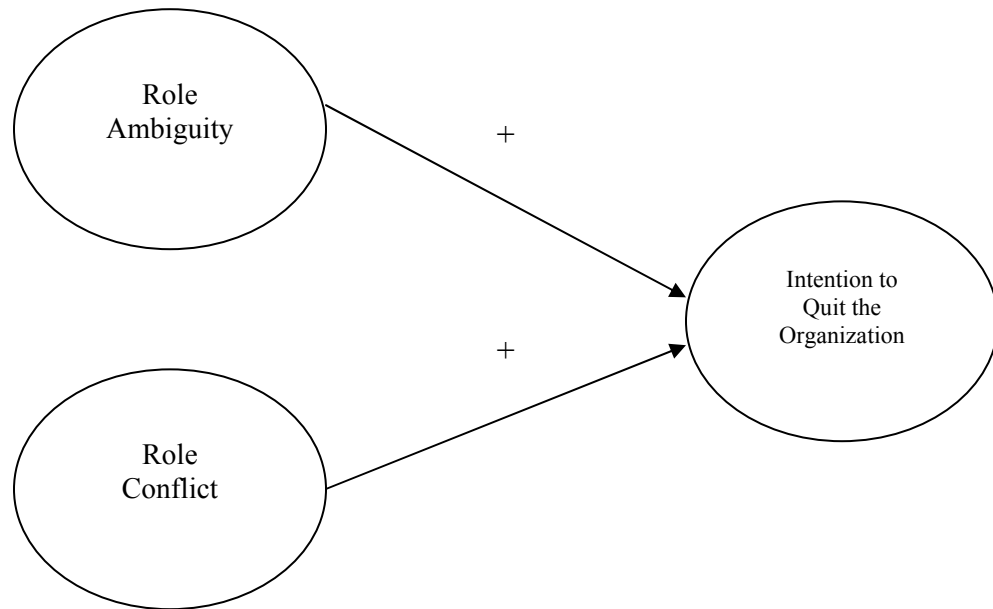


Figure 1: Hypothesized model

## **METHODS AND MEASURES**

This study was conducted in 2 law enforcement organizations within two cities in the southwestern U.S. A total of  $n = 114$  police officers took part in the study. The officers responded to all items in the instrument. Participation in the survey was voluntary, but no officer declined to complete it. It was necessary to throw out two surveys, however, due to an unusual pattern of responses. The unusual patterns consisted of one officer completing the first series of items in a commonly seen manner, then responding to all additional items with a “neither agree nor disagree” response. The second unusual pattern consisted of an officer responding to all items with a “strongly agree” response, regardless of the negatively worded items. This left us a sample size of  $n = 112$ . The surveys were administered over the course of three days to ensure all time shifts and personnel were administered the survey. The respondents were guaranteed confidentiality of responses, and were briefed on the ethical and professional standards demanded of us as researchers, as well as legal requirements.

Some of the demographic information of the sample is as follows: 83 % male ( $n = 93$ ) 17% female ( $n = 19$ ). The age range is as follows: < 30, 25% ( $n = 28$ ); 30-40, 45.6% ( $n = 51$ ); 40-

50, 19.6% (n = 22); >50, 9.8% (n = 11). The ranks of the respondents' were varied however, most were of the "officer" rank (this would be either "officers" in the police departments', or "deputies" in the sheriff's departments').

## Measures

Seven-point likert scales were used to measure the law enforcement officers' variables of role ambiguity, role conflict, and intention to quit the organization. The answers ranged from "strongly disagree" (1) to "strongly agree" (7). The items to which the officers responded are included in the following table.

### *Intention to quit the organization items*

1. As soon as I can find a better job, I'll leave the organization.
2. I am actively looking for a job outside the organization.
3. I am seriously thinking of quitting my job.

### **Role ambiguity items**

1. I feel certain about how much authority I have.
2. I have clear, planned objectives for my job.
3. I know that I have divided my time properly.
4. I know what my responsibilities are.
5. I know exactly what is expected of me.
6. I receive clear explanations of what has to be done.

### **Role conflict items**

1. I have to do things that should be done differently
2. I receive an assignment without the manpower to complete it.
3. I have to buck a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment.
4. I have to work with two or more groups who operate quite differently.
5. I receive incompatible requests from two or more people.
6. I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others.
7. I receive an assignment without adequate resources and material to execute it.
8. I work on unnecessary things.

Table 1: Survey items

### **Role Ambiguity**

Role ambiguity was measured using six items from the Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970) questionnaire. The coefficient alpha for this construct is  $\alpha = .8184$ .

### Role Conflict

The role conflict items also were measured using the established eight item scale developed by the Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970) questionnaire. The coefficient alpha for this construct is  $\alpha = .8118$ .

### Intention to quit the organization

This construct was measured with a three item scale as reported by Wayne, Shore, & Liden (1997) with  $\alpha = .8632$ .

All reliabilities meet the generally acceptable criteria of  $\alpha > .7$ . Some descriptive statistics, means, coefficient alphas, and the covariances are reported in Table 2

	Means	S.E.	Coefficient Alpha	Role Ambiguity	Role Conflict	Intention to Quit the Organization
Role Ambiguity	2.522	0.148	0.8184	0.831		
Role Conflict	3.927	0.160	0.8118	0.256	0.096	
Intention to Quit the Organization	2.982	0.241	0.8632	0.377	0.020	1.044

Table 2: Representative statistics

## RESULTS

Prior to testing the model shown in figure 1, we analyzed the 17 items the officers responded to, to an exploratory factor analysis (EFA). Maximum likelihood with oblique rotation was used to analyze the data, and missing data were handled with a pair-wise deletion method. Somewhat unexpectedly, five factors with eigenvalues greater than one were identified. Another factor analysis was run with the same extraction, rotation, and missing-data methods, but forcing a three-factor solution as prescribed by theory and the items loaded in a fashion more in line with the theory. As is evident in Table 3,

Pattern Matrix		Factor		
		1	2	3
RA4	0.887	0.055	0.056	
RA5	0.880	0.026	0.039	
RA2	0.729	-0.022	0.069	
RA6	0.646	0.075	0.271	
RA3	0.462	-0.070	0.048	
RA1	0.398	-0.135	-0.208	
IQ1	0.040	-0.888	0.018	
IQ2	-0.026	-0.859	0.017	
IQ3	0.025	-0.668	0.135	
RC7	-0.018	-0.108	0.779	
RC2	-0.105	-0.092	0.710	
RC5	0.061	-0.115	0.567	
RC3	0.042	0.041	0.566	
RC6	0.001	-0.053	0.533	
RC4	-0.029	0.067	0.501	
RC8	0.113	-0.055	0.484	

Table 3: Exploratory Factor Analysis of Law Enforcement Survey Items

all the items except RA1, and RA6 with a small cross-loading on factor 3, have significant loadings on a common factor with no significant cross loadings. The communalities, which accounts for the total amount of variance an original variable shares with all other variables included in the analysis (Hair, et al., 2006) are in an acceptable range. As intent to quit, role ambiguity, and role conflict are established scales, all items were kept and the factors loaded as follows: factor 1, role ambiguity; factor 2, intent to quit the organization; and factor 3, role conflict.

Separate regression analyses were used to test the relationship between the demographic variables and intention to quit the organization. There were no significant relationships between the demographic variables and intention to quit the organization, so the data were combined across demographic groups for the regression.

A simple linear regression was used to analyze the data. Intention to quit the organization is the dependent variable with role ambiguity and role conflict entered as the independent variables.

An ANOVA on the overall model as shown in Table 4,

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	56.088	2	28.044	12.315	.000
	Residual	245.942	108	2.277		
	Total	302.030	110			

Table 4: ANOVA

shows significance ( $F = 12.315, p < .001$ ). The overall  $R^2$  is .187 suggesting that role ambiguity and role conflict combine to explain approximately 19% of the variance in intention to quit the organization. While this figure may seem slightly low, being able to explain this much variance in any construct measured on humans is important.

Hypothesis 1 stated that role ambiguity is positively related to intention to quit the organization. Role conflict is statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.342, t = 3.690, p < .001$ ) suggesting hypothesis 1 is supported. Hypothesis 2 claimed that role conflict is positively related to intention to quit the organization. This construct did not suggest statistical significance ( $\beta = 0.168, t = 1.809, p = 0.073$ ), however, as I hypothesized direction, all the alpha value is in one tail. This would indicate that any  $t$  value larger than 1.65 is statistically significant. Therefore, hypothesis 2 is weakly supported. The beta coefficients and  $p$ -values are listed on figure 2.

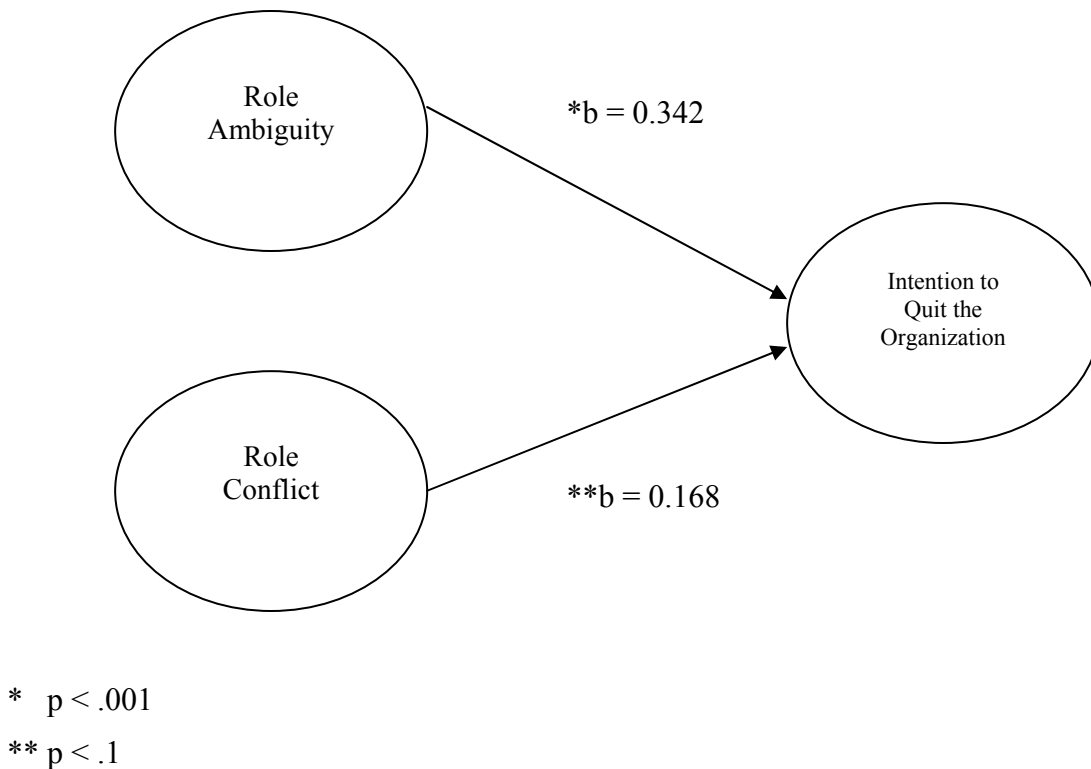


Figure 2: Model with coefficients and  $p$ -values

## LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the main limitations of the paper is the sample. It is quite possible that law enforcement officers know of the role ambiguity and role conflict they will encounter on the job thus having a suppressive effect on intention to quit the organization. Thus, further research should consider



role conflict, role ambiguity, and intention to quit the organization in different organizational settings. The implication here is that of the self-selection an individual makes to get into law enforcement. There may be practical implications here for other “service-minded” organizations such as fire departments and the armed services.

The importance of this paper for practitioners, i.e. law enforcement management, and of governmental organizations as a group, is the significant effects found from role ambiguity and role conflict to intention to quit the organization. Knowing that role ambiguity and role conflict have a direct positive relationship with intention to quit the organization could help law enforcement management keep employee retention higher, and inversely, keep turnover lower. The implications could follow for fire departments and armed services. The stress on the job is high, but individuals who apply for these type of service jobs generally know what they are getting into.

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