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Tenure of Girl Scout Volunteer Leaders: An Issue of Self-Role Merger

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Abstract

Past and present Girl Scout Volunteer Leaders (GSVLs) in a regional Girl Scout council were sampled to determine the factors that theoretically lead to self-role merger as a GSVL. Self-role merger as a GSVL exists when interacting with others, as a GSVL, is important in sustaining one's sense of worth as a person. The relationship between self-role merger and tenure as a GSVL was also examined. A test of hypotheses shows that the following variables are strongly related with self-role merger: a sense of achievement gained through role performances, the friendships developed through volunteering, and the extent of activities performed by the GSVL and her troop. A moderate, positive association was found between self-role merger scores and tenure; however, the strength of the relationship was much stronger for GSVLs whose daughters had previously left scouting. These findings support the structural symbolic interactionist theory of GSVLs developed in this article. Regional Girl Scout councils should consider these findings when developing strategies to retain GSVLs.

Research Question

The previous four decades have seen an explosion in the proportion of women residing on the Northern Great Plains who are employed. In 1970, forty-eight percent of all women with children ages 6-17 were in the labor force; this increased to eighty-two percent in

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1990.² During the same period, many organizations have struggled to secure and retain volunteers. The Girl Scouts is one such organization. Most Girl Scout Volunteer Leaders (GSVLs) become volunteers at the insistence of their daughters and stay only as long as their daughters remain Girl Scouts (a problem with retention that concerns regional Girl Scout councils). But some GSVLs remain as leaders long after their daughters have left Girl Scouting. Why? Indeed, what are the factors associated with GSVL tenure, whether long or short, of which Girl Scout councils can take advantage?

Theoretical Answer

Background

Why mothers volunteer and how much they participate depends on many factors, only some of which have been clearly delineated. Many individual differences exist among volunteers, but in an age when many women must care for young children and/or work to help support their families, role conflict is a major deterrent to joining and persisting at it (Knoke and Thomson 1977). Nevertheless, if GSVLs are typical volunteers, they are married with children of school age, are in their mid-twenties, are more educated than the general public, and are the children of volunteers themselves (Tomeh 1972; Knoke and Thomson 1977; and Wilson 1990). Studies of long-term GSVLs have shown them also to be mothers with the time available to volunteer, to have a daughter in scouting, to have support of the Girl Scout organization, and to be seeking to meet social and self-oriented needs (Helbling 1986; Czepiel 1992; Raskoff 1994), particularly the needs of affiliation, achievement, and power (Brandt 1998).

Symbolic Interaction and Self-Role Merger

A GSVL is a rational, goal-oriented individual who has chosen to become a Girl Scout leader and to do what that commitment entails (Brandt 1998). Then each year she chooses whether or not to continue enacting that role. When a mother becomes a GSVL, she learns the responsibilities and behaviors expected of that position. She also brings to the position certain unique personal needs that must be met by her role performances. If these needs are met, she will incorporate the role into

² The region includes Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

own self-identity. She will make it her own.³ This incorporation of roles into one's identity is called self-role merger, and it can be studied from a structural symbolic interactionist perspective.

There are four major themes to come out of symbolic interactionist theorizing. The first postulate is that people act toward a symbolic reality. They "name, remember, categorize, perceive, think, deliberate, problem solve, transcend space and time, transcend themselves, create abstractions, create new ideas, and direct themselves—all through the use of the symbol" (Charon 1992: 65). A second focus is on process. In terms of process, our definitions are never static; they are always open to change. For instance, a novice GSVL may have volunteered for the Girl Scout leadership position in order to fulfill her definition of herself as a mother, a nurturer of a child. But over time, as she gains self-worth from the performance, the motives for being a GSVL may very well shift to more self-fulfilling reasons. The friendships she makes among scouts and other leaders, and her desire to maintain these relations, may also become a motive for her persistence as a GSVL. Why her self-concept changes is less important than the fact that the change emerges out of the interactions she has with others. This brings us to the third theme, which contends that social reality is interactive. We name, categorize, deliberate, problem solve, and even alter our definitions when interacting with others. As noted above, even our definitions of our selves and our motives emerge out of the interactions we have with others. The fourth theme is endemic to sociology; symbolic interactionists observe symbolic behavior, social processes, and social interactions in order to infer some underlying patterns (Hewitt 1994). This is especially true for structural symbolic interactionists.

Structural symbolic interactionists accept the structural claim that there is an objective social reality that lies outside subjective constructions (Stryker and Burke 2001). Social structure provides "the symbolic and material resources for action" that can either facilitate or constrain collective and individual action (Stryker 1995). One way

³It is not uncommon for GSVLs to introduce themselves as Girl Scouts and Girl Scout leaders. It is also common for GSVLs to wear Girl Scout pins during non-scouting activities. Clearly, scouting is a central activity in these women's lives. These leaders have merged their self-concept with the role of a Girl Scout Volunteer Leader. Rosenberg (1979) calls this process psychological centrality; being a GSVL is important in identifying one's self-worth.

structure facilitates and constrains social constructions is by providing social roles. A social role is a set of expectations for a position a person occupies in society. A mother who is a Girl Scout Volunteer Leader is occupying two positions, mother and GSVL. What she is expected to do as a mother and as a GSVL are the roles associated with those positions. What she actually does is called role performance.

Many people identify very strongly with the positions they occupy: mother, employee, Girl Scout leader, etc. They also define themselves in terms of the groups and social categories to which they belong: mothers, employees, Girl Scout leaders, etc. Structural symbolic interactionists define these conceptions variously as self-identities (Stryker 1980), prominent role-identities (McCall and Simmons 1978), person-role merger (Turner 1978), self-role congruence (Karsky, Arwood, and Penor-Ceglian 2000), and psychological centrality of an identity (Rosenberg 1979). The expectations associated with the GSVL become the characteristics of the mother's self-views.

Several structural symbolic interactionists have attempted to measure the importance people give to their various self-role identities (Stryker 1994). They have discovered that the more important a particular identity is, the more often that identity will be called up and enacted, even when actors have other role-obligations. Actors choose the important identity over others when they want to maintain ties with those with whom the identity is aligned with in social interaction (Stryker 1980; McCall & Simmons 1978) and when they feel obligated to those others (McCall & Simmons 1978). In terms of the obligations mothers have for their daughters, it is readily apparent how social structure as social roles directs behavior; GSVL is a means of enacting the mothering role. Identities are also important to people when they have invested time and effort in the identities, and when they expect intrinsic and extrinsic rewards from concurring role performances (McCall & Simmons 1978; Arwood & Hess 1998). These motives point to the facilitating nature of social roles. Structural symbolic interactionists (Stryker and Burke 2001; Stets and Burke, forthcoming) claim that people seek out people and activities that allow them to "act out" their self-related desires. This is what we mean by motives. To this facilitator list, Michener, DeLamater, and Schwartz (1986) add the sense of competence, pleasure, and satisfaction that concurring role performances are expected to provide.

We must remember that any of the roles a person is expected to perform may have these features. Parent and breadwinner are two of them. Indeed, the investments, rewards, pleasure, and friendships associated with GSVL roles can be overshadowed by family-oriented motives that initially brought the GSVL to scouting in the first place. Unless the GSVL forges a new identity as a person committed to Girl Scouting, and not just to her family, she may very well drop out when her daughter does. Indeed, structural symbolic interactionists often attempt to “understand how and why individuals select among role performances [to perform] given the various possible alternatives” (Serpe 1987: 44).

Structural symbolic interactionists have found the answer in a simple proposition. In general, role choices are embedded in the social structure. In less abstract terms, people act on the basis of who they think they are, and who they think they are—their identities—mirror the relationships they have with others. This “mirroring effect” has both behavioral and subjective components. If a GSVL has many, intense interactions with others while she is occupying the position of GSVL, the identity she associates with that position will be important to her self-worth and, because of this importance, she will be more willing to enact the roles she associates with the position of GSVL.

Testing the Answer

Research Design

Unlike conventional symbolic interactionists, structural symbolic interactionists agree with the neo-positivist assumption that empirical generalizations are possible and the theories built upon them are testable using quantitative methods (Stryker 1995). Thus, we feel comfortable using a cross-sectional research design in this study. Indeed, the concepts in the model were operationalized and then measured with a mail questionnaire.⁴ Some of the questions were drawn from the works of Henderson (1979), Curtis (1990), and Oxenford (1991 and the rest of the questions were developed by the second author of this paper. The questionnaire was pre-tested on a panel of present and past GSVLs. Trainers and staff at the regional Girl Scout council also had a chance to critique the questionnaire. The altered questionnaire was then mailed to 546 present and past GSVLs believed to be residing in the catchment

⁴For copy of the questionnaire, e-mail Don at donald_arwood@sdstate.edu.

area of a regional Girl Scout council in the Northern Great Plains. A total of 199 questionnaires (36%) were returned.

Hypotheses

Several hypotheses were developed to test the veracity of our symbolic interactionist explanation of GSVL tenure. The first several hypotheses deal with the correlates of self-role merger.⁵ Indeed, it was hypothesized that self-role merger index scores would be related positively with (H1) the exposure the GSVL had to the role from her parents; (H2) the number of voluntary memberships the GSVL has; (H3) the degree to which the GSVL joined to fulfill the desire to continue in the girl scout tradition; (H4) the level of Girl Scouting the GSVL had completed as a girl; (H5) the amount of training completed when joining up as a GSVL; (H6) scores on an index measuring the number of meetings, training sessions, and events attended by the leader and her troop; (H7) scores on an affiliation index; (H8) scores on an achievement index; (H9) scores on a power index; (H10) scores on an attachment index. Self-role merger index scores were also expected (H11) to vary negatively with scores on a role conflict index. It was also hypothesized (H12) that STQ-GSVLs would have lower self-role index scores than would all other GSVLs.⁶ Finally, it was hypothesized (H13) that the association between self-role index scores and tenure (STQ vs. all others) would vary by the Girl Scout status of the GSVLs' daughters.

Measurement

There are many measures of the behavioral component used in this study: (1) anticipatory socialization as a GSVL (was parent a scout leader); (2) number of volunteer memberships; (3) the number of friends and close friends the volunteer developed in Girl Scouting; (4) the amount of training the leader had; (5) whether she was a scout as a girl;

⁵Self-role merger combines the z-scores for two questions, one dealing with the satisfaction derived from being a GSVL, the other dealing with the importance of being a GSVL.

⁶STQ-GSVL stands for GSVLs who quit or ended their tenures as GSVLs within three years of joining.

and (6) how active the leader was in her final/previous year.⁷ The subjective component was measured in terms of the facilitating nature of people's identities: (1) becoming a GSVL because of the desire to continue in the Girl Scouting tradition; and (2) amount of satisfaction the GSVL received from three self-oriented motives—affiliation, power, and achievement.⁸ A possible “constraining” variable, role conflict, was also considered. Present and past GSVLs were asked to check off reasons why they wanted to quit, or did quit, volunteering.⁹

Tests of Hypotheses

Several measures of association are used in this study, including eta, phi, Spearman rho, and Pearson's r. The .05 level of significance is used for rejecting the null forms of the research hypotheses. The strengths of the associations can be found in table 1 and the cross-tabulations that follow it.

The tests of the hypotheses show support for each hypothesis except H4, which predicts a positive relationship between level completed as a Girl Scout and self-role merger. Even so, the strengths of the associations vary considerably. Self-role merger is only weakly related with anticipatory socialization (H1), voluntary memberships (H2), and training at the beginning of the GSVL's tenure (H5). Moderate associations were found between self-role merger and desire to continue the Girl Scout tradition (H3), affiliation index (H7), power index (H9), role conflict (H11), and tenure (H12). Self-role merger scores were found to be strongly related with activities of the GSVL and her troop (H6), achievement index (H8), and attachment index (H10).

⁷Activities were measured in terms of the number of meetings, training sessions, and other events the leader attended; the number of meetings and events attended by the girls in her troop; and the number of try-its or badges the girls earned.

⁸Affiliation deals with such things as being with one's daughter, with girl scouts, and with other leaders. Achievement includes such things as completing activities, working with parents, and learning new things. Power deals with such things as running meetings, being in charge, and leading girls in activities.

⁹Reasons included, among other things, too many obligations, daughter dropped out, health problems, returned to work, had a baby, had conflicts with other leaders, and too many rules.

TABLE 1: MEASURES OF ASSOCIATION WITH REGARD TO THE HYPOTHESES: SELF-ROLE MERGER BY SEVERAL INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

| H _R | Statistic | Independent Variable | n | Strength | P Value |
|----------------|-----------|--|-----|----------|---------|
| H1 | rho | Anticipatory socialization | 178 | .109 | .023 |
| H2 | rho | Voluntary memberships | 155 | .187 | .010 |
| H3 | r | Desire to continue in the GS tradition | 179 | .411 | .001 |
| H4 | eta | Level completed as a girl scout | 163 | .121 | .121 |
| H5 | rho | Training at beginning | 153 | .219 | .003 |
| H6 | r | Activities of GSVL & troop | 142 | .500 | .001 |
| H7 | r | Affiliation index | 178 | .394 | .001 |
| H8 | r | Achievement index | 153 | .558 | .001 |
| H9 | r | Power index | 171 | .455 | .001 |
| H10 | r | Attachment index | 178 | .512 | .001 |
| H11 | r | Role conflict index | 128 | -.316 | .001 |
| H12* | phi | Tenure--short term quit vs. all others | 181 | .327 | .001 |

**For this hypothesis only, self-role merger is the independent variable and tenure is the dependent variable.*

Hypothesis 13 is tested with the elaboration model. The elaboration model looks at the degree to which a control variable alters the strength or pattern of an association between a single independent

variable and a single dependent variable (Healey 1999). It is reserved for data displayed in bivariate tables.

The modeling begins with a zero-order table and a zero-order correlation, which together describe the association between the independent and dependent variables. The zero-order relationship in hypothesis 13 deals with the association, or effect size, between self-role merger index scores and tenure (see zero-order Table 2). A total of 168 GSVLs were included in this model; 39 were short-term quitters,¹⁰ while 129 were presently GSVLs or had quit after three years. Of the 88 GSVLs with low self-role merger, 32 (36.36%) were short-term quitters, while only 7 of the 80 (8.75%) GSVLs with high self-role merger were short-term quitters. Phi is used to describe the zero-order correlation. The phi value of .327 reveals a **moderate** relationship between tenure and self-role merger.

TABLE 2: TENURE BY SELF-ROLE MERGER (INCLUDES ALL GSVLs; n = 168)

| | | SELF-ROLE MERGER SCORES | | |
|---------|-------|-------------------------|-----------|-----|
| | | LOW | HIGH | |
| TENURE? | STQ | 32 36.36% | 7 8.75% | 39 |
| | OTHER | 56 63.63% | 73 91.25% | 129 |
| | | 88 | 80 | 168 |

phi = .372

p = .001

The next step in the elaboration model is to construct first-order tables and calculate first-order correlations. This is done for each category of the control variable. The control variable in H13 is the membership of the GSVL's daughter. Has she dropped out of scouting or is she still a member? Let's look at the association between self-role merger and tenure for only those GSVLs whose daughters have dropped out of scouting (see Table 3).

¹⁰ No negative connotation is implied by this term.

The strength of the relationship is different. Of the 30 GSVLs with low self-role merger, 25 (83.33%) were short-term quitters; of the 18 with high self-role merger scores, only 6 (33.33%) quit within the first three years. The phi of .506 reveals a **strong** association between self-role merger and tenure.

TABLE 3. TENURE BY SELF-ROLE MERGER (INCLUDES ALL GSVLs w/ DAUGHTERS WHO HAVE DROPPED OUT OF SCOUTING; n = 48)

| | | SELF-ROLE MERGER SCORES | | |
|---------|-------|-------------------------|-----------|----|
| | | LOW | HIGH | |
| TENURE? | STQ | 25 83.33% | 6 33.33% | 31 |
| | OTHER | 5 16.67% | 12 66.67% | 17 |
| | | 30 | 18 | 48 |

phi = .506

p = .001

Let's now look at the association between self-role merger and tenure for only those GSVLs whose daughters are still in scouting (see Table 4). There are only 8 short-term quitters among these GSVLs. Of the 58 GSVLs with low self-role merger, only 7 (12.07%) were short-term quitters; of the 62 with high self-role merger scores, only 1 (1.61%) quit within the first three years. The phi of .209 reveals a **weak** association between self-role merger and tenure.

The final step in the elaboration is to compare the first-order correlations with the zero-order correlation and, then, to make a decision as to the effect of the control variable on the association between the independent and dependent variables. In our case, the zero-order correlation is .372, which reveals a **moderate** association between self-role merger scores and tenure for all GSVLs with daughters who had ever been (or still are) Girl Scouts. The first of the first-order correlations—the sample that only includes GSVLs with daughters who have dropped out of scouting—is .506, which reveals a **strong**

association. For the second first-order correlation—the sample that includes GSVLs whose daughters are still Girl Scouts—the strength of the association is a **weak .209**.

TABLE 4: TENURE BY SELF-ROLE MERGER (INCLUDES ALL GSVLs w/ DAUGHTERS WHO ARE STILL IN SCOUTING; n = 120)

| | | SELF-ROLE MERGER SCORES | | |
|---------|-------|-------------------------|-----------|-----|
| | | LOW | HIGH | |
| TENURE? | STQ | 7 12.07% | 1 1.61% | 8 |
| | OTHER | 51 87.93% | 61 98.39% | 112 |
| | | 58 | 62 | 120 |

phi = .209

p = .001

What do these correlations reveal? According to Healey (1999), whenever a mixed relationship exists (one first-order correlation is stronger than the zero-order correlation while the other is weaker), the investigator has discovered an interaction effect. The assumed causal relationship that self-role merger accounts for length of tenure must be revised to take into account the membership of GSVLs daughters. When the daughter has dropped out of scouting, the relationship between self-role merger and tenure is strong, but the strength of the relationship is much weaker for GSVLs whose daughters are still Girl Scouts. It appears that the importance of self-role merger as a GSVL “kicks in” only when the GSVL’s daughter has dropped out of scouting.

Evaluation of the Answer

The results of hypothesis testing support structural symbolic interactionists’ claim that role choices are socially embedded. The GSVL role is more important in the process of identifying self with higher scores on (1) the desire to continue in the Girl Scouting tradition, (2) the number of role performances enacted, (3) the level of satisfaction with affiliation, achievement, and power goals met, and (4) the

attachments the leader has with adults she knows through scouting. Indeed, all of these relationships are either moderate or strong. The results also reveal a negative association between role conflict and self-role merger. This makes sense, both from a symbolic interactionist perspective and a role theory perspective. When the number of other expectations—lack of time, work, had a baby, other family responsibilities—were high, self-role merger scores tended to be low. And when strife with other volunteers and dissatisfaction with leadership norms were high, self-role merger index scores tended to be low.

The importance of self-role merger in explaining tenure is especially meaningful when one considers just those GSVLs whose daughters have dropped out of scouting. For these leaders, the correlation between self-role merger scores and tenure was substantial. This has both theoretical and practical implications. In order to retain volunteers, regional Girl Scout Leaders need to develop training and activities that conform to the mothers' identity issues. For instance, they can (1) stress the tradition of Girl Scouting and its role in women's lives; (2) demonstrate that GSVLs gain satisfaction from affiliating with like-minded women; and (3) show them how they can develop leadership skills and gain satisfaction from it.

Further research should test these conclusions. This is important because very little research has been done on GSVLs. Besides, the sample used in this study was fairly narrow; the GSVLs in the regional Girl Scout council that was sampled were mostly white and middle-class. Before the conclusions of this study can be generalized with any degree of authority, the theory should be tested on GSVLs of varying races, social classes, and regions. A sample with a larger number of GSVLs who have quit within a three-year period needs to be done, particularly to further test the authors' role conflict proposition.

Regardless of these limitations, the implications of the research should not be overlooked. The test of hypotheses supports the structural symbolic interactionist claim that social structure, in the form of social roles, acts to both constrain and facilitate behavior. Most mothers become GSVLs out of a sense of parental obligation to their daughters, and most quit when their daughters do; however, mothers who stay in scouting after their daughters have given it up do so because they have made the GSVL role one of their self-identities. For these mothers, volunteering meets self-related goals of achievement, affiliation, attachment, and power that are not met by other identities. It appears

that this new role-identity, then, facilitates longer tenure as a GSVL. Regional Girls Scouts councils would be better able to reduce turnover of GSVLs if they focused on these conclusions.

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