Role theory

Science

Understanding Intimate PartnerViolencethrough Role Theory: A Concept Paper Introducing Role Theory Role theory is a sociological framework that has been used to explain sets of relational patterns between people across varying contexts. It seeks to explain one of the most important characteristics of human social behavior – the fact that how people act, behave and speak are not separate, unique, disconnected but rather, are reflective of certain patterns and arrangements that depend on the social context and the actors in these contexts (Mangus, 1957; Biddle, 1986).

To illustrate, within the context of an intimate relationship such as marriage, violence between partners can be tied to the particular patterns and arrangements of acting, behaving and speaking between partners – such as earningmoney, rearing children, taking care of the home and initiating sexual relations.

Although several versions of the theory have been explicated by scholars, there appears to be agreement that role theory is mainly about three interrelated concepts: (1) patterned and characteristic social behaviors, (2) parts or identities as assumed by social participants, and (3) scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood and followed by actors in a particular social context (Biddle, 1986).

For instance, adopting a role theory perspective to understanding intimate partner violence necessitates looking at the patterned and characteristic social behaviors of intimate partners in a relationship, the parts or identities that each partner plays in the relationship, and the scripts or expectations

that are interpreted and adhered to by the partners in a particular relational context, specifically in situations of violent encounters.

Furthermore, the theory also allows for an understanding of the relationships among the individual, collective and structural levels of society (Turner, 2001), as it deals with the organization and connection of social behavior between the micro, macro and intermediate levels of society. Thus, within role theory, an analysis of intimate partner violence entails looking into the individual behaviors of partners in a violent relationship and tracing the linkages of these behaviors to the social structures that exist in a particular society. Defining Roles

Central to role theory is the concept of role. Several definitions have been ascribed to the concept of role in the literature. On a general level, the concept of role includes a description of behaviors, characteristics, norms and values held by a person (Thomas & Biddle, 1966). Another definition identifies role as a cluster of behaviors and attitudes that are understood as belonging together, such that a person is considered as acting consistently when enacting the various components of a single role and variably when he or she fails to do so (Turner, 2001).

For instance, the traditional masculine role can be characterized as aggressive, ambitious, dominant, independent and persistent whereas the traditional feminine role can be illustrated as agreeable, courteous, sympathetic, trusting, understanding and warm (Ellington & Marshall, 1997). As such, a partner who plays the masculine role must enact behaviors and attitudes that are typical of this role, such as being aggressive, dominant,

independent and agentic. For this partner cast in the masculine role, to be passive, dependent and agreeable implies incompatibility with the traditional masculine role.

Specifically, a role may refer to behavior that is expected of people who occupy particular social categories such as statuses (or positions) in both formal and informal systems (Montgomery, 1998 as cited in Lynch, 2007; Biddle & Thomas, 1979 as cited in Lynch, 2007). Roles may also be reflective of the cultural values and norms in a particular society (Zurcher, 1983 as cited in Lynch, 2007). Roles may also be conceptualized as a resource that social actors try to utilize to achieve certain socialgoals(Callero, 1994).

This assumption suggests two things: (1) that human agency is facilitated and expressed through the use of roles as resources, and (2) that roles are employed as tools in the establishment of social structures (Baker & Faulkner, 1991 as cited in Callero, 1994). Most social roles exist in pairs or sets. Thus, roles can be conceptualized as related through distinctive role relationships (Mangus, 1957). As such, there could be no husband role without a wife role and no parent role without a child role. In the context of intimate violence, there exists the perpetrator-victim role set.

As organized patterns of social behavior, roles are of several types (Mangus, 1957). Roles may be ascribed to the individual, imposed upon an individual or achieved by the individual (Mangus, 1957). Sex andgender rolesare ascribed to or imposed upon an individual (Mangus, 1957). For instance, one has to assume the masculine role if one is male or the feminine role if one is born female. On the other hand, one’s roles in groups and occupational

systems, such as leader, mediator or peacemaker, are achieved roles. Roles may also be understood as generic or specific.

Some roles may be pervasive, persistent, generalized and highly important to a person's life while other roles may be limited, subordinate, temporary, isolated and unimportant to a person's life (Mangus, 1957). To illustrate, in a violent intimate relationship, the roles of perpetrator and victim may be the predominant configuration in the relationship. On the other hand, these roles may also be seen as isolated to particular relational contexts and thus understood as subordinate to other roles such as father, mother, breadwinner and caretaker.

Roles may also be highly abstract or they may be concrete (Mangus, 1957). Abstract roles emerge from social systems of statuses and are expressed as generalized moral standards (Mangus, 1957). Examples of abstract roles are evident in universal expectations of honesty and justice. Status roles include rights and duties that emanate from a given position or office (Mangus, 1957). Illustrations of status roles can be seen in the entitlements and obligations that are given to persons of authority, such as managers, leaders or decision-makers.

Turner (2001) also identified four broad types of roles: (1) basic roles, (2) position or status roles, (3) functional group roles, and (4) value roles. Basic roles refer to roles that are associated with gender, age and social class (Banton, 1965 as cited in Turner, 2001). These are considered basic roles because they apply to a wide range of situations and because they tend to alter the meaning and taking up of other types of roles. The second type of

roles, position or status roles, correspond to positions in organizations or formally organized groups (Turner, 2001).

Occupational andfamilyroles may be regarded as examples of position or status roles. Functional group roles are the informal behavior patterns that arise spontaneously as persons take on situational identities during social interactions (Benne & Sheats, 1948 as cited in Turner, 2001). Examples of functional group roles are mediator, coordinator, critic, counselor, leader and follower. Finally, value roles are similar to functional group roles in that both types of roles emerge spontaneously from the social interaction.

However, value roles tend to be attached to very positively or negatively valued identities (Turner, 2001). In intimate relationships, examples of value roles can be the roles of hero, villain, saint, sinner, perpetrator or victim. After providing an overview of role theory and the concept of roles, we now turn to explain the two major approaches to understanding role theory. Two Main Approaches to Understanding Roles A review of the related literature identified two main approaches to understanding roles: (1) the traditional structural-functional approach and (2) the interactionist approach.

In this section, we highlight the characteristics of each approach as well as provide an explanation of the major assumptions within each perspective. We also provide illustrations as to how each approach can help enlighten our understanding of intimate partner relationships. Finally, we discuss the limitations of each approach. Traditional Structural-Functional Approach The structural-functionalist tradition of role theory focuses on how roles, as fixed

components of complex social structures, cultures or social systems, influence the behavior of people (Lynch, 2007).

Two related strands of role theory are embedded within this approach – structural role theory and functional role theory. Structural role theory concentrates on social structures, which are understood as stable organizations of sets of persons (called “ social positions” or “ statuses”) who share the same patterned and characteristics behaviors (roles) that are in relation to others sets of persons in the structure (Biddle, 1986). This particular strand of traditional role theory refers to parts of organized groups as “ status” and to the fixed behaviors expected of persons occupying a status as “ roles” Stryker, 2001). Thus, roles may be conceptualized as the dynamic aspect of statuses or social positions, with roles corresponding to rights and duties attached to statuses or social positions (Stryker, 2001). Within this strand, roles are understood as existing prior to the social interaction of people who occupy the statuses or social positions, as roles originate from the accumulated experiences of past individuals who have previously occupied a status or social position (Stryker, 2001).

The second strand of traditional role theory – functionalist role theory – highlights the characteristic behaviors of persons who occupy social positions within a stable social system (Biddle, 1986). Within this strand, roles are conceptualized as the shared and normative expectations that prescribe and explain these characteristic behaviors (Biddle, 1986). Functional role theorists view the enactment of roles as something that is learned through an understanding of social norms in a society as well as

something that accomplishes certain functions in social systems (Biddle, 1986).

Both structural and functional strands of the traditional approach to role theory emphasize social structures as antedating roles, such that roles are seen as imposed on the individual (Turner, 2001). Thus, within this approach, the roles of perpetrator and victim can be understood as emanating from social structures such as gender. For instance, the masculine role has often been identified with being the dominant partner, the primary breadwinner, the decision-maker and the enforcer of rules in the household.

On the other hand, the feminine role has often been linked with being the subordinate partner, the caretaker of the home and the supporter of the husband and children. Such role configurations may put partner occupying the masculine role at an advantage while setting the partner playing the feminine role at a disadvantage, thus making them vulnerable to becoming perpetrators and victims of intimate violence (Mihalic & Elliot, 1997). Furthermore, this approach also points to socialization as the process by which persons learn to take on and perform particular roles in society (Stryker, 2002).

Thus, when persons in social relationships conform to the expectations that are attached to statuses and supported by social norms, they tend to gain approval from other people who occupy related statuses and adhere to similar norms; such approval then reinforces the learning and enactment of roles (Stryker, 2002). Research has shown that typical school practices tend

to create children's identities as boy and girls (Martin, 1998 as cited in Fox & Murry, 2000).

In particular, findings showed that teachers tend to treat boys' voices as different from girls' voices, such that the former were allowed to be louder and more as compared to the latter. Presumably, such gender role socialization contributes to the accrual of privileges to the masculine role and the corresponding accrual of disadvantages to the feminine role. In addition, both strands of the traditional structural-functional approach to role theory agree on the assumption that society, social systems and social structures shape individual behaviors (Brookes, Davidson, Daly & Halcomb, 2007).

Analysis within this approach also starts from an examination of the social structure (Biddle, 1986). As such, within this approach, an examination of intimate partner violence will proceed from an investigation of the social systems and social structures that influence violent behaviors between partners in an intimate relationship. Furthermore, such an analysis will look into the cultural norms and values that sustain the social systems and social structures implicated in the phenomenon of intimate partner violence.

However, several limitations of this approach have been raised in the related literature. According to Lynch (2007), this approach paints roles as relatively inflexible structures that are difficult to combine. Furthermore, by focusing on social structures, the traditional approach to role theory fails to take into account the mental, experiential dimension of role enactment (Lynch, 2007), thus regarding persons as automatons who take on roles mechanically.

As such, this approach tends to be limited in its view of intimate partner violence as mechanically carried out by individual persons according to their status or position in the social structure, without taking into account the variability and diversity of experiences related to this phenomenon. Also, as it has difficulty accounting for individual level negotiations where actors may switch or combine roles, this approach also treats the variability and flexibility of roles as problematic (Lynch, 2007). Thus, traditional role theory is unable to address issues elated with non-conformity, social change and social systems that are not well-formed (Biddle, 1986). For instance, given instances of intimate partner violence where both partners inflict violence upon one another, traditional role theory proves to be limited in its explanation of intimate violence as emanating from the social structure. Within this approach, role changes such as when the perpetrator becomes the victim and the victim becomes the perpetrator become problematic and difficult to explain.

The traditional structural-functional approach to role theory has also been criticized as advancing a one-sided view of society, with its emphasis on consensus, cooperation and continuity in social life along with its seeming blindness to disagreement, conflict and change (Stryker, 2001). Finally, scholars have also criticized the traditional approach to role theory as rationalizing and reinforcing the existing social order (Stryker, 2001).

Interactionist Approach

The interactionist approach to role theory arose from the symbolic interactionism perspective insociologyand as such gives importance to the roles of individual actors, the development of roles through social

interaction, and the processes through which social actors understand and interpret their own and other people's behavior (Biddle, 1986). Thus, this approach focuses on how roles emerge in social interactions and how individuals are able to influence behavioral expectations through social negotiation (Lynch, 2007).

Within this approach, a role is conceptualized as neither fixed nor prescribed, but rather, something that is continuously negotiated by persons in social interaction (Mead, 1934 as cited in Lynch, 2007; Blumer, 1969 as cited in Lynch, 2007). Using this approach to understand intimate partner violence therefore necessitates looking at how partners in a violent relationship interact with one another as well as how they, negotiate, take on, impose or reject specific roles.

In contrast to the traditional approach to role theory which highlights social systems and social structures, the interactionist approach emphasizes social processes such ascommunication, interpretation and negotiation (Lynch, 2007). Theorizing within this approach assumes that the relationship between personal, behavioral and social variables is reciprocal (Plummer, 1991 as cited in Lynch, 2007). As such, the interactionist role theory approach to xamining intimate partner violence will tend to focus on how partners communicate, interpret and negotiate particular issues in their relationship. As opposed to the traditional approach to role theory that posits the unidirectional influence of social structure on individual action, the interactionist approach opens up the possibility that personal and behavioral variables may influence social structural variables. For interactionist

theorists, social actors interpret and enact their own roles by imagining the roles of others actors in the social interaction (Turner, 2001).

Thus, far from being automatons who take on roles mechanically, people are viewed as interpreting, negotiating and shaping their own roles to be able to interact effectively with other people who take on related roles (Turner, 2001). In this approach, analysis starts from an examination of the patterns of social interactions among individuals and groups of individuals (Turner, 2001). As such, research on intimate partner violence using this approach will look at the interpretative, negotiated and dynamic nature of violent interactions between partners. Some challenges to the interactionist approach to role theory have also been raised.

One of these challenges criticized the interactionist approach for failing to take into account the influence of social institutions and structural forces on the role enactment process (Lynch, 2007). Thus, little attention is given to the structural constraints that impinge on roles (Biddle, 1986). To illustrate, although intimate partner violence can be analyzed by studying the social interactions where violence occurs, it is also important to trace the occurrence of intimate violence to social structures that impose and influence the roles that people enact.

In addition, as the interactionist approach tends to focus on specific instances of social interactions, interactionist theorists sometimes fail to discuss the contextual limits of their assumptions (Biddle, 1986). Also, while the approach acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between personal, behavioral and social variables, it still fails to explain how these relationships

feedback and affect succeeding role enactments (Lynch, 2007). Summary of Limitations of Two Main Approaches to Role Theory

In his work on proposing an integration between role theory and positioning theory, Henriksen (2008) cited important limitations of the two main approaches to role theory. These limitations represent a summary of the difficulties that are encountered when using the traditional structural-functional approach and the interactionist approach to understanding social phenomena such as intimate partner violence. On the one hand, the traditional structural-functional approach seems to ignore individual action and its influence on social structure (Henriksen, 2008).

Furthermore, a structural-functional approach to role theory also appears to be limited in examining the finer grains of social interaction (Harre & van Langenhove, 1999 as cited in Henriksen, 2008; Harre & Moghaddam, 2003 as cited in Henriksen, 2008). On the other hand, the interactionist approach appears to focus on social interactions, without taking into account the influence of social structures on the patterning and stability of such interactions. The interactionist approach has also been criticized for its limited attention to the social p of social interaction (Henriksen, 2008).

It is based on these limitations of role theory that we propose an integration of role theory with positioning theory, in view of providing a better understanding of intimate partner violence at the structural, interactional and discursive levels. References Biddle, B. J. (1986). Recent developments in role theory. Annual Review of Sociology, 12, 67-92. Brookes, K. , Davidson, P. M. , Daly, J. , & Halcomb, E. J. (2007). Role theory: A framework to

investigate the community nurse role in contemporaryhealthcare systems. Contemporary Nurse: A Journal for the AustralianNursingProfession, 25 (1-2), 146-155.

Callero, P. L. (1994). From role-playing to role-using: Understanding role as resource. SocialPsychologyQuarterly, 57 (3), 228-243. Ellington, J. E. & Marshall, L. L. (1997). Gender role perceptions of women in abusive relationships. Sex Roles, 36 (5/6), 349-369. Fox, G. L. & Murry, V. M. (2000). Gender and families: Feminist perspectives and family research. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62, 1160-1172. Henriksen, T. D. (2008). Liquidating roles and crystallizing positioning: Investigating the road between positioning theory and role theory.

In F. Moghaddam, R. Harre, and N. Lee (Eds.), Global conflict resolution through positioning analysis (pp. 41-64). New York: Springer. Lynch, K. D. (2007). Modeling role enactment: Linking role theory and social cognition. Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour, 37 (4), 379-399. Mangus, A. R. (1957). Role theory and marriage counseling. Social Forces, 35 (3), 200-209. Mihalic, S. W. & Elliot, D. (1997). A social learning theory model of violence. Journal of Family Violence, 12 (1), 21-47. Stryker, S. (2001).

Traditional symbolic interactionism, role theory and structural symbolic interactionism: The Road to Identity Theory. In J. H. Turner (ed.), Handbook of Sociological Theory (pp. 211-230). KluwerAcademic/Plenum Publishers, New York. Thomas, E. J. & Biddle, B. J. (1966). Basic concepts for the variables of role phenomena. In B. J. Biddle & E. J. Thomas (Eds.), Role theory: concepts and research (pp. 51-65). New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Turner, R. H. (2001). Role theory. In J. H. Turner (ed.), Handbook of Sociological Theory (pp. 233-254). Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, New York.