ROLE THEORY: OPERATIONALIZATION OF KEY CONCEPTS

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Draft Version 25.03. 2010
Introduction

Role Theory emerged first in Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) in the 1970s when scholars started to ascertain the regular behavioural patterns of classes of states in the bipolar cold war structure, e.g. “non-aligned”, “allies”, “satellites” etc. (Holsti 1970). Since then, a growing number of role theorists assert the existence of an expanding number of social roles – such as a leader, mediator, initiator – and counter-roles – such as follower, aggressor etc - as the social structure of international relations evolved (Wendt 1999). Early foreign policy role scholarship focussed on the ego-part of roles, i.e. self-conceptualizations of a state’s purpose by its leadership (Holsti 1970; Walker 1979, 1987, Wish 1980). As a consequence, this literature did away with much of the foundations of role theory in sociology, social psychology and anthropology which stressed the relational and social roots of the concept, e.g. the constitutive effects of counter-roles and the recognition by others (Coser 2003: 340). In the last decades role scholarship both in FPA and IR theory have come to rediscover these roots. They have, thus, not only started to transcend the individual or state level of analysis to investigate the systemic dynamics of role change (Wendt 1999; 227f.). They have also commenced with the analysis of more complex role sets (e.g. Jönsson’s 1982 pioneering study on superpower role sets), which include more than one role, and the stability of these role sets given the changes in the distribution of power and institutions in the wake of the Cold War (e.g. Maull 1990/91; Le Prestre 1997; Elgström/Smith 2006).

Today, leading role theorists differ with regard to the sources and factors shaping national roles: whereas American role theorists tend to stress the actor’s material or

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1 For comprehensive reviews see Walker 1987, Breuning (this volume); Thies (forthcoming).
cognitive traits as „determining factors“ and the stability of roles as causes for action, European based scholars tend to employ a constructivist understanding that explores language and social interaction and in which roles provide „reasons for action“. And yet all role theorists seem to agree that roles in international relations cannot be thought of or theorized about without reference to other roles and a basic recognition through society (Thies forthcoming: 9; Stryker/Stratham 1985: 323).

In this volume, we build on both of these threads of current role theory, the one that emphasizes cognitive or institutional structures as causes for certain roles and the other that posits that roles are „embedded“ in certain social orders/arrangements“ which in turn give meaning and reasons for specific action. Our authors and role theorists in general also use a variety of methods to analyse ego and alter expectations that shape national roles. Nabers (this volume) uses linguistic techniques based on the discursive approach of the… school. Flockhart, Frank and .. use a phenomenological approach of inductively analysing texts to recover roles Poland, Germany, NATO and other international actors play. Müller conceptualizes …

Defining roles and related key concepts

Roles are social positions (as well as a socially recognized category of actors) which are constituted by ego and alter expectations regarding the purpose of an actor in an organized group (cf. Thies 2010: 3-4; Andrews 1975: 529). The position’s function in the group is limited in time and scope and it is dependent on the group’s structure and

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2 Many role theorists, however, do not consider themselves in either of these camps as they prefer a middle ground between positivism and post-positivism.
3 For a similar approach with regard to sociological role theory building: Biddle 1986: 68. Biddle argues that role theory has been occupied with roles as patterns of behavior; identities to be assumed, scripts or expectations for behavior that are shared in a society and that all of these foci should be kept.
4 For a definition of National Role Conceptions (NRC) see Krotz 2008: 2: „NRCs are domestically held political self-views or self-understandings regarding the proper role and purpose of one’s state in the international arena“ see also cf. Aggestam 2006: 19.
purpose. Whereas some roles are constitutive to the group as such, recognized member of the international community, other roles or role sets are functionally specific, i.e. balancer, initiator etc.  

**Role expectations** for corporate actors, such as states or international organizations, may vary considerably. On the one hand, they regularly comprise of ego, i.e. domestic and/or individual expectations as to what the appropriate role is and what it implies, and alter expectations, that is implicit or explicit demands by others (counter or complimentary roles, audience cues). On the other hand, role expectations differ with regard to their scope, specificity, communality and thus their obligation. Hence, roles, and even more so role sets, entail a potential for conflict within a role (intra role conflicts, e.g. between ego and alter expectations) and between roles (inter-role conflicts) (Harnisch forthcoming).

**Role conceptions** refer to an actor’s perception of his position vis-à-vis others (ego part of a role) and the perception of the role expectations of others (alter part of a role) as signalled through language and action (Kirste/Maull 1996: ??; Deitelhoff 2006: 66 Check). As such, role conceptions encompass what Wendt has called the social identity of an actor and the actions and perceptions of others (cf. Gaupp 1983: 109). Role conceptions are inherently contested because roles and their enactment are closely related to the roles of other actors (counter and complementary roles). This “structural environment of roles” may put severe limits on the behaviour (social choice) and properties (social status) and even the very existence of others (Stryker 2006: 227). If, for example, the European Union would assume a predominating role in the foreign policy making of its member states, finally displacing them, the resulting effect may be that the constituting parts fear for their very existence as “sovereign states”.

Changes in roles or role sets are important determinants for both role enactment and identity formation. Role enactment, often taken as the dependent variable in role

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5 Holsti introduced a typology of some 17 major national roles which has been taken up by Walker (1979), Chafetz et al. 1996; Adigbue (2007); Jönsson (1982), Harnisch/Maull (2001); Elgström/Smith (2006) have introduced typologies of role sets for superpowers, civilian powers and the European Union respectively.
scholarship, refers to the behavior of an actor when performing a role. Role performances regularly differ considerably from role expectations, both ego as well as alter, and role enactment may also differ in its constitutive effect for the role beholder and the respective social group. E.g. Mead (1934) hypothesized that the number or roles performed by an actor in a group increased the actor’s social capacity for interaction in that group (complexity of role set). Inverse, complete nonperformance in a possible role or set of roles implies that non-performed roles may have not have an impact on the process of self-identification (see below).

Whereas FPA role theory does not yet imply any particular assumption on the number of roles and processes of self-identification, the research in this volume suggests that the fewer the number of roles an actor performs, the more likely it is that these roles more or less shape the identity of that actor (Krotz/Sperling this volume).

**Excursion: role and identity**

The social categories of role and identity are closely intertwined by most researchers, but hardly ever clearly defined and related to each other (Breuning this volume). Early role theorists modelled the relationship by equating the ego part of a role with the social role itself. Roles therefore were defined as self-conceptions, self-referent cognitions that agents apply to themselves as a consequence of the social role positions they occupy (cf. Hogg et al. 1995: 256). In this conceptualization, the social embeddedness of roles were mostly neglected (see above), but causal theorizing was retained as these (fixed) national role conceptions could be interpreted as causing a specific role behavior. Identity, then, is reduced to a social identity, meaning that agency primarily or exclusively defines itself through the eyes of others and vis-à-vis society. Drawing on Wendt’s distinction between corporate and role identities, early role theorists and CFA analysts tended to focus on role identities only.

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6 Role behavior regularly involves speech acts, various foreign policy actions, such as negotiations, air bombardments, and non-action, e.g. the denial to shake hands between officials of allied nations. In this case non-action through gesturing also structurates social relations by paying respect or displaying disrespect (Wolf 2008).

7 Wendt defines corporate identities as ‘the intrinsic, self-organizing qualities that constitute actor individuality’, and social identities as the ‘sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object’ (Wendt, 1994: 385).
In the 1990s, social constructivist and discourse theorists have been prone to distinguish role and identity more clearly by splitting national roles into a distinct ego- and alter-part and by endogenizing both of them. Again drawing on Wendt, and Mead, these later models refer to the ego-part of a role as the self-conceptualization of an actor’s social position with regard to a given social group (social identity or role identity). This ego-part is then endogenized in the process of role taking where a corporate identity meets with the role identity, i.e. anticipated attributes of a social role as interpreted by the role beholder (cf. Harnisch and Nabers in this volume).  

Changes in roles and their enactment come in two types: adaptation and learning. As defined here, role adaptation refers to changes in the choice of strategies and instruments when performing a role. The purpose of that underlying role stays fixed. Adaptation processes are often used as causal mechanisms in rationalistic role approaches where roles primarily regulate behaviour but are not interpreted as having constitutive effects for an actor or social order. Within the FPA literature, adaptation,

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8 Underlying these models is Mead’s understanding of the process of identity formation. In his reading, self-consciousness can only develop once one is able to relate one’s own subjective feelings and experiences (what Wendt calls corporate identity and Mead refers to as ‘I’) to the understanding of how one can also be understood to exist as a separate person in the eyes of others (the ‘me’ or what Wendt defines as social identity) (Mead 1967: 173-178 and Greenhill 2008: 354).
as defined here, is similar to the first three levels of foreign policy change in Hermann’s typology (1990, 2007): 1) increasing or decreasing the use of certain instruments; 2) changing how and in which order certain instruments are used (tactics); 3) changing the way how the problem is perceived (strategy). In the scholarship on foreign policy learning, adaptation, in this sense, resembles simple learning, i.e. shifts in behaviour prompted by failure in which neither values nor goals of an actor are subject to reassessment (Ziegler 1993: 6; Levy 1994).

Learning, as defined by Jack Levy, describes a change of beliefs (or the degree of confidence in one’s beliefs) or the development of new beliefs, skills, or procedures as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience. Levy distinguishes diagnostic learning, which entails “the definition of the situation or the preferences, intentions, or relative capabilities of others” (Levy 1994: 285) from complex learning, which consists of changes in the actors’ own preference rankings or a transformation of the underlying understanding about the nature of the political system within which the actor functions (cf. along these lines Walker/Schafer 2004; Marfleet/Simpson 2006). In general, Levy’s definition of complex learning is consistent with the behavioural approach towards international roles. It focuses on the behaviour and the properties of an actor (i.e. identities, interests and capabilities) but merely touches upon the existence, the constitutive effects of social learning (cf. Jepperson et al. 1996: 41). Drawing on Wendt’s distinction between the corporate and the social identity, however, we can also tie up Levy’s learning conceptualization with a more constitutive understanding of learning. In such a reading of learning processes, actors’ social identities and corporate identities can undergo profound changes which may even transform the actors’ self-perception of who they are. In effect, this opening provides space for a structurationist reconfiguration of agency, i.e. roles and identities as agency properties and structure, i.e. social order through social interaction (for a similar approach Aggestam 2006: 14; Delori 2009).

Role making, i.e. as-if role taking, depicts the process of role learning from a specific symbolic interactionist perspective (Harnisch 2010). Based on the differentiation between “I” and “Me”, Mead conceives learning as a “transformation” of the
constitutive parts of the self (Herbornth 2004: 78-80). In routine situations, the “me-part” of the self as the “I-part” has been reconciled with the perceptions of social norms through practices (routines) (Mead 1934: 199). Learning, then, takes place when the process of role taking results in a transformation of the “I” and the “Me”. In problematic situations, the “I-part” becomes more prevalent, because old routines do not promise to achieve the anticipated effects, i.e. material pay-offs and/or immaterial stabilizing effects for the self. In these situations the “I-part” takes over and the self acts “as-if” it was performing a new role. Thus as-if role taking by definition excludes the routines of the old role and does not reify existing social structures (Mead 1934: 209-212, 214-218).

Figure 3: Role and Identity in later role theory: Endogenization of corporate identity (I-Part)

Significant and generalized others are central concepts in symbolic interactionism because various roles cannot be conceived of without them. In this reasoning, the generalized other is a (theoretical) starting point only, because generalized other cannot be met in person. It can only be imagined as an abstract reference point of the “I” to recognize itself as belonging to a special type (identity) or social category (e.g. human being) (Dodds et al. 1997). Mead’s conceptualization of the significant other is build upon this process because it presupposes choice by agency. As Wendt notes, “not all

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9 In a nutshell, there is no ‘I’ without a ‘Me’ and there is no ‘Me’ without an ‘Other” (Mead 1925: 268).
others are equally significant, however, so power and dependency relations play an important role in the story” (Wendt 1999: 327).

In interpersonal relationships significant others are often associated with primary socializing agents, such as parents and siblings. The latter assert considerable leverage because children face significant material and immaterial, e.g. emotional, barriers to withdraw from the relationship. In international relations, states or other actors do have considerably more choice. And yet, these choices are also shaped by tangible and intangible parts of their corporate identity: their material extension and resources plus the (immaterial) notion of the state’s identity and the ‘needs’ that derive from it (Wendt 1999: 328).

Therefore, the selection or appearance of significant others in international relations does not happen randomly. The choice or constitution of a significant other is based on past experiences by the role beholder. The occurrence of significant others, i.e. former colonial or occupatory powers, is often tied to crisis or (external) shock situations in which given role conceptions are challenged, either materially or immaterially or both (cf. Folz 2008: 14). But role learning must not be reduced to action and crisis. The transformation of significant others can also be the result of not performing a role, i.e. undoing a significant relationship by negligence (Herborth 2004: 80).

**Role change: causal and constitutive modes**

In the remainder of this chapter, I sketch out the repertoire of causal and constitutive modes of role change. These five modes have been, to a varying degree, subject to extensive research in the FPA and IR literature. Accordingly, this survey is brief and focuses on their role theoretical implication.

Broadly, role learning can be conceptualized in two ways: in rationalism and cognitivism learning depicts a causal process in which the role beholder changes the structure and content of a role conception based on new (deviant) information, i.e. experience. In social constructivism learning is conceptualized as a constitutive process in which the beholder acquires a new role (and identity) in a given or evolving social group (cf. Harnisch 2010). The mode of learning, then, is not fixed, but its choice has important implications for the scope and societal impact of role change. For example, social constructivism implies that role learning goes hand in hand with the change of
counter or complimentary roles. In this conceptualization, role learning has an “transformative ontology” (Dessler 1989), because when actors acquire a new role and act upon what they hold as appropriate role behaviour, they recreate the counter roles around them, rather than adapting to the latter. Also, in such a reading role learning in foreign policy is not restricted to socially accepted or even prescribed behaviour. It may (and actually does) also entail, to a varying degree, that actors learn roles that are unacceptable to others or the society at large. In rational and cognitive designs, the modes of role change have often been distinguished by their causal origin: whether roles are “ascribed” by society or others or “achieved” by the beholder (Sarbin/Allen 1968: 496f., Le Prestre 1997a: 7). Subsequent research has hypothesized that novices, as a class of young states, only hold a few roles that are mainly ascribed. In contrast, mature states have few ascribed but multiple achieved roles. In addition, mature states, as recognized members of a group, often ascribe roles to novices (Thies 2010:8). One of the modes by which roles are ascribed bilaterally has been identified as “altercasting”. In cognitive role theory altercasting may thus be referred to as the conscious manipulation of one’s own role taking behavior to (re)shape the role of another actor, presumably a counter or commensurate role. As such altercasting can be distinguished from socialization because the former does not necessarily imply the adoption of group standards (identities) as it may be directed to a bilateral relationship only (Malic 2006). However, if there is a group consensus that one of its members should act as a “teacher” of given group norms vis-à-vis a “pupil”, than altercasting may cross over into socialization practices (see below). But altercasting, at least in this reading, may also be directed towards and yet unknown order in which group norms are yet to be determined.

In the role literature, normative persuasion is by definition directed towards a specific social order which is upheld or sought, among others, by normative entrepreneurs (Arora 2006: 59f.). Based on Habermas’ theory of communicative action normative persuasion occurs when actors engage in linguistic interaction to assess the appropriateness of roles in a situation of uncertainty. As Müller, Risse, Deitelhoff and others have argued actors do not necessarily always want to maximize their own fixed

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10 In this sense, the role of a “rogue state”, “aggressor”, “outsider” is a constitutive counter role for the “insiders, civilized nations”, “defenders of democracy” or “protector”.

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utility, but may also seek to arrive at a reasoned consensus, succumb to the better argument, even if such behaviour is in contradiction to their own well-formulated prior interests (Müller 1994; Risse 2000, Deitelhoff 2006).

Normative persuasion has demanding scope conditions. In particular, actors communicating in negotiations of an agreement need a common stock of shared understandings, i.e. a lifeworld. These lifeworlds are deemed to compensate against the risk of dissent by defining the possible range of legitimate arguments. They are thus depicted as a realm of trust in which a reasoned consensus among arguing states can evolve. The current culture of multilateral diplomacy and international public law establish only a very thin layer of a shared lifeworld so that states are likely to refrain from engaging in communicative action at this stage (Deitelhoff/Müller 2005).

Socialisation, then, can be distinguished from both learning and normative persuasion as a mechanism of role change. It describes a process by which an outsider internalizes the behavioural rules previously set by a community of insiders. Socialisation theory, thus, assumes an intact social group/setting with a fixed normative structure and it leaves very little room for agency beyond the social identity within the group. In contrast to the Habermasian ideal speech situation, socialisation occurs in a highly asymmetrical power situation: between states or international organisations that act as socialisation agencies which hold the material and immaterial resources and the external state, lacking but striving for those resources (Schimmelfennig 2003: 406).

Two avenues of state socialisation have been identified in the literature: in the first instance, socializees adopt community standards because socializing agencies use a strategy of political conditionality based on ‘reinforcement by material reward’ (Schimmelfennig 2005). In principle, this rationalist interpretation of socialisation is compatible with a process-oriented understanding of socialisation, but it is incommensurate with a results-oriented notion, because the latter assumes that socializees have internalized group rules and norms and do not need material incentives to engage in appropriate behaviour (cf. Schimmelfennig 2003: 407).

In the second instance, socialisation either implicates the legitimacy of group norms in a modus which has been dubbed „social influencing“ or by creating legitimacy through

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11 In a first, rough cut, trust may be defined as the belief that one will not be harmed when his or her fate is placed in the hands of others. As such, trust always entails a combination of uncertainty and vulnerability, cf. Rathbun 2009: 349.
a process of normative persuasion (Flockhart 2006: 97). Socialisation theorists assert that social influencing occurs in two distinctive patterns: on the one hand by way of imitation in which the socializee imitates schemes and rules of the socialising agency in a situation which is characterized by uncertainty (Schimmelfennig 2003: 410); on the other hand socializing agents elicit pro-norm behaviour by social rewards/punishment or argumentative action which does not allow for any form of coercion, neither materially or immaterially.

By focusing on the internalization of group norms, socialization theory promises to enable role scholars to better understand/explain the importance of international institutions both formal and informal. However, socialisation tends to underestimate the saliency of agency, both in terms of creative learning and in terms of the resilience of corporate identities vis-à-vis social identities. Indeed, if socialisation allows for persuasion, then socializees may well persuade socializing agents that new norms and rules should be created to better resemble the groups’ collective identity.

**Summary**

There are important benefits from using role theoretical and related concepts. By providing clear definitions, we may be better prepared to capture complex international social relations across levels of analysis. The better we are able to integrate knowledge from diverse research fields, the larger the synthetic benefits of role theory will be. Similarly, however, the larger the gains of synthesis are, the greater the “losses” for each unique research tradition may be. Despite potential gains, role theory may face considerable impediments to deliver on its synergistic promises.

To anticipate some of our conclusions, I sketch out hypotheses based on the above discussion: To begin with, in his seminal article Kalevi Holsti already mused that young states may not develop cohesive role sets until they engage in regular and dense interactions with their social environment (Holsti 1970: 299). As a consequence, we may find that role changes induce intense domestic debates at least in democracies so that foreign policy issues may even become salient for electoral choices. Second, recent advances in the institutionalisation of world politics may explain why more cohesive patterns of role sets occur (cf. Searing 1991; Barnett 1995). However, we
may also find that institutionalized roles lead to more inter-role conflicts as institutions become competitors or pursue diverging purposes. Third, democratization may also impact upon role cohesiveness. Democratic states more often than other regimes engage in formal international organization (Mansfield/Pevehouse 2008; Mansfield/Pevehouse 2006; Mansfield/Milner/Rosendorff 2002): They also trust each other more than other regime types: wrong signalling is seldom and identification tends to be high. We thus may expect that different densities and contents of social institutions create variation in role cohesiveness and orientation.

Lastly, it is plausible to assert that national role conceptions do reflect the social order(s) a state is living in and that the social stratification of world politics is resembled by the tensions within those role conceptions. Based on recent studies on the social order of world politics – e.g. Wendt’s cultures (Wendt 1999), Adler’s security communities (Adler/Barnett 1998), Frederking’s social arrangements (Frederking 2003) or Lake’s hierarchy (Lake 2009) – we may find that the emergence of new actors – e.g. terror groups – substantially challenge establish role sets as these do address social relations with “peers” only.
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