

# Encyclopedia of Social Problems

## Role Strain

Contributors: Barbara Feldman  
Editors: Vincent N. Parrillo  
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Role strain refers to a condition whereby an individual experiences unease in fulfilling role expectations. For various reasons, the expectations associated with a role may be mutually incompatible or undesirable, leaving a person with feelings of discomfort as she or he is called upon to fulfill role obligations. There are numerous causes of role strain, some avoidable and others inevitable. Feelings of stress and the sense that one is unable to fulfill role expectations are problematic for the individual and for society.

Sources of role strain may originate with the individual or with the expectations of a role. In some cases, an individual may feel unable to successfully meet role expectations because he or she does not accept or is not committed to the underlying values that justify the expectations. The role expectations may contradict an individual's values or call upon one to behave in an undesirable manner or at an unavailable time. For example, lawyers operating under the rules of confidentiality may be privy to information they are professionally required to keep confidential but personally feel compelled to reveal.

Role strain can be a consequence of social arrangements that create a situation in which an individual experiences strain. In this case, the source of the strain resides with the role expectations. An individual may experience role strain when expectations associated with a role are incompatible, competing, or ambiguous. In this case, an individual may want to fulfill expectations but is unable to do so due to a lack of clarity of expectation. For example, expectations associated with the role of parent are often ambiguous. In trying to be a good father, a man may be torn between earning a living to support his family and spending time with his children. Both are expectations of a good father, and both may be impossible to uphold. The ambiguity surrounding expectations of roles such as father creates the stress of role strain but also allows for individual expression of a role.

In some cases, individuals can resolve role strain by seeking clarification of role expectations, ordering expectations in a hierarchy, or adjusting one's own expectations of the fulfillment of a role. However, there is a certain amount of role strain that characterizes a society and its roles and is beyond the ability of an individual to eliminate. Role strain and attempts to reduce it may be the cause of certain problems experienced by individuals, but it may also be the source of change leading to

solutions to problems. The processes of role strain resolution may result in innovative or alternative role expectations. A working father, for example, may negotiate an arrangement with an employer allowing for a work schedule that allows him to spend time with his children and still meet the work expectations of the employer.

Barbara Feldman

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*See also*

#### Further Readings

Goode, William J. "A Theory of Role Strain." *American Sociological Review* vol. 25 no. (4) 1960 pp. 483–96. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/2092933>

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