ROLE AMBIGUITY, EMPLOYEE GENDER, AND WORKPLACE FRIENDSHIP[1]

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Summary. — The importance of workplace friendship is recognized by researchers and practitioners, but its antecedents with respect to work roles are not well understood. Employees' gender might moderate a relationship between work roles and friendships. Data from a survey of 221 international tourist hotel employees showed that a key aspect of job support, role ambiguity, was negatively related to having workplace friendships. However, employees' gender did not moderate this relationship. Role clarity (the opposite of role ambiguity) may facilitate workplace friendships.

Workplace friendship is voluntary, informal, and person-related interactions among employees in the workplace setting (Berman, West, & Richter, 2002). The importance of workplace friendship for job and organizational effectiveness has been recognized by researchers and practitioners (Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Mao, 2006). Workplace friendship provides employees with support and information exchange, elevating their job performance (Berman, *et al.*, 2002), and thus promotes organizational productivity (Ross, 1997; Song & Olshfski, 2008). Although previous studies have indentified factors influencing workplace friendship (e.g., similarity, proximity, organizational culture; Riordan & Griffeth, 1995; Sias, Smith, & Avdeyeva, 2003), more research is needed to examine the antecedents of workplace friendship (Tse, Dasborough, & Ashkanasy, 2008).

Workplace friendships evolve from work relationships (Sias & Cahill, 1998). The jobs in organizations have connections from which relationships among employees develop. For example, collaboration and sharing resources, and supporting work goals may promote friendship, while conflicting expectations and perceptions of unfair resource allocations may hinder friendship (Sias & Cahill, 1998; Sias, Heath, Perry, Silva, & Fix, 2004). Such interactions focus on the issues related to the connections be-

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tween jobs, other workers, supervisors/managers, or organizational contexts. Since resource sharing and knowledge about shared work goals is based on roles, it is logical that one major source of problems with interactions and development of friendships might be role ambiguity. The goal of the current study is to examine how employees' role ambiguity is related to their friendships at work.

If an employee lacks or does not understand his/her job responsibilities, obligations, performance expectations and/or objectives, role ambiguity exists (Breaugh & Colihan, 1994; Yun, Takeuchi, & Liu, 2007). To reduce role ambiguity, the employee may engage coworkers to obtain more information about shared work roles and to collaborate on those goals, potentially enhancing workplace friendships. On the other hand, role ambiguity may reduce an employee's effectiveness, thereby burdening coworkers or causing resentment and inhibiting the development of workplace friendships. Previous studies have demonstrated that role ambiguity causes a host of dysfunctional job-related problems (see Jackson & Schuler, 1985, for a review). Bedeian, Armenakis, and Curran (1981) also found a significant correlation of −.28 between role ambiguity and relations among work group members. However, the finding may not manifest the association between role ambiguity and workplace friendship because relations among work group members, similar to work relationships, are compulsory and sanctioned by work roles, while workplace friendships are voluntary and unrestricted by work roles (Sias, *et al.*, 2003). Whether role ambiguity affects workplace friendships is not known.

Bridge and Baxter (1992) stated that when employees blend their work role and friend role, their inability to handle the dual-role tension might lead to deterioration of workplace friendship. Role ambiguity and role conflict are different constructs (Jackson & Schuler, 1985) and "are not always associated with the same variables" (Michaels, Day, & Joachimsthaler, 1987, p. 30). Role conflict is defined as the employee's inability to simultaneously satisfy the expectations of different roles, so role ambiguity is not necessarily implied. So, although role conflict is related to workplace friendship, role ambiguity and workplace friendship may not be related in the same way.

Previous studies have indicated that employee gender moderates the relationships between role ambiguity and its consequences (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003). Babin and Boles (1998) also found that role ambiguity had a more negative effect on job performance for female employees (path coefficient = −.46) than for male employees (path coefficient = −.19). Generally speaking, men and women have different communication styles (Leaper, 1987). Specifically, men possess an agentic orientation, discussing topics regarding their work more than women, while women demonstrate

a more communal orientation, discussing topics concerned with people more than men (Leaper, 1987). Female employees exchange more person-centered information and help (Burleson, Liu, Liu, & Mortenson, 2006), which may reduce the effect of decreased job information exchange. The negative effect of role ambiguity (i.e., limited job information) on workplace friendship may be stronger in male employees than in female employees. Accordingly, the other purpose of this study was to examine the moderating effect of gender on such a relationship to address the assertion of Bettencourt and Brown (2003).

Hypotheses

Based on the above literature and logical analysis, two hypotheses were posited. *Hypothesis 1*: role ambiguity will be negatively related to workplace friendship. *Hypothesis 2*: employees' gender will moderate the hypothesized negative relationship between role ambiguity and workplace friendship, that is, the negative relationship will be stronger in male employees than in female employees.

METHOD

Participants

International hotel industry employees were selected as a relevant population for several reasons. Firstly, they perform boundary-spanning jobs. Prior research has indicated that boundary-spanning employees (i.e., those who interact with different groups such as customers and coworkers; Bartel, 2001; Johlke, Stamper, & Shoemaker, 2002) exhibit greater role ambiguity than non-boundary employees (who are situated internally) (Babin & Boles, 1996; Kim, Murrmann, & Lee, 2009). Accordingly, international hotel industry employees will experience higher role ambiguity because of the frequent customer-contact nature of their jobs. Secondly, teamwork is important in the hotel industry. Workplace friendship has positive functions such as cooperation and support which may provide hotel employees with assistance to accomplish their jobs more effectively. Not much research on role ambiguity has focused on hotel employees (Kim, *et al.*, 2009). Here, employees in the international hotel industry were recruited.

The authors contacted the personnel managers of 10 international tourist hotels in Taiwan (three in the north, four in the middle, and three in the south), who agreed to participate in the survey. Each unit was sent 20 to 35 questionnaires, depending on the number of eligible employees. Every employee received a questionnaire, a cover letter promising confidentiality, a gift, and postage-paid return envelop. The data were collected between March 2009 and April 2009. Of the 300 questionnaires distributed, 225 questionnaires were returned. Omitting four invalid questionnaires,

with incomplete or conflicting answers, there were 221 valid question-
naires (74% response rate). Sample characteristics are shown in Table 1:
62.4% were female employees, 29.9% were 26-30 years old, 52.9% were
single, 42.5% were college graduates, 61.5% earned between NT$20,001
and NT$30,000 per month, and nearly half (45.2%) of respondents' ten-
ures were 2–5 years.

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE ($N = 221$)

Variable	n	%	M	SD
Gender [a]			0.62	0.49
Male	83	37.6		
Female	138	62.4		
Age [b]			3.39	1.17
Less than 20	5	2.3		
21–25	54	24.4		
26–30	66	29.9		
31–35	42	19.0		
36 and over	54	24.4		
Marital status [c]			0.53	0.50
Married	104	47.1		
Single	117	52.9		
Education [d]			3.14	0.97
Junior school	10	4.5		
High school	54	24.4		
Junior college	57	25.8		
College degree	94	42.5		
Graduate degree	6	2.8		
Income [e]			2.24	0.97
NT$0–NT$20,000	32	14.5		
NT$20,001–NT$30,000	136	61.5		
NT$30,001–NT$40,000	35	15.8		
NT$40,001–NT$50,000	9	4.1		
NT$50,001–NT$60,000	4	1.8		
NT$60,001 and over	5	2.3		
Tenure [f]			2.56	1.15
Less than 1 yr.	31	14.0		
2–5 yr.	100	45.2		
6–10 yr.	48	21.7		
11–15 yr.	19	8.6		
16 yr. and over	23	10.5		

Note. — [a] 0 = male, 1 = female; [b] 1 = less than 20, 2 = 21–25, 3 = 26–30, 4 = 31–35, 5 = 36 and over;
[c] 0 = married, 1 = single; [d] 1 = junior school, 2 = high school, 3 = junior college, 4 = college de-
gree, 5 = graduate degree; [e] 1 = NT$0–NT$20,000, 2 = NT$20,001–NT$30,000, 3 = NT$30,001–
NT$40,000, 4 = NT$40,001–NT$50,000, 5 = NT$50,001–NT$60,000, 6 = NT$60,001 and over; [f] 1 =
less than 1, 2 = 2–5, 3 = 6–10, 4 = 11–15, 5 = 16 and over.

Measures

The questionnaire was pre-tested in a sample of hotel employees in Taichung, Taiwan. Based on the opinions of 38 respondents in the pretest, some questions were reworded for ease of understanding.

Role ambiguity.—To measure role ambiguity, 15 items relevant to the hotel industry were selected from the scales developed by Hartline and Ferrell (1996). The measurement dimensions included "performance criteria ambiguity" and "behavioral responsibility ambiguity" suggested by Breaugh and Colihan (1994) and Eys and Carron (2001). A sample item for the former was, "I understand how my supervisor evaluates my performance" and for the latter, "I know how to provide customers with good service." Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1: Not at all certain to 5: Completely certain. After reversing the scale responses, higher scores indicated more perceived role ambiguity. The 15 items of the role ambiguity scale are listed in the Appendix (p. 730).

Workplace friendship.—Workplace friendship was measured using six items developed from Nielsen, Jex, and Adams (2000). The sample item was "I have formed strong friendships at work." Responses were made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1: Strongly disagree to 5: Strongly agree. Higher scores indicated more friends at work. The six items of the role ambiguity scale are listed in the Appendix (p. 730).

Demographic variables.—For gender, male was coded 0 and female was coded 1. Previous studies suggested that age, marital status, education, and job tenure affected role ambiguity as well as workplace friendship (Karatepe & Sokman, 2006; Mao, 2006). Therefore, to clarify the relationship between role ambiguity and workplace friendship, these variables were controlled. Descriptive statistics are shown in Table 1.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed via correlation and hierarchical regression analysis. Steps in a moderation analysis suggested by Cohen and Cohen (1975) and Aguinis (2004) were to enter control variables (including gender) in the first step, followed by role ambiguity, followed by the interaction term of role ambiguity and gender.

<div align="center">Results</div>

Measures

The internal consistency reliabilities of the role ambiguity scale ($\alpha = .96$) and the workplace friendship scale ($\alpha = .85$) were acceptable. AMOS software was used to conduct confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) of role ambiguity and workplace friendship questionnaires to assess the scales' validity. In the initial stage of the analysis, two items were deleted from the scales because of non-significant *t* values. For the remaining

TABLE 2
ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS AMONG STUDY VARIABLES

Variable	M	SD	Pearson Correlation						
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age[a]	3.39	1.17							
2. Marital status[b]	0.53	0.50	−.55†						
3. Education[c]	3.14	0.97	−.40†	.30†					
4. Tenure[d]	2.56	1.15	.50†	−.31†	−.26†				
5. Gender[e]	0.62	0.49	−.24†	.17*	.13	−.14*			
6. Role ambiguity	2.46	0.77	−.38†	.14*	.25†	−.24†	.00	**.72**	
7. Workplace friendship	3.73	0.59	.16*	−.14*	−.07	.09	−.09	−.27†	**.54**

Note.—The boldface values on the diagonal are average variance explained (AVE). [a]1 = less than 20, 2 = 21–25, 3 = 26–30, 4 = 31–35, 5 = 36 and over; [b]0 = married, 1 = single; [c]1 = junior school, 2 = high school, 3 = junior college, 4 = college degree, 5 = graduate degree; [d]1 = less than 1, 2 = 2–5, 3 = 6–10, 4 = 11–15, 5 = 16 and over; [e]0 = male, 1 = female. *$p < .05$. †$p < .01$.

items, the two-factor model showed that the ratio of chi square over degrees of freedom was 3.08 (458.76 / 149), which was below five to indicate good fit (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Root mean square residual (RMR) was .05 and standardized root-mean-square residual (SRMR) was .06, better than the recommended standard (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Additionally, the comparative fit index (CFI) was .91, which exceeded the recommended standard (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Therefore, the model had an acceptable fit to the data. Standardized loadings of all items were significant on their respective latent variables ($p < .05$). The average variance explained for role ambiguity and workplace friendship exceeded the squared correlations with other variables in this study (see Table 2), an indicator of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Therefore, the constructs have basic convergent and discriminant validity.

Common method variance may affect the empirical results because all the data were collected using self-report questionnaires. The fit indices of the one-factor model (where all items were loaded on a single factor) were much worse ($\chi^2 = 1{,}290.22$, $df = 152$, $\chi^2/df = 8.45$, RMR = .09, CFI = .68, SRMR = .14), so common methods variance was not a serious problem in this study (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003).

Correlation and Hierarchical Regression Analysis

Zero-order correlations among variables in this study are presented in Table 2. Role ambiguity was statistically significantly associated with younger age, single status, having higher education, and shorter job tenure. Besides, workplace friendship was statistically significantly associated with being older, married, and higher role ambiguity.

As shown in Table 3, model 2, the explanatory power of role ambiguity on workplace friendship was significant (increment in $R^2 = .06$, $F_{6,214} = 3.56$,

TABLE 3
RESULTS OF HIERARCHICAL REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR WORKPLACE FRIENDSHIP

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	.11	.01	.01
Marital status	−.07	−.10	−.11
Education	.01	.04	.04
Tenure	.01	−.01	−.02
Gender	−.05	−.08	−.23
Role ambiguity		−.27*	−.32*
Role ambiguity * Gender			.17
R^2	.03	.09	.09
R^2 change		.06	.00
F	1.45	3.56*	3.12*
df	5,215	6,214	7,213
F change		13.70*	0.54
df change	5,215	1,214	1,213

*$p < .01$.

$p < .01$; F change$_{1,214} = 13.70$, $p < .01$). The standardized regression coefficient for workplace friendship was $\beta = -.27$ ($p < .01$). As a result, Hypothesis 1 was supported. Employees who perceived role ambiguity reported less workplace friendship.

As shown in Table 3, model 3, the increment of R^2 was small (increment of $R^2 = .00$, $F_{7,213} = 3.12$, $p < .01$; F change$_{1,213} = 0.54$, $p > .05$). The regression coefficient for the interaction term of role ambiguity and gender was not significant. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

DISCUSSION

The literature on role ambiguity has mostly focused on the association between role ambiguity and job-related factors, such as job satisfaction and job performance (Li & Bagger, 2008; Tunc & Kutanis, 2009). However, little research has examined the associations between role ambiguity and interpersonal variables. The contribution of this study was in showing role ambiguity was significantly associated with reduced workplace friendship. Employee's gender did not moderate the negative relationship between role ambiguity and workplace friendship. Bridge and Baxter (1992) stressed that role conflict was related negatively with workplace friendship, but role ambiguity was not addressed. Lowering role conflict, or enhancing role clarity may help facilitate employees' workplace friendships as well as having other desirable outcomes. Role ambiguity is a major factor in role conflict (Weatherly & Tansik, 1993; Grant, Cravens, Low, & Moncrief, 2001). If employees' roles are clear, this will improve their understanding of coworkers' role expectations, perhaps reducing role conflict.

The hypothesized moderating effect of gender on the negative rela-

tionship between role ambiguity and workplace friendship predicted in Hypothesis 2 was not supported. This could be explained by employees having assigned role expectations and responsibilities (Dobreva-Martinova, Villeneuve, Strickland, & Matheson, 2002). In that context, women employees were expected to receive more information and help concerning people and thereby would also be more aware of the effects of role ambiguity on their workplace friendships. Apparently this sex difference was at most a very small effect and was not significant.

To achieve role clarity, managers need to provide employees with adequate job-related information, which usually appears in job descriptions and includes stated job responsibilities, actions required to complete these job responsibilities, performance appraisals, and the consequences of not fulfilling job responsibilities (Cunningham & Eys, 2007). These consequences are typically less noted in job descriptions. They can be a reasonable tactic for reducing employee's job ambiguity, particularly in the hotel industry, where employees frequently contact customers and the demands and expectations of customers are not predictable. This characteristic of the hotel industry will increase the influence of an employee's role ambiguity (i.e., not knowing what to do with a customer demand) on the workload of his/her coworkers because they may have to deal with his/her unfulfilled customer demand.

Cunningham and Eys (2007) found that greater communication among group members was associated with a drop in members' role ambiguity. Workplace friendship may be negatively related to employees' role ambiguity since workplace friends can provide them with job-related information. Similar studies have noted the negative relationship between work relations and role ambiguity (Ross & Boles, 1994; Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, & Shacklock, 2011), which may be reciprocal. This is a noteworthy topic for future study.

Research has shown that the relationship between role ambiguity and its outcome variables is affected by other factors (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Karatepe, Yavas, Babakus, & Avci, 2006). In a dependent work environment, information exchange/assistance is required among employees to promote the achievement of job objectives (Saavedra, Early, & Van Dyne, 1993). The negative relationship between role ambiguity and workplace friendship will be stronger in dependent than in independent settings. For the same reasons, competition is unfavorable toward developing workplace friendship (Berman, *et al.*, 2002). In a highly competitive setting, an employee with role ambiguity may perceive a lack of mutual assistance and job information sharing among employees because coworkers would like to maintain their individual advantages. Competition

among employees would moderate the relationship between job ambiguity and workplace friendship. Future study should address this possibility.

A limitation of this study is that samples for the main survey were drawn from employees of international hotels, which limits the generalizability of the results to other populations. In addition, the design of this study could not rule out the effects of common methods variance since all the data used in the study were acquired using the same questionnaire.

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APPENDIX

MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE MEASURES

Measures and Items	M	SD
Role Ambiguity		
(1) I know how to provide customers with good service.	2.27	0.97
(2) I know how much time I should spend on each task.	2.35	0.93
(3) I know how to solve customers' complaints.	2.55	0.93
(4) I understand how to complete daily paper work.	2.41	0.99
(5) I understand well how to plan or arrange my daily work.	2.31	0.93
(6) I know how to handle special problems and situations.	2.58	0.90
(7) I understand well where I can get help for handling my work.	2.47	0.93
(8) I understand well my company's rules and regulations.	2.24	0.99
(9) I know how my supervisor will evaluate my performance.	2.62	0.94
(10) I understand well how my supervisor is satisfied with my performance.	2.60	0.91
(11) I know which training is related to my work.	2.37	0.95
(12) I understand well which factors determine my promotion.	2.63	1.01
(13) I understand well how my supervisor will expect me to arrange my time.	2.55	0.96
(14) I understand well how my customers are satisfied with my performance.	2.44	0.97
(15) I understand well what my customers expect for my work.	2.40	1.02
Workplace Friendship		
(1) I have formed strong friendships at work	4.03	0.63
(2) I have social activities with coworkers outside of work	3.83	0.76
(3) I can share my secrets with my coworkers	3.56	0.84
(4) I feel I can trust many of my coworkers	3.62	0.75
(5) Being able to see my coworkers is one reason why I look forward to my job	3.59	0.74
(6) I do not feel that anyone I work with is a true friend (reverse question)	2.47	1.02

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