

Role Analysis: What is it?

Role analysis applies psychological insights to how the client understands his/her experiences, behaviors, habits, mind sets, and so forth within the context of work life. More than simply intellectual career development, role analysis is deeply process-oriented and establishes a space where the client develops his/her abilities to produce and reflect on multiple interpretations of significant situations/events of the work environment. A wide range of information is covered in a role analysis session, including awkward circumstances, frustrating events/situations, emerging patterns, as well as enjoyable aspects of work.

Although the role analysis process is based on a therapeutic model of personal and interpersonal development within the immediate context of a safe 'holding environment' of each consultation, it should be made explicit that this is NOT psychotherapy. Psychotherapy may emerge as a possible solution to some problems or dilemmas that arise as a result of role analysis, but psychotherapy is not the purpose of the role analysis consultations.

The Importance of Personal History and the Interpersonal Consultation:

One primary focal point for role analysis is the client's family-of-origin. Whether we like to admit it or not, a significant portion of our interpersonal and intrapersonal (internal) constellations of behavioral and cognitive sets reflects the developmental context of our family-of-origin. To cite a simplistic example for illustrative purposes, our individual reactions to authority figures (e.g., bosses, rules, etc.) will often reflect how we grew up in relation to the disciplinarian(s) of the family. If we were duly rewarded by our childhood disciplinarians for obeying reasonable rules/demands, we will be less likely to feel uncomfortable in adulthood when confronted by authority figures. If we were taught the value of reasonableness and common sense in abiding by rules -- whether imposed externally or internally -- then we will be less fearful in adulthood of authority figures and will even be able to engage effectively and reasonably in the negotiation of these rules. Of course, this is very simplistic, but the general idea is that one's childhood developmental contexts do carry weight for how one relates to others (and to the self) in adulthood.

In conjunction with this personal historical influence on our present individual psychological styles, these family-of-origin issues will also influence how we interpret and behave in group situations. On a daily, if not hourly, basis we find ourselves confronted with various issues that hinge on our and others' group memberships, such as status/rank in the company, gender, age, degree of experience, political opinions, and so forth. Membership in the various groups results in behaviors that are interpreted and responded to by others, depending on where one's primary attributes and allegiances lie and how salient the various group influences are in each particular context. Given these considerations, the manner in which each individual takes up his/her role at work -- as a member of his/her respective groups -- will carry consequences for others who are members of their respective groups. The importance of group-level dynamics at work can be surprising. Clearly, this complicates the individual's role at work, and a role analysis is designed to clarify the issues at play, including how each person can approach his/her place in the work environment in a more informed and effective manner.

Role Analysis as Personal-Professional Coaching:

One fruitful metaphor for role analysis consultations is as coaching sessions for the professional development of the client. Each client will have different goals for their participation in role analysis, and therefore the form and content of the role analysis sessions will vary. Still, the overall attitude within the sessions is one of psychologically working through issues that may be either building blocks for or obstacles to his/her professional development. This is hard work! The role analysis consultant serves as a coach to the client and provides feedback with the goal of opening up previously unexamined options and perspectives, thereby increasing the client's ability to gain insight in his/her processes within the workplace. Ideally, after awhile, the client will carry this introspective, insightful attitude with him or herself beyond the walls of the consultative office to engage in self-coaching in the absence of the consultant.

Change, development, communication, collaboration, and initiative have all become increasingly important in today's bustling work world. Role analysis can aid the professional in taking stock of how and why one takes on their various roles at work and the ways that they can improve their effectiveness along many different dimensions of work.