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Mindy Demaree
Susquehanna University

Zachary Wright
Susquehanna University

Kaitlynn McMullen
Susquehanna University

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Individual Role Stability in Self-Selected Groups

Mindy Demaree, Kaitlyn McMullen, Zachary Wright and M. L. Klotz

Susquehanna University

Introduction

- In daily life, people navigate between different roles such as student, employee, and friend. Roles can be defined as sets of activities or potential behaviors that are associated with a particular environment (Wilson & Baumann, 2015).
- In their classic study of small group behavior, Benne and Sheats (1948) identified roles such as compromiser, knowledge-giver, group leader, and follower within groups. More recent additions to this typology include comic relief and nurturer.
- Some roles are dictated by the type of group (e.g., an employee typically is hired to fill a specific role), but in many cases roles are chosen by the individual. Our study focuses on roles individuals adopt in self-selected groups, and the extent to which those roles are consistent across different groups.
- Previous research on group roles has generally focused on task-oriented groups, but in a college population, friendship groups and extracurricular groups (e.g., clubs) are also very important. Extracurricular groups might have a more formal structure if they are focused on accomplishing tasks, but friendship groups typically are less formal and more unstructured (Unsworth, Kragt, & Johnston-Billings, 2018). Even so, members of a group of friends also can adopt roles within the group.
- Our study examined the extent to which people maintain the same role within their different self-selected groups. For example, individuals drawn to the leader role might run for office in clubs—but do they also tend to be in charge of decision making in friendship groups?
- Finally, we included the personality trait of self-monitoring. High self-monitors tend to adapt their behavior to demands of the situation, while low self-monitors tend to show greater cross-situational consistency.

Hypotheses

- We predicted that participants generally would show consistency in the roles they adopted across different types of groups.
- We expected that participants who scored higher in self-monitoring would show less consistency across situations in the roles they adopt.
- We expected to find a positive correlation between having chosen the role and both effectiveness and happiness with the role.

Method

- Participants were 108 students (83 female, 25 male) recruited from psychology classes at a small, liberal arts school
- They were asked to think about three specific groups to which they currently or recently belonged: a friend group, an extracurricular group or club, and a third group on campus (either friends or extracurricular). For each, they indicated the main role they played in the group (leader, follower, equal contributor, advice giver, nurturer, or comic relief), the extent to which they adequately fulfill the requirements of that role and how happy that role makes them. They also indicated the extent to which they tend to play the same roles overall in the groups they belong to.
- The questionnaire included the Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale (Johnston & Finney, 2010) and a measure of self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974).

Results and Discussion

- We did not find the hypothesized consistency in roles across groups. Only 6.42% of participants occupied the same role in all three groups; 37.61% played the same role in two groups, and 55.96% had different roles in the three groups. Of the 41 participants who had the same role in two different groups, 16 were leaders, 8 were equal contributors, and 7 were the knowledgeable person.
- There was evidence that the choice of roles was somewhat constrained by the nature of the groups. Fewer participants said they were leaders in their friend group (20.2%) than in their extracurricular group (40.4%). There also was a much higher rate for nurturer in friend groups (22.0%) than extracurricular (2.8%).
- We observed some gender differences in the roles chosen. In friend groups, men were more likely to be leaders than were women, but in their extracurricular group there was no difference. Women were more likely than men to say they were equal contributors in both friend groups and extracurricular groups. Across groups, 100% of the nurturer roles were occupied by women. (See Table 1)
- As predicted, being able to choose one's role in the group was associated with more positive perceptions of the role. For friend groups, choosing their role was correlated with both adequately fulfilling that role, and the role making them happy. The pattern was the same for extracurricular groups and the other groups. (See Table 2.)
- Self-monitoring was not significantly correlated with self-rated role consistency. However, general life satisfaction, as measured by the Basic Needs Satisfaction Scale, did show the predicted positive correlations with adequately fulfilling the chosen role, $r(109) = .236, p = .0134$, and happiness with the role, $r(109) = .411, p < .0001$, in friend groups. For extracurricular groups, satisfaction correlated only with fulfilling the role, $r(109) = .249, p = .0092$.
- Finally, we conducted ANOVAs on ratings of how happy participants were with the different roles in the groups. For the friend group there was a significant effect of role, $F(5, 103) = 4.56, p = .0008$. Followers were significantly less happy with their role than all others, and those whose role was comic relief were significantly happier than leaders and equal contributors. Those in the knowledgeable and nurturer roles were equal to all but followers. Extracurricular groups also produced a significant effect, $F(5, 103) = 5.33, p = .0002$. Those in the follower role were significantly less happy than those in all other roles.

Table 1

Percentage of Participants in each Role by Gender and Type of Group

Role	Friend Group		Extracurricular Group	
	F	M	F	M
Leader	18.5	28.0	40.5	44.0
Follower	3.7	4.0	14.8	12.0
Equal contributor	24.7	16.0	30.9	24.0
Knowledgeable	13.6	32.0	4.9	12.0
Nurturer	29.6	0.0	3.7	0.0
Comic Relief	9.9	20.0	4.5	8.0

Note. Values represent the percentage of subjects within each column who occupy the role.

Table 2

Extent to Which Role Was Chosen Correlated with How Well Subjects Fulfill the Role and their Happiness with the Role

	Fulfill Role	Happy with Role
Friend Group	.267*	.293*
Extracurricular Group	.343**	.453***
Other Group	.256**	.540***

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$ *** $p < .0001$

Conclusion

Participants did not show role consistency across different types of groups. It may be that the norms of extracurricular groups are structured in a way that restricts the choices students have in their roles. For example, they are required to have leaders who serve specific terms, and some members must be followers. In friend groups, roles may be more flexible, with less need for a specific leader and a greater emphasis on equal contributions.