

# ROLE AMBIGUITY IN ACADEMICS: AN ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMATIC IN UNIVERSITIES

## AMBIGÜEDAD DE ROL EN ACADÉMICOS: UNA PROBLEMÁTICA ORGANIZACIONAL EN LAS UNIVERSIDADES

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this study was to identify the presence of role ambiguity in academics, who divide their working hours between teaching and researching, of five areas of knowledge in a university in Mexico This is a study with a quantitative approach, a non-exploratory, transactional, descriptive, and correlational design. The reliability of the instrument used was of 0.93 in Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient. The results identified that 80.3% of the sample perceives role ambiguity more strongly on the dimensions of 'Job demands' and 'Norms'. Subsequently, the analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed a significant difference in the perception of role ambiguity on the dimension of 'norms' and the areas of knowledge. Therefore, it is concluded that it is necessary for universities to draw attention to establishing precision and clarity on the normativity related to teaching and researching activities, as well as providing the adequate information regarding the institution's expectations on job performance.

## KEYWORDS

Job Demands, Normativity, University, Teacher's Role, Performance expectations, Teaching-Researching.

## RESUMEN

*El objetivo de este trabajo fue identificar la presencia de ambigüedad de rol en académicos, que dividen su tiempo laboral entre actividades docentes y de investigación, de cinco áreas del conocimiento de una universidad de México. El estudio fue cuantitativo de diseño no experimental transversal, descriptivo y correlacional. La confiabilidad del instrumento fue de 0.93 en el coeficiente Alpha de Cronbach. Los resultados señalan que el 80.3% de la muestra percibe ambigüedad de rol, con mayor intensidad en las demandas laborales y en las normas; el análisis de varianza ANOVA mostró diferencia significativa en la percepción de ambigüedad con las normas y las áreas del conocimiento. Se concluye que es necesario en las universidades poner atención cuidadosa en la precisión y claridad de la normatividad relacionada con el trabajo docente y de investigación, así como proporcionar suficiente información sobre lo que la institución espera del desempeño de una función.*

## PALABRAS CLAVE

*Demandas Laborales, Normatividad, Universidad, Papel del Profesor, Expectativas de Desempeño, Docencia-Investigación.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Role ambiguity is produced by the lack of definition about the role that an individual has to perform in an institution. It emerges when the efforts to acquire clarity on the role, are frustrated, and it presents itself in general when people face different demands on the job and they do not have the resources and information to attend to them (Malone, 2002; Orgambidez-Ramos, Pérez-Moreno & Borrego-Alés, 2015), thus affecting the individual's job satisfaction and obstructing the achievement of the organizational goals. Thereupon, the study aims to measure the existence of role ambiguity in professors of a university, this considering that nowadays, the role of the professor is characterized by the development of multiple activities and the fulfilment of various guidelines that govern their job. On one hand, their role as academics is determined by the indicators of diverse evaluation systems, with different normativity and heterogeneous requirements. The latter, a result of recent changes in public policies in terms of higher education, which are focused on quality and productivity. On the other hand, the professor must comply with different commissions, requested internally by the university, amongst these, to name a few, are: tutorship, developing and restructuring educational programmes, activities focused on accrediting such programmes, etc.

Regarding the evaluation systems, in Mexico, specifically, the Programme for Teacher's Professional Development (PRODEP by its acronym in Spanish) can be mentioned as an example, for its objective is to "professionalize the full-time teachers, in order for them to achieve the capacities of researching-teaching, technological development and innovation, and, with social responsibility, form consolidated academic bodies" (Secretaría de Educación Pública, 2016, par. 1). This programme demands evenness in the performance of teaching-researching activities and academic management.

Furthermore, the Mexican National Research System (SNI), coordinated by the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), can also be mentioned, for it gives public recognition to the "scientists and technologists that have excelled by the quality of their productivity and in the formation of new researchers, as well as for their input in strengthening their countries' scientific and technological

research” (CONACYT, 2017, p.113). To be accredited by these organisms means, for the teacher, an academic and economic recognition, therefore they make a major effort to comply with these external requirements.

Under those circumstances, empirical investigations are in order, with the purpose of identifying if the faculty members, of such universities, are perceiving role ambiguity, and if so, in which environments, and, accordingly to their sociodemographic and academic profiles, in which areas there's the most evidence, this with the goal of contributing to the inhibition of factors and circumstances that might be developing the problem. In the same way, role ambiguity has been measured in different types of populations such as: professional soldiers, undergraduate students, public employees, business advisers and business-administrative staff (Bernhard, 1996; Díaz-Fúnez, Pecino & Mañas, 2016; Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004; Mansilla, 2011; Meliá, Zornoza, Sanz, Morte & González, 1987; Núñez & Fresatti, 2016; Osca, González-Camino, Bardera & Peiró, 2003; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Nonetheless, studies related to role ambiguity in university professors are insufficient, and these have been centred in only one area of knowledge at a time: health (Gomley, 2005) and Social and Administrative Sciences (Surdez, Magaña y Sandoval, 2017). Due to that, to contribute with a holistic perspective and to identify the variability in the perception of the studied phenomenon, this study provides conclusions of an empirical investigation that measures role ambiguity in five areas of knowledge.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Role ambiguity is referred to as the lack of clarity towards the role that is being developed, the objectives of the individual work, or the reach of the responsibilities (Slipak, 1996). It is the circumstance of an individual that is conscious he or she does not have the adequate references to do their job, thus affecting the job satisfaction and performance (De Arquer, Daza & Nogareda, 1995). It has also been defined as the lack of information issued with clarity in regards to the performance expectations, the goals, the duties, the authority, the responsibilities, the obligations, and many other working conditions related to

the performance of their role (González-Romá *et al.*, 1995; Yun *et al.*, 2007; quoted in Díaz-Fúnez *et al.*, 2016, p. 392).

Provided that investigations about role ambiguity started in the 50's it was not until the 60's that they began to acquire more relevance, the studies tend to divert towards the analysis of negative results derived from role ambiguity, results such as lack of job satisfaction, absenteeism, low productivity and even the definite pull out of the job; nowadays, there are factors that highlight the importance of the study in matters like group work and high indexes of job rotation (Mansilla, 2011).

According to Fisher (quoted in Nuñez and Frezatti, 2016), the ambiguity could originate when the individual is not given enough or adequate information about 1) the relevant expectations toward the performance of a certain function and the reach in terms of rights, duties and responsibilities; 2) the crucial activities for the fulfilment of the duties for the position, as well as the steps or the best way in order to achieve a job; 3) the consequences if a task is not fulfilled; 4) rewards or punishments, and the nature of those, as well as feedback on behaviour whether it be satisfactory or not; 5) the opportunities for promotion.

Henceforth, role ambiguity is considered a source of work-related stress, this, when discrepancy is found between the demands and the resources, and also when multiple transitions are found in the development of a role (Peiró, 2001). It is also considered to be “a psychosocial -risk-factor on the workplace that has a high possibility to affect health” (Soler, Fernández-Valera & Meseguer, 2016, p. 61). In this respect, the demands on the workplace are seen as the physical, psychological and organizational aspects which cause stress when the employees carry out additional efforts to comply with performance expectations (Soler, Fernández-Valera & Meseguer, 2017).

There are diverse studies regarding role ambiguity. The most renowned instrument used to measure this problematic, according to the literature, is the one that Rizzo *et al.* (1970) used to identify conflict and role ambiguity and its consequences in managers of complex organisations. In the study, the authors

argue that role ambiguity is a variable that intervenes in an important way in organisational practices. Accordingly, the results report that a negative correlation exists between this and work satisfaction, and that decision-making drawbacks, distortion and suppression of information, and violations to the chain of command are common practices related to the problem. Likewise, the problematic diminishes when the employers provide structure and work standards; when there is an emphasis on personal development, horizontal communication, planning, high receptivity to ideas and work-flow coordination.

In a study with nursing professors, it was noted that the staff experiencing role ambiguity considered that their work relationships with the dean were obstructed and that this was more evident in young, inexperienced professors (Gomley, 2005). Additionally, other authors divulge that the dysfunctional consequences associated to role ambiguity are: augmentation in work tension and diminution in job satisfaction (Lloret, González & Peiró, 1995); other results have pointed out that role ambiguity is a significant predictor of emotional weariness and is negatively associated with intrinsic work satisfaction (Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004). Respectively, in a study with professional soldiers, it was found that when the clarity of the role decreases, physical deterioration symptoms and help-searching behaviours appear (Osca *et al.*, 2003).

Furthermore, researchers detail that ambiguity on the objectives and in general policies of the organisation causes the greatest negative effects on work satisfaction (Meliá, Zornoza, Sanz, Morte & González, 1987) ambiguity also produces stress, depression, and lowers self-esteem, which ends up in wishes of abandoning job positions. On the counterpart, proper and clear information and communication diminish these types of conflicts (Slipak, 1996). Other authors suggest that the environment of communication is an important factor to control role ambiguity (Schulz & Auld, 2006). In the same way, in a study about stress in the role of college students, it was discovered that role ambiguity was the most significant and constant factor in both psychological and academic results (Bernhard, 1996). These are related to skipping classes and getting low grades.

In contrast with previous investigations that point out the ambiguity's negative consequences at work and with individuals, it can be mentioned a study made on salespeople. Such study presented results that indicate that, to a moderate level, the stressors of role, like ambiguity and conflict may be stimulators for a greater compromise in the search of improving development (Onyemah, 2008).

### 3. METHODS

This is a study with a quantitative approach, with a non-exploratory, transactional, descriptive and correlational design. In it, 116 professors were selected, in a non-probabilistic way, from a total population of 220 professors who belong to research groups on the areas of knowledge of 'Agricultural Sciences', 'Engineering and Architecture', 'Information Technology and Systems', 'Biological Sciences' and 'Basic Sciences' in a university in Southeast Mexico. The sociodemographic data of the sample can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic data of the sample.

Age	Gender	Civil state	Job seniority (years)	SNI	PRODEP
33-43 (39.7%)	Men (56%) Women (44%)	Single (20.7%)	1-10 (21.6 %)	Yes (18.1%) No (81.9%)	Yes (70.7%)
44-54 (40.5%)		Married (79.3%)	11-20 (43.1%)		No (29.3%)
55-65 (19.8%)			21-30 (35.3%)		

**Source:** prepared by the authors

#### 3.1. INSTRUMENT

The research instrument is a two-section translation and adaptations of Rizzo *et al.* (1970) questionnaire, taking into account adaptations on diverse research projects (Magaña, Sánchez & Rosas, 2009; Magaña *et al.*, 2009; Surdez, 2013) and the work of Surdez, Magaña & Sandoval (2017). The first section includes sociodemographic variables (age, gender, civil state, job seniority, accreditation to the PRODEP profile and seniority on the SNI). Subsequently, the second section of the instrument analyses role ambiguity in professors through four important dimensions (see Table 2).



**Tabla 2.** Especificaciones de las dimensiones de ambigüedad de rol.

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Operating definition</b>
<b>Ambiguity in autonomy</b>	Ambiguity in the levels of independence in decisions related to the tasks of the job.
<b>Ambiguity in job demands</b>	Ambiguity in job instructions, methods, and results associated with the role.
<b>Ambiguity in contributions</b>	Ambiguity on how the job efforts contribute to the institutions' objectives.
<b>Ambiguity on norms</b>	Ambiguity in the institutional guidelines related to role performance and assessment.

**Source:** own elaboration.

The questionnaire has a Likert type scale of 5 points: completely disagree (1), disagree (2), not in agreement and not in disagreement (3), agree (4), completely agree (5). It consists of 16 phrases to determine if the professors perceive that role ambiguity issues are taking place. By the positive sense of the phrases, the lowest punctuation reveals stronger perceptions of role ambiguity. The instrument was validated in a previous investigation with university professors, obtaining reliability of 0.93 on Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient and factor loads of 0.60+ (Surdez, Magaña & Sandoval, 2017). To confirm the reliability of the instrument with the participant professors on this study, the coherence of the items in each dimension of the questionnaire was tested through Cronbach's Alpha Analysis. The results of this analysis indicate a rank of acceptable consistency for every dimension on the study: ambiguity in autonomy (0.78), ambiguity in job demands (0.86), ambiguity in contributions (0.88), and ambiguity in the norms (0.81). In general, the instrument's reported reliability was of 0.93, which is an indicator of high internal consistency (García, 2011).

### 3.2. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

In the study, the data was analysed through descriptive statistics, in order to identify the levels of role ambiguity and to determine in which dimensions it was perceived with more or with less intensity. Subsequently, with the purpose of determining the existence of significant statistic differences between

the dimensions of ‘civil state’, ‘gender’, ‘accreditation to SNI’ and ‘accreditation to PRODEP profile’, the Student’s t-test was used. Furthermore, the ANOVA variance analysis with Bonferroni’s post hoc test was used to detect differences between role ambiguity and the areas of knowledge, age and job seniority. Lastly, to identify the relations between the dimensions of role ambiguity and both age and job seniority, the Pearson correlation analysis was used.

## 4. RESULTS

The frequency distribution showed a normal distribution with a registered minimum value of 1.38 and a maximum value of 4.94, a kurtosis of 0.605, an asymmetry of -0.864, a medium of 3.80 and a standard deviation of 0.71. To determine the perceptions of role ambiguity in the professors, the answers given by them were classified in four groups: on the first group, were professors who showed lower or equal punctuations as the percentile 25, on the second group were the professors registered above percentile 25 and below percentile 50, on the third group were those above percentile 50 and below 75, finally, in the fourth group were the teachers above percentile 75. Moreover, 27% of the sample presents a high level of role ambiguity, 26% a moderate level, 27.3% a low level and a 19.7% does not present role ambiguity, therefore, 80.3% of the sample perceives a certain amount of role ambiguity on the dimensions which were analysed (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Levels of role ambiguity, range of values (1-5 scale).

Levels of role ambiguity	Percentile	Percentile	%
High	25	Values ≤ 3.38	27
Moderate	50	3.39-3.94	26
Low	75	3.95-4.35	27.3
No ambiguity	100	Values ≥ 4.36	19.7

**Source:** own elaboration.

To determine the dimensions in which there was greater role ambiguity, and statistic-descriptive analysis was carried out, finding that the greatest role ambiguity is on job demands and on the norms.

Subsequently, the lowest role ambiguity was found on the autonomy (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Descriptive analysis of the dimensions of the variable role ambiguity.

Dimensions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Medium	S.D
Ambiguity in autonomy	116	1.75	5	4.14	0.73
Ambiguity in job demands	116	1	5	3.46	0.90
Ambiguity in contributions	116	1	5	4.09	0.88
Ambiguity in the norms	116	1	5	3.55	0.85
Not valid (by list)	116				

**Source:** own elaboration.

With the purpose of determining the existence of significant differences between the dimension of role ambiguity in relation to the civil state, gender, accreditation to the SNI and to PRODEP, the Student t-test was used (see Tables 5 and 6).

**Table 5.** Differences of mediums on the dimensions of role ambiguity in relation to the civil state.

Dimensions	Civil state	N	Medium	E.D.	t	Sig.
Ambiguity in autonomy	Single	24	4.16	0.85	0.18	0.75
	Married	92	4.13	0.71		
Ambiguity in job demands	Single	24	3.57	0.78	0.86	0.28
	Married	92	3.42	0.93		
Ambiguity in contributions	Single	24	4.00	0.80	-0.46	0.56
	Married	92	4.11	0.90		
Ambiguity in the norms	Single	24	3.52	0.59	-0.10	0.02*
	Married	92	3.56	0.90		

**Note:** \* $p \leq 0.05$

**Source:** own elaboration.

**Table 6.** Differences of mediums on the dimensions of role ambiguity in relation to gender.

Dimensions	Gender	N	Medium	E.D.	t	Sig.
Ambiguity in autonomy	Man	65	4.18	0.67	0.72	0.29
	Woman	51	4.08	0.81		
Ambiguity in job demands	Man	65	3.46	0.90	0.01	0.79
	Woman	51	3.46	0.90		
Ambiguity in contributions	Man	65	4.07	0.84	-0.21	0.32
	Woman	51	4.11	0.93		
Ambiguity in the norms	Man	65	3.53	0.95	-0.40	0.03*
	Woman	51	3.59	0.70		

Note: \* $p \leq 0.05$

Source: own elaboration.

In Table 6, it can be observed that a significant statistic difference can be found, in the perceptions of the teachers, in gender on the dimension 'ambiguity in the norms', this result indicates that men perceive more role ambiguity than women. The t-test did not show significant differences between role ambiguity with professors who belong to the SNI and with professors who are accredited by the PRODEP profile.

The analysis of variance (ANOVA) signalled a significant difference between perception of ambiguity in the norms and the areas of knowledge (see Table 7), in this case, the post-hoc test of Bonferroni specifically indicated that the differences in the mediums are found between Agricultural Sciences and Basic Sciences, under those circumstances, the professors of the latter were found to perceive the most ambiguity. On the contrary, no differences in the perception of role ambiguity were found with the sociodemographic data of age and job seniority.

**Table 7.** Differences of mediums on the dimensions of role ambiguity in relation to areas of knowledge.

Dimensiones	Áreas del conocimiento	N	Medium	E.D.	Mín.	Max.	F	Sig.
<b>Ambiguity in autonomy</b>	Agricultural Sciences	23	4.03	0.87	2	5	0.25	0.91
	Engineering and Architecture	16	4.08	0.73	1.75	5		
	Information Technology and Systems	26	4.17	0.72	1.75	5		
	Biological Sciences	28	4.22	0.69	2	5		
	Basic Sciences	23	4.15	0.68	2.25	5		
	Total	116	4.14	0.73	1.75	5		
<b>Ambiguity in job demands</b>	Agricultural Sciences	23	3.49	1.03	1.25	5	1.58	0.18
	Engineering and Architecture	16	3.61	0.80	2	4.75		
	Information Technology and Systems	26	3.70	0.72	1.75	4.75		
	Biological Sciences	28	3.41	0.90	1	5		
	Basic Sciences	23	3.10	0.95	1	4.25		
	Total	116	3.46	0.90	1	5		
<b>Ambiguity in contributions</b>	Agricultural Sciences	23	4.30	0.76	2	5	2.20	0.07
	Engineering and Architecture	16	4.28	0.69	2.5	5		
	Information Technology and Systems	26	4.04	0.78	2.75	5		
	Biological Sciences	28	4.21	0.95	1	5		
	Basic Sciences	23	3.65	1.01	1.5	5		
	Total	116	4.09	0.88	1	5		
<b>Ambigüedad con las normas</b>	Agricultural Sciences	23	3.90	0.78	2.5	5	2.74	0.03*
	Engineering and Architecture	16	3.73	0.82	2	4.75		
	Information Technology and Systems	26	3.58	0.89	1.75	5		
	Biological Sciences	28	3.48	0.82	1	4.5		
	Basic Sciences	23	3.14	0.78	1	4.5		
	Total	116	3.55	0.85	1	5		

**Note:** \* $p \leq 0.05$ **Source:** own elaboration.

The Pearson correlation analysis determined a positive yet weak correlation (0.188) between the dimension of ambiguity in autonomy and the job seniority, which indicates that the professors with more seniority perceive more ambiguity in the indicated dimension (see Table 8).

**Table 8.** Correlation of the dimensions of role ambiguity in relation to age of the professor and job seniority.

Dimensions	Ambiguity in autonomy	Ambiguity in job demands	Ambiguity in contributions	Ambiguity in the norms	Age	Seniority
Ambiguity in autonomy	1	.620**	.560**	.438**	0.151	.188*
Ambiguity in job demands		1	.658**	.761**	0.068	0.107
Ambiguity in contributions			1	.716**	0.126	0.144
Ambiguity in the norms				1	0.120	0.13
Age					1	.658**
Seniority						1
** The correlation is significant in the level 0.01						
* The correlation is significant in the level 0.05						

Source: own elaboration.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The frequency analysis presented evidence that over half the sample perceives role ambiguity in a high-to-moderate level, a situation which requires attention, for, as shown before, the problem of role ambiguity may conduce to the increase of job tension, the decrease of job satisfaction and to psychosocial risk factors (Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004; Ossa, *et al.*, 2003; Soler, Fernández-Valera & Meseguer, 2016).

The descriptive analysis to identify in which dimensions role ambiguity is perceived the most, it was observed that there is more role ambiguity in both job demands and norms, this shows that there is not enough nor adequate information about what is expected in regards to performance of a function, which is one of the causes of Role Ambiguity that Fisher (quoted in Nuñez and Frezatti, 2016) points out.

Because of this, it is recommendable to consider the results of studies that argue that an environment of communication and enough information contributes to controlling role ambiguity (Schulz & Auld, 2006; Bernhard, 1996).

Ultimately, the t-test did not show differences between the dimensions of ambiguity in autonomy, Job demands, and contribution, in relation to the civil state. Nonetheless, the analysis reports significant statistic differences between these sociodemographic variables and the dimension of ambiguity in the norms, denoting that single professors perceive more ambiguity than the married professors. This test also revealed differences between the gender of the professors and the dimension of ambiguity in the norms, in which men perceive more role ambiguity than the women, thus, a new line of investigation to assess the dimension on a gender perspective is suggested.

On the counterpart, no statistic differences were found between the dimensions and the fact that the professors belong to the PRODEP profile or are members of the SNI, this demonstrates that professors with these acknowledgments perceive role ambiguity in a similar manner. At the same time, no differences were found with the areas of knowledge and the dimensions of autonomy, job demands, and contributions, which means that the professors of all five areas perceive role ambiguity similarly in those dimensions. The differences were only found in the dimension of the norms, between Agricultural and Basic Sciences, revealing that the perception of ambiguity is not the same between the professors of such areas in the matters of objectives and guidelines. This presents a research opportunity in order to investigate the causes of it.

Furthermore, a weak correlation between ambiguity in autonomy and job seniority was proven, expressing that the professors with more years working for the university are the ones who perceive more ambiguity in this dimension. However, because the correlation is very low, this result is not determinant.

Given these points, it is suggested that actions that allow the clarification of where the professors are to direct their academic efforts, to achieve institutional goals, are implemented universities. It is also

imperative to ensure that the professor perceives, in a precise and adequate form, the normativity that guides the teaching and researching practices.

In short, it is concluded that organizations must value studies about role ambiguity and correlate them with studies about work satisfaction, stress, staff rotation, and emotional weariness. Despite, the findings in this investigation, the results do have limitations because of its transversal design of descriptive correlational type, which makes impossible an analysis to identify causal relationships between the variables of the study. In the same way, the results reflect the conditions of role ambiguity of the studied sample, and this factor should be considered when analysing other populations.

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