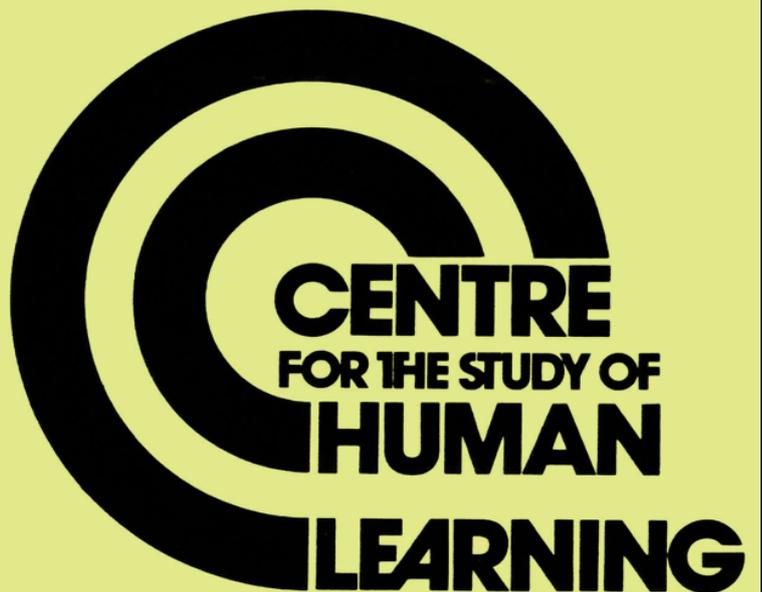


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Centre for the Study of Human Learning
(C.S.H.L.) Oxford. UK



Construing Others: A New Approach to the Study of Role And Role Conflict

Cliff McKnight, Ph.D.

The aim of the present paper is to offer possible partial solutions to some of the problems surrounding the concepts of 'role' and 'role conflict'. Although a small amount of data are presented, it should be stressed that this is not really a 'research report'; rather, it should be seen as speculatively indicating the direction of future research.

That the concept of role is problematic is evident from the literature.

For example, Sarbin and Allen (1968) say:

"In spite of the demonstrated utility of concepts elaborated by role theorists, some critics continue to point to the fact that certain vagaries seem to surround the central term role." (p.488)

Similarly, Thomas and Biddle (1966) say:

"The concept of role is the central idea in the language of most role analysts but, ironically, there is probably more disagreement concerning this concept than there is for any other in role theory." (p.29)

Indeed, the conclusion of Miller and Swanson (1960) was that:

"The concept (of role) has not proved to be fruitful, however, in psychological research." (p.400)

From the point of view of Personal Construct Theory (PCT), a person's behaviour is governed by his construing. He acts on the world in accordance with his view of the world, and he views it through his constructs. This is as true for role behaviour as it is for any other behaviour. Hence, from within PCT it makes no sense to define a role independently of the person occupying it, as many role theorists do.

Despite the obvious conceptual link between constructs and action, an operationally definable link has been sadly lacking. That is, given that we go to the trouble of finding out how a person construes a part of the world, we are still not in a very good position to predict how the person will act on that part of the world.

Outside of PCT models of action abound. We act in such a way as to express our repressed desires; we act in order to reduce drive level; we act in the way others expect us to act; we act in order to maximise subjective expected utility, and so forth. Of these examples it is subjective expected utility (SEU) which I would like to pursue in more detail. In effect SEU theory is an attempt to formalise two observations of a phenomenological nature. That is, the basis of SEU theory lies in the observations that a) value is a relative concept; value-to-an-individual, or utility, is what must be considered, and b) probabilities are not inherent in nature; they are degrees of belief which a person holds. The "expected" in SEU then refers to a mathematical expectation; that is, the utilities are weighted (multiplied) by the appropriate subjective probabilities.

In recent years, many decision theorists have become more aware that utility is not always unidimensional. Consequently, a class of models known as multi-attributed utility (MAU) models has been developed. These models enable account to be taken of the complex nature of choice situations, usually by 'decomposition' of the situation into smaller units and then re-combining these units after evaluation. Despite their mathematical elegance, the MAU models have until recently fared rather badly as psychological models, largely because the view of the situation used has been the experimenter's rather than the subject's view

.....Which brings us back to PCT! Hence, recent work by the author has been concerned with combining PCT and MAU theory in order to model (and hence predict) choice behaviour. In repertory grid terms, this involves weighting constructs according to their salience for a particular decision¹. Furthermore, it is recognised that preferred poles of constructs and weights on constructs will change as the person's purpose in making the decision changes.

In order to illustrate what is meant here, consider a person who is choosing reading material. The person will be bringing a certain set of constructs to bear on the possibilities. Some constructs will be more relevant than others, depending on why the person is choosing in the first place. For example, the construct 'not many pictures -- lots of pictures' may be very relevant (i.e., highly weighted) if he is choosing a book to read with a small child, but not as relevant if he is revising for a maths exam. Hence, the suggestion is that it is the changes in preferred poles and construct weights which produce different choices in different situations; we take "War and Peace" on a long train journey and "Woman's Realm" to the launderette. Using PCT/MAD techniques, choice of books, records and clothes have been shown largely predictable (i.e., if actual choice is correlated with predicted choice, correlations in excess of 0.9 have not been unusual).

By now, the concept of role may seem a long way away, but we are now in a position to return to it. In order to do so, consider the following argument:

It is possible to elicit from a person a list of roles with which they have contact but which they do not occupy, and then use these as elements in a repertory grid in order to elicit constructs. Furthermore, since the person is a member of the class of objects being construed (i.e., a person), they should be able to apply the constructs to themselves. However, the preferred pole and importance of each construct will depend on the role which the person is occupying. Hence, it should be possible to define a particular role for an individual in terms of a set of personal constructs, a knowledge of the preferred poles, and a set of weights on these constructs. On the basis of this argument, the following procedure was carried out:

The subject was a 24-year-old female Trainee Social Worker who at the time was attending a full-time course leading to the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work. Nine elements were elicited, these being roles with which she had some interaction. These were then used to elicit constructs by triadic presentation (the 3-card trick!), yielding the following grid:

1. The actual methods used and the decision theoretic notions underlying them are not central to the present paper. They are fully dealt with elsewhere (McKnight, 1977).

FIGURE 1 : Elicited Repertory Grid.

		ELEMENTS									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Doctor (G.P.)		2	4	4	5	3	2	1	2	1	3
Vicar		4	1	5	4	1	1	4	5	2	5
Bus conductor		2	4	2	2	5	4	5	1	4	4
School Teacher		5	3	5	3	1	3	2	4	2	2
Secretary		3	5	1	1	4	4	3	2	3	1
Nurse		3	3	4	3	3	1	3	3	4	1
Hairdresser		1	4	1	2	5	5	4	1	4	4
Therapist		5	2	3	3	1	1	2	4	1	3
Shop assistant		2	5	2	1	5	2	4	2	5	2
		CONSTRUCTS									
Physical things	Mental things										
'Real world'	Not real world										
Financial gain	No financial gain										
Serving	Controlling										
Personal growth	Not personal growth										
Caring	Not caring										
Knowledgeable	Not expected to know										
Expect results	Don't expect results										
Expect honesty	Don't expect honesty										
Probably ambitious	Not necessarily ambitious										

Since the suggestion is that the importance of the constructs changes depending on the role being occupied by the subject, seven such roles were elicited from her. These were 1) wife, 2) daughter, 3) student, 4) neighbour, 5) consumer, 6) Social Worker, and 7) close friend, same sex. In order to remain within the choice paradigm, it was necessary to obtain a rank-ordering of the elements in relation to each of these 'reference' roles. Hence, the subject was asked to choose the element she would most like to be if she could not adopt the reference role. That is, if she was in a situation where she would normally adopt the role of 'wife' but was prevented from doing so by an omnipotent deity, would she rather play the role of bus conductor, doctor or secretary? In this way, a rank ordering of the elements was obtained in relation to each of the seven reference roles.

Preferred poles and construct weights were then elicited in relation to each of the reference rules in turn, and these weights were then combined with the repertory grid in order to derive predictions of the actual rank orders provided by the subject. The correlations obtained between predicted and actual rank orders were as follows:

FIGURE 2 : Correlations between actual and predicted rank orders.

ROLE	CORRELATION
Wife	0.900
Daughter	0.917
Student	0.900
Neighbour	0.867
Consumer	0.967
Social Worker	0.917
Close friend, same sex	0.967

In view of the high nature of these correlations, they are taken as support for the view that a role may be defined in terms of a person's construing and the relative importance of the constructs used. Hence, the notion of weighted constructs not only provides a link between construing and action but also allows for the derivation of an operational definition of roles. Instead of assuming that a role is delimited by the expectations of others, the present formulation assumes that such delimitation can only occur if the person construes such expectations as relevant, if he construes them at all.

In addition to offering an operational definition of roles, the present formulation also offers a method of defining and exploring role conflict. That is, role conflict can be seen as requiring two conditions to be met: a) the preferred pole of at least one construct must lie at opposite ends for the two roles, and b) the construct must be highly weighted for both roles.

For example, consider the subject's construct "Expect honesty -- don't expect honesty". In relation to the role of wife this construct had a weighting of 0.23 and in relation to the role of neighbour it had a weighting of 0.185. Hence, the construct was fairly important in both roles¹. However, the preferred pole lay at opposite ends for these two roles. Thus, the formulation would suggest that conflict would be experienced if the person attempted to adopt both roles simultaneously and that such conflict would centre on what the person called "honesty". Although in this case the two roles may never be adopted simultaneously, similar conflicts are obviously anticipated, for example, by rules which prevent surgeons operating on close relatives.

Once again, this formulation places the locus of control firmly within the individual. That is, instead of the familiar idea that role conflict results from the incongruent expectations of others, the present suggestion is that it arises from within the construct system of the person who reports the experience.

One problem which has been glossed over here is that the meaning of a particular construct may change from one role to another. This problem was experienced in a study of magistrates' sentencing behaviour (McKnight, op.cit.) where it was necessary to allow re-rating in relation to each case being sentenced. In the present context, it may prove necessary to all re-rating in relation to each reference role.

To summarise, therefore, it is contended that problems involved in the use of the concept of role have been due to lack of operational definitions. By combining PCT and MAU techniques it is possible to formulate a model of choice behaviour from within which operational definitions of role and role conflict can be derived. In keeping with a PCT approach, the model places the ultimate locus of control within the individual. The notion of weighted constructs on which the model is based also provides an important link between construing and action.

1. The method of eliciting weights ensures that they sum to 1.0. For this subject, the largest weight elicited was 0.446 and the smallest was 0.016.

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