



## Role ambiguity and self-efficacy: The moderating effects of goal orientation and procedural justice

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### ABSTRACT

The present study investigated variables that moderated the relationship between role ambiguity and self-efficacy. Results of a field study found support for the moderating role of learning goal orientation, such that the relationship between role ambiguity and self-efficacy was weaker when learning goal orientation was high. In addition, we found that procedural justice moderated the role ambiguity–self-efficacy relationship, such that the relationship was stronger when procedural justice was high. However, contrary to our prediction, avoiding goal orientation did not interact with role ambiguity to predict self-efficacy. Implications of these findings for theory and practice are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The construct of role ambiguity, defined as “employees’ perceptions of uncertainty concerning various aspects of their jobs” (Breugh & Colihan, 1994, p. 191), has generated persistent research interest. In part, this is due to the fact that research findings have related it to a broad range of work-relevant outcomes, such as performance, turnover intentions, actual turnover, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Fisher & Gitelson, 1983; Jackson & Schuler, 1985; Tubre & Collins, 2000). Among the many variables that have been found to be related to role ambiguity, one receiving increased research attention is self-efficacy (Beauchamp, Bray, Eys, & Carron, 2002; Chen & Bliese, 2002; Jex & Gudanowski, 1992). Self-efficacy refers to “people’s beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). In the present study, we focus on the belief in one’s capability to execute actions needed to meet job requirements, a form of self-efficacy that is task specific and relative malleable (Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2004).

There are two reasons to believe that role ambiguity may be negatively related to self-efficacy. First, role ambiguity reduces the quality of the information that can be used to make an accurate assessment of one’s ability to perform a task. Second, according to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), to have a high level of self-efficacy, a person must be able to visualize effective performance in a given situation. When role ambiguity is high, the ability to visualize one’s performance is impaired, thereby reducing one’s confidence in his/her ability to perform effectively. Consistent with these arguments, Gist and Mitchell (1992) suggested that one way to increase self-efficacy is to give an individual “a more thorough understanding of the task attributes, complexity, task environment, and the way in which these factors can be controlled” (p. 203).

However, there has been mixed empirical evidence on the negative relationship between role ambiguity and self-efficacy. While a negative relationship has been found in some studies (e.g., Beauchamp et al., 2002; Bray & Brawley, 2002), no such

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effects have been observed in others (Jex & Gudanowski, 1992). Such inconsistent findings suggest the presence of moderating variables. The present study sought to identify conditions under which role ambiguity may be related to self-efficacy. According to Kahn and colleagues (1964), the relationships between role ambiguity and its related variables tend to be moderated by three broad categories of variables: organizational, interpersonal, and personality processes. In the present study, we focused on two potential moderators: goal orientation representing a personality process and procedural justice representing an organizational process.

## 2. Theoretical foundation

### 2.1. Goal orientation

Researchers have suggested that there are two different dispositional goal orientations: performance goal and learning goal orientations (e.g., Vandewalle, Cron, & Slocum, 2001). Performance-oriented individuals tend to conceive of their ability as a fixed entity. As such, they seek to prove their competence on a task. Learning-oriented individuals, however, tend to view their abilities as being malleable. For this reason, they tend to focus on improving their task performance. A refinement of the construct bifurcated performance goal orientation into two separate dimensions (Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Vandewalle, 1997): proving goal orientation (that focuses on demonstrating one's abilities) and avoiding goal orientation (that focuses on avoiding negative comments on one's competence). Empirical research has provided supportive evidence on the theoretical justification, factor structure, convergent, and discriminant validity of this new conceptualization (Vandewalle et al., 2001).

We argue that goal orientation may provide a mechanism to explain the inconsistent relationship between role ambiguity and self-efficacy. Although our earlier discussion suggests that role ambiguity may represent a considerable challenge to employees and may be negatively related to their self-efficacy, this effect may be less pernicious for individuals who are high on a learning goal orientation. Previous research has shown that these individuals tend to view a challenging situation as an opportunity to advance their abilities (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Instead of withdrawing themselves from the challenge, they confront it head-on, becoming intrinsically involved in the task, developing effective task strategies, expending additional effort, and intensifying their attention on task-related activities (Elliot, 1999; Elliot & Church, 1997; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Elliot & Thrash, 2002; Van Yperen & Janssen, 2002). These arguments suggest that learning-oriented individuals may proactively scout for information that can be used to reduce role ambiguity. Even if they fail to perform adequately—as a result of role ambiguity—they draw on these experiences to enhance their abilities. These characteristics enable them to remain resilient and see the positive side even in a dire situation, as well as allow them to acquire the competence to overcome role ambiguity and to perform effectively at work. As such, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1.** Learning goal orientation moderates the relationship between role ambiguity and self-efficacy, such that the negative relationship is weaker when the level of learning goal orientation is high.

Individuals who are high on avoiding goal orientation may be particularly averse to appearing incompetent (Vandewalle, 1997). As a result, they resort to avoidance when they encounter situations that are considered beyond their coping abilities (Elliot & Thrash, 2002). There are a number of reasons to anticipate that avoiding goal orientation may moderate the role ambiguity–self-efficacy relationship. First, avoiding-oriented individuals may respond negatively to role ambiguity because it is likely to adversely affect their performance and potentially reveal their lack of abilities. These negative responses, or learned helplessness, may hinder their abilities to develop effective strategies to cope with role ambiguity and increase their tendency to attribute it to a lack of abilities (Diener & Dweck, 1980). Second, as an almost inevitable consequence of role ambiguity, individuals may encounter negative performance feedback. The feedback, however, may be viewed as a sign of low abilities by avoiding-oriented individuals (Vandewalle et al., 2001). Third, to the extent that an avoiding goal may direct one's attention to negative outcomes or information, perceptions of role ambiguity are more likely to elicit threat appraisal of the situation and reduce one's sense of control, which may produce a low level of competency (Bandura, 1997). Fourth, avoiding-oriented individuals are likely to experience negative physiological states such as anxiety, which may reduce one's self-efficacy (Elliot & McGregor, 1999). As such, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 2.** Avoiding goal orientation moderates the relationship between role ambiguity and self-efficacy, such that the negative relationship is stronger when the level of avoiding goal orientation is high.

Proving goal orientation is sometimes viewed as a hybrid of two motives: performance approach (seek success) and performance avoidance (avoid failure) (Elliot & Church, 1997). When performance approach motive is accessible, individuals may “produce processes and outcomes similar to those yielded by mastery (learning) goals” (Elliot, 1999), such as high task motivation, perseverance in the face of difficulties, increased effort, and enhanced task performance. In contrast, when performance avoidance motive is accessible, individuals may demonstrate maladaptive responses compatible to those yielded by avoiding goals, such as withdrawal from tasks, fear of failure, and low performance. Researchers argue that the accessibility of these two competing motives depends on how a given situation is perceived (as a threat or as a learning opportunity) by proving-oriented individuals. As such, proving-oriented individuals may potentially respond to role ambiguity in

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