

# ROLE STRESSORS AND SALESPERSON JOB STRESS: THE IMPORTANCE OF SALESPERSON COGNITIVE APPRAISALS OF EXPECTED ROLE SANCTIONS

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## ABSTRACT

The authors propose a reconceptualization of the relation between role stressors (i.e., role conflict and role ambiguity) and actual stress felt by the salesperson. Grounded in role and cognitive appraisal theories, it is proposed that salesperson appraisals of role sanctions mediate the effect of role stressors on felt stress. Moreover, salesperson appraisals of the ability to cope with expected role sanctions are proposed to moderate the stressor/felt stress relationship.

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of understanding job stress cannot be overstated. Job stress has been linked with detrimental job-related psychological outcomes such as job burnout (Singh, Goolsby, and Rhoads 1994), and excessive levels of job stress are positively correlated with serious psycho-physical outcomes such as hypertension and alcoholism (see Sager and Wilson 1995). Over the past few decades, researchers from both management and marketing have been particularly concerned with the effects of job stress on boundary-spanning individuals (e.g., Lysonski 1985; Miles 1980). Often, boundary-spanning employees are pulled in several directions since they must interface both with coworkers and with customers. In marketing, considerable research has focused on the boundary-spanning role of the salesperson and how that role contributes to job stress (e.g., Behrman and Perreault 1984; Chonko, Howell, and Bellenger 1986; Singh, Verbeke, and Rhoads 1996).

By focusing on how the “role” of the salesperson leads to stress, marketing researchers naturally turned to the extant role theory literature widely adopted and subsequently influenced by industrial psychologists and other business researchers. Originally based on work from anthropology, sociology, and psychology, role theory was adopted by managerial researchers to explain job related stress (e.g., Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, and Snoek 1964). As in the management literature, role theory has proven to be a useful framework for examining employee stress in salesperson research.

This paper attempts to enhance the application of role theory to the sales literature by focusing upon the effects of *role sanctions* on the stress actually felt by the

salesperson. In organizations non-performance commonly results in sanctions. It is argued that expected role sanctions – formally defined as the anticipated consequences of not meeting role expectations – impacts the stress actually experienced by salespeople. Here, stress is defined as a psychological state wherein a salesperson perceives personal resources as taxed, resulting in the potential for negative psychological, psycho-physical and/or behavioral outcomes (adapted from Sager and Wilson 1995, p. 59). While stress is influenced by traditional role “stressors” such as role conflict (i.e., contradictory role expectations) and role ambiguity (i.e., insufficient understanding of role expectations), we posit that the effects of these stressors are mediated by salesperson cognitions regarding role sanctions. As such, it is not assumed, as is often the case in role stress research, that role conflict and role ambiguity automatically result in felt stress. Also, we emphasize the importance of salesperson anticipatory coping with role sanctions as a key moderator of actual felt stress.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to extend the conceptualization of salesperson stress by incorporating the notion of role sanctions, specifically the cognitive appraisals of expected role sanctions, into the typical role stress model. More precisely, expectations of role sanctions and appraisals of one’s ability to cope with role sanctions are discussed.

The remainder of this paper is organized into three sections. First, a brief history of the job stress construct, as it has been considered in role-related research, is offered. Second, the importance of understanding cognitive appraisals and role sanctions is discussed. Finally, managerial implications are offered along with an agenda for future research.

## HISTORY OF ROLE STRESS RESEARCH

For over three decades researchers have used role theory to better understand employee stress and its consequences (e.g., Kahn, et al. 1964; Hartline and Ferrell 1996; see Brown and Peterson’s meta-analysis 1993). The current state of the research, finds role-based stress to be an important element in explaining overall job stress. Researchers, however, have acknowledged weaknesses associated with the conceptualization and operationalization of role terms, which may be contrib-

uting to some ambiguous findings (Sager and Wilson 1995).

To better understand the potential weakness of role-related stress research, a brief review of role terminology is in order. In short, role ambiguity refers to uncertainty about the salient information needed to enact a role, and role conflict refers to contradictory expectations for performing a role (for a more complete discussion of these constructs and their operationalization, see Kahn 1964). These constructs are often termed role stressors. As these constructs have been linked to important psychological and behavioral outcomes (e.g., job satisfaction and performance), their usefulness in sales research is well-established. However, the findings linking stressors and outcomes are often contradictory (see Sager and Wilson 1995). For example, Behrman and Perreault (1984) found a positive relationship between role conflict and job performance. Meta-analyses, however, find negative relationships or non-significant findings between role conflict and job performance (Jackson and Schuler 1985; Brown and Peterson 1993). Even more basic, the connection between role stressors and stress that is actually felt by the salesperson is not well understood (Sager and Wilson 1995).

Some researchers have considered role stressors such as conflict and ambiguity as direct indicators of overall job stress (e.g., Babin and Boles 1998). The perspective adopted here, however, considers role stressors as *potential* causes of role stress – which is itself only one contributor to overall job stress (Goolsby 1992). By understanding the link between role stressors and actual stress, as it is felt by the salesperson, more complete conceptual models of job stress are made possible.

One approach to better understanding job stress has been to attend to its potential complexities by refining the role stressor variables. For example, rather than calling upon general operationalizations of role ambiguity and role conflict (e.g., the 1970 RHL role stress scales), several researchers have developed more detailed operationalizations of the role stressor variables (e.g., Chonko and Burnett 1983; Singh 1993). To illustrate, Singh and colleagues (1993; Singh and Rhoads 1991) exposed several facets of role ambiguity including ambiguity relating to job, coworkers, and family. Their research helps provide greater understanding of the potential differential effects of the various possible forms of role ambiguity upon role stress. In general, marketing researchers seem to be making headway into exploring this complex aspect of role stress.

Another approach to advancing stress research has been to include complementary theories and/or non-role related constructs in explaining overall job stress. For example, individual differences have been included in role-based models of salesperson job stress (e.g., Behrman and Perreault 1984).

This research uses another approach by building upon the extant role literature through introducing a new role variable, expected role sanctions, into the traditional model of salesperson role stress. Further, this paper incorporates elements from cognitive appraisal theory into the salesperson stress model. Sales researchers have called for the inclusion of “psychological” perspectives that would add more cognitive dimensions to salesperson stress research (see Sager and Wilson 1995). To date, however, little research has meshed a cognitive evaluational approach with a role theory perspective of salesperson stress.

The conceptualization presented here contributes to understanding role stress by addressing the gap as to why, both within and across salespeople, role stressors often seem to affect felt job stress differently. That is, sometimes stressors seem to cause stress, while at other times they do not. Plus, for some salespeople, certain role stressors seem more salient in their effects than for other salespeople. The next section details this conceptualization. As a preview, the notion of sanctions will be shown to be firmly grounded in role theory. Further, the importance of understanding role sanctions’ influence on role stress will be supported indirectly with complementary findings in the stress and coping literature.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Expected sanctions may play a large role in determining salesperson stress. The notion of appraisals of expected role sanctions assumes that the object (e.g., the salesperson) will form general expectations for role sanctioning activities by others and will anticipate one’s ability to cope with the role sanctions. Role senders (e.g., customers, bosses, coworkers) may engage in role sanctions to “intentionally achieve change in role actors’ behaviors, the direction of desired change generally being toward increased conformity with prevailing (role) prescriptions” (Biddle and Thomas 1966, p. 28).

In line with Lazarus and colleagues (1978, 1984), salespeople normally engage in a cognitive process known as primary appraisal, here, to determine the usual severity of role sanctions associated with a given type of conflict (e.g., conflict between management and customer) or ambiguity. Additionally, salespeople normally will make secondary appraisals of the extent to which the sanctioning can be handled either emotionally or directly. In the cognitive psychology research, there are examples of differences both between individuals and between work-related problems (i.e., potential stressors) and the degree and type of coping behaviors employed (see Norman, et al. 1995) providing indirect evidence of the importance of considering salesperson cognitive appraisals in stress research.

In sum, appraisals involved with role sanctions include two components that are drawn from cognitive appraisal theory (see Lazarus and Folkman 1984). First, individuals evaluate the anticipated consequences of their non-performance – i.e., expected role sanctions. If expected role sanctions do indeed mediate the relationship between role ambiguity/conflict and the experience of actual job stress by the salesperson, it is a very important construct to acknowledge and understand. It helps to explain situations where conflict or ambiguity may exist, but are not *causing* salesperson stress. Second, individuals make an assessment as to their overall ability to engage in either problem-focused (proactive) or emotion-focused (reactive) coping in relation to the expected role sanction(s). Both appraisals potentially impact the stress actually felt by the salesperson. A detailed discussion of these appraisals follows.

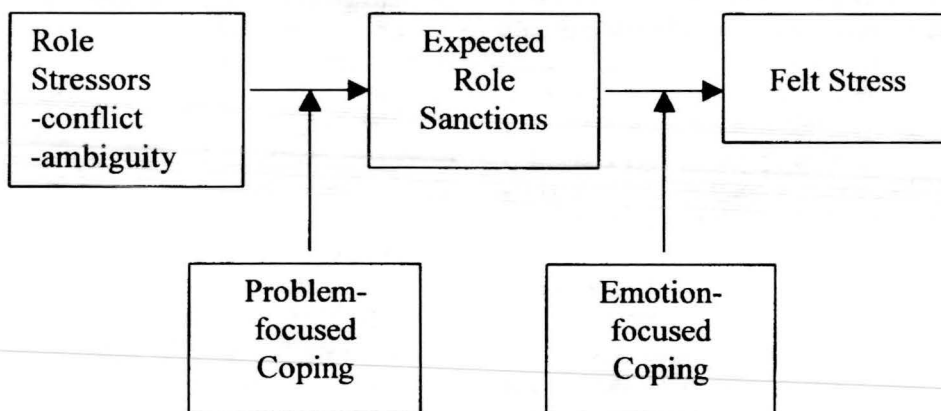
### The Primary Appraisal – Expected Role Sanctions

The primary appraisal notion differs from other theoretical perspectives on salesperson sanctions. Rather than focusing on the motivational aspects of an expected reward/effort/performance relationship – e.g., expectancy-value research (Teas and McElroy 1986) and attribution research (DeCarlo, Teas, and McElroy 1997) – primary appraisals relate to the severity of expected sanctions associated with potential non-performance of a given role and how those appraisals influences stress. Thus, expected role sanctions are not examined as motivators. Rather, expected role sanctions are proposed as mediating the effects of felt stress in roles where ambiguities and conflicts are present (see Figure 1). This hints at a second factor that differentiates role sanctions research from other research on salesperson reward and punishment.

Role sanctions are considered at a more general level than is the case in motivation research. To illustrate, attribution and expectancy research is usually concerned with specific task-situations (e.g., meeting a quota). Expected role sanctions, on the other hand, are conceptualized as global appraisals of consequences that originate from role senders (e.g., family, bosses, coworkers; see Singh 1993) usually encountered when “playing the role” of salesperson. This global assessment is more in line with the conceptualization and operationalization of extant role variables relating to role sanctions – e.g., role ambiguity and conflict. Since role theory deals with role variables at a general level, rather than with specific instances of conflict and ambiguity, role sanctions are likewise viewed at a general level. For example, even when ambiguity is finely delineated in role research – e.g., *family* ambiguity – the operationalization remains broad, capturing an overall sense of family ambiguity rather than focusing on a specific instance of ambiguity related to family.

In the sales context, cases of contradictory role prescriptions (i.e., role conflicts) are often coupled with competing role sanctions. For example, a customer may desire credit terms and service agreements that are allowable, but not desirable, from the salesperson’s organizational perspective. That is, the salesperson may be allowed by his/her organization to grant the terms desired by the customer, but will be financially sanctioned for doing so (i.e., decreased commission payment from regular commission schedule). If the terms are not granted, the customer may walk away from the deal. Thus, the salesperson is confronted with a conflict-inducing situation accompanied by two competing sanctions for his/her behavior. The aggregate of these sanctions over time from a given set of role senders (e.g., organization,

**FIGURE 1**  
Expected Role Sanctions Model of Role Stress



customer) shapes the salesperson's anticipated role sanctions for that type of conflict. While this implies a highly cognitive evaluative process on the part of the salesperson, it is a process that would likely come naturally to a salesperson in dealing with a diverse set of role senders.

The same process implied above may be seen when considering the effects of role ambiguity upon job stress. That is, the salesperson also engages in a process of cognitive appraisal related to anticipated role sanctions associated with a given type of ambiguity (e.g., from boss, coworker, etc., see Singh 1993). For example, if a salesperson is often told that she/he needs to "figure out" a way to enact an expected role or else be terminated, the sanction associated with the ambiguity affects felt stress. In addition, this sanction need not be explicit. That is, individuals commonly assume that inadequate performance of a given role, possibly stemming from being unsure of how to perform the role (i.e., role ambiguity), will result in some form of sanctioning.

Again, implied is that the relationship between role stressors and job stress is not clean and direct. This is supported by findings in previous research conducted in social psychology. In research investigating the level of stress experienced by employees who work out of their home, Norman, et al. (1995) found that sources of stress were only weakly related to the actual experience of stress and depression. In addition, they found cognitions about the consequences of stress aided in the prediction of the sources of stress – experience of stress relationship. Additional research by Glaser and Bussing (1996) found that stress is not only a direct effect of contradictory demands (i.e., role conflict), but also is influenced by the sanctions associated with contradictory demands. The notion that role sanctions mediate the relation between role stressors and felt stress, however, is tempered by the salespersons appraisals of his/her ability to cope with the sanction – this is known as the secondary appraisal.

### Secondary Appraisal – Coping

Within the context of job stress, where primary appraisals are evaluations of the severity of expected role sanctions, secondary appraisals deal with the salesperson's *anticipated ability* to cope with potential role sanctions. It is our contention that a belief about one's general ability to cope with the anticipated role sanctions will influence whether stress actually arises from a situation involving role ambiguity, role conflict, and role sanctions (see Figure 1). For example, when customer and management expectations regarding salesperson behavior conflict, salespeople become aware of the sanction(s) typically associated with the type of conflict being experienced and with their ability to cope with the expected role sanctions. These appraisals are consistent with cognitive appraisal theory as viewed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Lazarus and Launier (1978).

For example, in the situation where a salesperson is frequently confronted with conflicting demands between his/her customers and company, the salesperson may choose to play the role in accordance with the expectation of sanctions involving company/customer conflict. However, if the salesperson feels that he is in an excellent position to cope (either emotionally or directly) with the anticipated role sanctions, the overall effects of this type of role conflict on employee job stress may be less significant (i.e., a diminished conflict-stress relationship). That is, the severity of expected sanctions would be tempered by a perceived ability to cope with conflict related sanctions.

As noted earlier, support for the above contention flows from research based on Lazarus and Launier's (1978) appraisal theory of stress. That is, appraisal theory contends that a stressor's effect may be heightened or diminished by moderating factors encountered by an individual during secondary appraisals of the situation. Again, during primary appraisal, the severity of sanctions are evaluated. During a secondary appraisal, the individual would evaluate his/her ability to cope with the expected sanctions. For this secondary appraisal, either emotional-focused or problem-focused coping may be evaluated by the individual (Norman, et al. 1995). Emotion-focused coping refers to efforts to control or regulate emotional responses to the stressful situations (e.g., attempting to deny the reality of the event), whereas problem-focused coping refers to efforts to deal with the threat of the stressor itself (e.g., exerting effort to remove or circumvent the stressor).

As some sales researchers contend, one's perceived ability to cope influences one's reaction to role stimuli (i.e., role conflict and ambiguity; Goolsby 1992). For example, Goolsby (1992, p. 162) proposes, "The tendency of a boundary spanner to use problem-focused coping strategies will be associated with lower levels of role stress." This proposition could be explained through the action of problem-focused coping working to reduce levels of role conflict or ambiguity. It is our contention, however, that the same proposed relation might be explained due to a reduction in expected sanctions through enactment of problem-focused coping. The reduced level of expected role sanctions would then translate into a lower level of actual stress experienced by the salesperson relative to the level of stress that would have been experienced without engaging in problem-focused coping (see Figure 1).

In addition, Goolsby (1992, p. 162) proposes that, given the occurrence of stress, the use of emotion-focused coping, "... will be associated with higher levels of deleterious strains." In association with the role sanctions model proposed here, this implies that once a role sanction has occurred, the use of emotion-focused coping by the salesperson will actually produce a higher level of

felt stress relative to the level of stress the salesperson would have experienced through the use of problem-focused coping. However, the use of emotion-focused coping would still work to reduce the level of stress experienced by the salesperson relative to not having engaged in any method of coping. Thus, it is our belief that emotion-focused, taken as a whole, has the potential to reduce felt stress after the experience of a role sanction (see Figure 1).

Given the above discussion, the role sanctions model proposed here has the potential to aid in the explanation of several role-related research findings. For example, Singh (1993) found that the experience of role ambiguity may be broken into several distinct dimensions, each with potentially different overall effects upon outcome variables such as job satisfaction, job performance or role stress. For example, ambiguity experienced by a salesperson in relation to his/her family may actually help to decrease the negative effects of other ambiguities (e.g., job or boss) upon the aforementioned outcome variables (see Rhoads, Singh, and Goodell 1994). When considered in conjunction with the role sanctions model, one possible explanation for the differential effects of multiple facets of ambiguity is that each facet is perceived as producing different expected role sanctions, some of which may be effectively coped with by the salesperson, and some of which may influence other types of ambiguity. For example, family ambiguity may be a form of ambiguity with which a salesperson may engage in very effective problem-focused coping. This coping may not only reduce the felt stress associated with family ambiguity, but it may also effectively reduce the expected sanctions associated with other forms of ambiguity thereby reducing the overall level of felt stress for the salesperson.

Additionally, contradictory findings in the sales-related role research leave unanswered the question as to whether role conflict actually increases the performance of a salesperson, whether performance is not influenced, or is influenced in a negative manner. In the extant literature, stress is assumed to mediate the effects of role stressors on various outcome variables such as performance. However, as the role sanction model illustrates, without role sanctions stress may not be well explained even in the presence of role stressors. Given then that roles stressors may have inaccurately indicated the presence or absence of felt stress, the linkages between role stressors and outcomes are questionable. The role sanction model helps to overcome this by explicitly considering stress apart from role stressors and by proposing an important mediating variable, expected role sanctions, that may greatly impact whether stressors do indeed lead to felt stress.

The above discussion leads to the following propositions.

- P1: Role stressors (i.e., role conflict and ambiguity) are positively related to expected role sanctions.
- P2: Expected role sanctions are positively related to a salesperson's felt stress.
- P3: Given that role stressors occur, salesperson use of problem-focused coping will be associated with lower levels of expected role sanctions.
- P4: Given that expected role sanctions occur, the use of emotion-focused coping will be associated with lower levels of salesperson felt stress.

## IMPLICATIONS

An obvious next step for researching expected role sanctions would be to develop an operationalization that would capture the term's complexity. In developing this operationalization, the following suggestions are offered. One, researchers should adhere to suggestions from role theory as to the types of conflicts (cf. Chonko, et al. 1986) and ambiguities (cf. Norman, et al. 1995). To illustrate, for role conflict both inter-role and intra-role conflicts should be captured, and for role ambiguity both goal-based and process-based ambiguities are salient. Two, role sanctioning should be considered from multiple role sender perspectives. Singh and Rhoad's (1991) conceptualization of the multiple facets of ambiguity helps capture this notion.

Understanding the effects of role sanctions is beneficial to sales managers. As Goolsby (1992) points out, there is an abundance of stress related research in the sales literature, but the problems of role-related stress in the workplace have not diminished. This paper acts as a step toward conducting empirical research providing managerially actionable results as well as contributing to theory on job stress.

Through management of salesperson expectations concerning role sanctions, it may be possible to effectively reduce the intensity of stress experienced by the individual salesperson. For example, if it is clear that situations of conflict between management and customers will not result in heavy management-imposed sanctioning, salespeople should experience less stress related to that type of conflict. This style of managing could potentially lead to a stronger customer orientation.

Also, managers should be aware that the coping styles of salespeople may greatly influence the degree to which stress is felt. Salespeople who engage in behavioral coping not only may feel less stress but they may do so by remedying a role stressor. As such, these employees are less prone to experiencing a role sanction and by remedying the stressor should produce better outcomes – e.g., performance. On the other hand, some salespeople

may effectively cope with sanctions through emotional means thus reducing stress. This type of coping, however, may not lead to desired outcomes since these salespeople are not dealing with the origins of their stress, but with the psychological impact of the stress. For

example, an employee who emotionally handles stress by emotionally learning to live with sanctions might be easily outperformed by an employee who engages in the behavioral coping outlined above.

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