

**The Price Chameleons Pay:  
Self-monitoring, Boundary Spanning, and Role Conflict in the Workplace \***

Ajay Mehra

Gatton College of Business and Economics

University of Kentucky

Lexington, KY 40356

Ph: 859.257.8268

Fax: 859.257.3577

ajaymehra1@gmail.com

Mark T. Schenkel

College of Business Administration

Belmont University

1900 Belmont Boulevard, Nashville, TN 37212-3757

Ph: 615.460.5474

Fax: 615.460.6605

schenkelm@mail.belmont.edu

**In-Press at the British Journal of Management**

*We thank Craig Froehle, Gerald Ferris, Associate Editor Susan Cartwright, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their helpful comments and advice. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2005 Academy of Management meetings. The usual caveat applies.*

\* Both authors contributed equally to this research-- order of authorship is alphabetical.

## **The Price Chameleons Pay:**

### **Self-monitoring, Boundary Spanning, and Role Conflict in the Workplace**

The vast majority of research on self-monitoring in the workplace focuses on the benefits that accrue to chameleon-like high self-monitors (relative to true-to-themselves low self-monitors). In this study, we depart from the mainstream by focusing on a potential liability of being a high self-monitor: high levels of experienced role conflict. We hypothesize that high self-monitors tend to choose work situations, which, although consistent with the expression of their characteristic personality, inherently involve greater role conflict (i.e., competing role expectations from different role senders). Data collected from a 116-member high-tech firm showed support this mediational hypothesis: Relative to low self-monitors, high self-monitors tended to experience greater role conflict in work organizations because high self monitors were more likely to occupy boundary-spanning positions. We call for more theoretically grounded research on the price chameleons pay to help draw a more realistic and balanced portrait of self-monitoring in the workplace.

## **The Price Chameleons Pay:**

### **Self-monitoring, Boundary Spanning, and Role Conflict in the Workplace**

The idea that stable differences in human personality can systematically influence individuals' reactions to the workplace has a long, and stormy, history in organizational studies. Although the relevance of personality variables for predicting work related outcomes was once suspect, there is now "abundant evidence for the robustness of many personality characteristics in understanding work-related attitudes..." (Day & Schleicher, 2006: 686). In recent years, one personality variable in particular has received significant attention from organizational researchers: "self-monitoring" (Snyder, 1974; for a recent review, see Leone, 2006). This variable has a long history of use in basic and applied research and it has sound psychometric properties. Indeed, the impressive validity it has demonstrated in the workplace has made it "one of the most widely used personality measures for research purposes" (Day, Schleicher, Unckless, Perrin, and Hiller, 2002: 390; Day & Schleicher, 2006).

At the heart of self-monitoring theory is the proposition that individuals differ meaningfully in the extent to which they can and do engage in the expressive control required for the creation of appropriate self-presentations (Snyder, 1974). One class of individuals, high self-monitors, tend to be highly attuned to cues of situational appropriateness; chameleon-like (Snyder, 1979), they adapt their behaviors and attitudes to suit different situational requirements. Faced with a social situation, high self-monitors ask: "Who does this situation want me to be and how can I be that person?" (Snyder, 1979). By contrast, the other class of individuals, low self-monitors, tend to be less attuned to the requirements of different situations than to their own inner beliefs and

values. Faced with a social situation, these true-to-themselves individuals ask: “Who am I and how can I be me in this situation?” (Snyder, 1979; see the discussion in Kilduff & Day, 1994). Consequently, low self-monitors tend to be relatively rigid in their reactions to changing situational demands (Gangestad and Snyder, 2000).

The pragmatic, collaborative attitude of the chameleon-like high self-monitors, compared to the principled, unyielding stance of the low self-monitors, has been shown to be positively related to a number of important workplace outcomes, such as promotions (e.g., Kilduff and Day, 1994), job performance (e.g., Mehra, Kilduff, and Brass, 2001), and leadership emergence (e.g., Dobbins, Long, and Dedrick, 1990). Less work has been done on the price that high self-monitors may pay for their workplace success. A notable exception is the handful of studies that have reported results suggesting that high self-monitors tend to experience greater role conflict—the presence of disparate and potentially incompatible work-role related demands—at work than low self-monitors (see Day et al., 2002). Role conflict can cause stress and burnout (e.g., Lepine, Podaskoff, and Lepine, 2005), and it can have serious and negative health consequences (e.g., House, 1974; Perrewe, Zellars, Ferris, Rossi, Kacmar, and Ralston, 2004).

The existing evidence linking self-monitoring and role conflict comes, however, from only a few samples, each of which has focused on jobs, such as sales, that inherently involve high levels of role conflict (e.g., Dubinsky and Hartley, 1986). More troubling is that although there is evidence for a statistical relationship between self-monitoring and role conflict, the theoretical rationale for the relationship has been unclear and untested. In this paper, we formulate and test the argument that high self-monitors

are more likely to experience role conflict because they tend to occupy boundary spanning positions within the firm.

### **Theory and Hypothesis**

Formal organizational structure has long been recognized as a direct source of role expectations and pressures that can contribute to perceived role conflict (Rizzo et al., 1970). For example, by virtue of their location at the “skin” of the organization (Katz and Kahn, 1966: 192), individuals designated as external boundary spanners are responsible for receiving, processing, and transmitting information across varying permeable organizational boundaries. Because they have to mediate between different groups with different values, beliefs, and interests, boundary spanners are routinely caught in the cross-fire of competing expectations; they are subjected to high levels of conflict from intra-organizational and extra-organizational influences (Kahn et al., 1964).

The dispositional strengths of high self-monitors appear to nicely complement the conflicting pressures of boundary spanning roles. Studies have shown that high self-monitors are better able to adapt their behavior to a range of different social situations; they prefer to inhabit different, relatively segregated, social worlds (Snyder, Gangestad, and Simpson, 1983; Snyder, 1987: 68-69). There is also evidence that high self-monitors tend to outperform low self-monitors in external boundary spanning positions (e.g., Caldwell and O’Reilly, 1982). If boundary spanning positions are suited to the native strengths of the high self-monitor, then we can expect that high self-monitors will tend to disproportionately occupy such positions in

organizations and this, in turn, may explain why they tend to perceive greater role conflict in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

**Hypothesis:** The relationship between self-monitoring and perceived role conflict will be *mediated* by the occupancy of external boundary spanning positions.

## METHOD

### Sample

This research was part of a larger study conducted at a high-tech firm located in the Northeastern United States. The organization was deliberately flat, with only three layers of hierarchy, to enhance speed and responsiveness. Data on self-monitoring and role conflict were collected through a questionnaire sent to all 116 employees (response rate: 88 percent). Missing data on the self-monitoring measure reduced the total usable sample of responses from 102 to 93.

### Measures

**Self-monitoring.** Self-monitoring was measured through an 18-item true-false questionnaire (Snyder and Gangestad, 1986). A sample item is “In different situations with different people, I often act like very different persons.” In the present study, the reliability for this scale, as measured by Cronbach’s alpha, was .80.

**Boundary spanning.** Our operationalization of boundary spanning positions drew on prior research, which has emphasized linking/coordination and information filtration and transfer

---

<sup>1</sup> The logic of our hypothesis draws on the “situational strategy,” which proposes that the regularities and consistencies in people’s behaviors and attitudes are products of regularities and consistencies in their situations (Snyder & Ickes, 1985; Ickes et. al., 1997). The situational strategy seeks to capitalize on the intuition that the situations in which people find themselves are often of their own choosing; and it is this intuition that “differentiates it from the focus of most other personality research” (Day & Kilduff, 2003: 209).

as key to the concept of boundary spanning (e.g., Miles, 1976). Over the course of two hour-long interviews, we asked the firm's human resources (H.R.) director to identify "positions that required a high degree of interaction with and responsiveness to both internal and external constituents." Of the 116 positions in the firm, 28 boundary spanning positions were identified by the HR director. (We checked the reliability of this coding using the independent perceptions of two other employees: Inter-rater agreement as assessed by the proportional reduction in loss method (see Hughes and Garrett, 1990) was .96. Discrepancies were resolved in a face-to-face meeting between the H.R. director and the three independent coders.)

**Role conflict.** This measure consisted of 6-items drawn from the original 13-item scale developed by Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman (1970). Items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from "very false" to "very true," and the average score across the six items is interpreted as directly proportional to the level of role conflict. A sample item is "At work, I tend to receive incompatible requests from two or more people." The reliability for this scale as measured by Cronbach's alpha was .78.

**Control variables.** We gathered data from company records to control for three variables that have been shown to be related to role conflict in previous work: organizational rank (non-supervisors=0; supervisors=2; top-management-team members=3), tenure (in months), and sex (females=0; males=1).

## ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

We followed the standard approach to testing mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986): Using hierarchical regression, we first examined whether self-monitoring explained significant variance in role conflict. Second, we used logistic regression to examine whether self-monitoring was positively related to the occupancy of boundary spanning positions. Finally, to evaluate the full mediation hypothesis, we used hierarchical regression to examine whether any significant

relationship between self-monitoring and perceived role conflict became insignificant once boundary spanning position was included in the hierarchical regression model.

-----  
Insert Table 1 about here

-----  
Table 1 reports means, standard deviations, and zero-order correlations among the variables in our study.

-----  
Insert Table 2 about here

-----  
To test the hypothesized mediation model, we followed the standard approach outlined in Baron and Kenny (1986). First, we asked: Was self-monitoring related to perceived role conflict across the full range of jobs in the organization? Hierarchical regression results presented in Table 2 show that the answer to this question was affirmative. As shown in model 2, even after controlling for rank, tenure, and sex, self-monitoring was significantly and positively related to perceived role conflict ( $b = .20, p < .05$ ), explaining an additional 3 percent of variance over the baseline model. High self-monitoring individuals tended to perceive greater role conflict than low self-monitoring individuals, irrespective of rank, tenure, or sex.

-----  
Insert Table 3 about here

We then asked: Is self-monitoring related to the occupancy of external boundary spanning positions? Results of logistic regression analysis, shown in Table 3, show that the answer to this question was: “yes.” The significant and positive beta coefficient for self-monitoring ( $b = .26, p < .01$ ) indicated that high self-monitors were more likely than low self-monitors to occupy boundary spanning positions within the firm. High self-monitors only made up 23 percent of the sample, but they occupied just over 53 percent of all external boundary spanning positions. In short, high self-monitors were overrepresented in external boundary spanning positions.

The final step in evaluating our mediation hypothesis required that the previously significant relationship between self-monitoring and perceived role conflict should become non-significant once boundary spanning position (the mediator) is included in the regression model. The results in Table 2, model 4 show that this is in fact the case. The previously significant relationship between self-monitoring and role conflict was no longer significant once boundary spanning position was included in the model ( $b = .14, ns$ ). Taken together, these results showed strong support for our hypothesis. The relationship between self-monitoring and perceived role conflict was mediated by occupancy in boundary spanning positions.

## **DISCUSSION**

Past work on self-monitoring in the workplace has overwhelmingly emphasized the benefits that accrue to (chameleon-like) high self-monitors, relative to (true-to-themselves) low self-monitors, such as more numerous promotions (Kilduff & Day, 1994), and higher supervisory evaluations (Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 2001). High self-monitors have come to be seen as the preferred employee in work settings (Day & Schleicher, 2006). Our study suggests that there may also be some drawbacks to being a social chameleon: relative to low self-monitors, high self-monitors reported experiencing greater role conflict in the workplace. These

findings are clearly tentative; but they suggest a clear hypothesis for future investigation:

Relative to low self-monitors, high self-monitors should be more likely to experience stress, and its related negative symptoms, both physical (see Lepine et. al., 2005 for physical indicators and how they might be measured) and psychological (e.g., job burnout; low job commitment). By focusing on the potential drawbacks of the high self-monitoring personality orientation, we hope to contribute to a more complete and realistic portrait of self-monitoring in the workplace.

Previous studies that have examined the relationship between self-monitoring and perceived role conflict have relied exclusively on samples of retail and insurance salespeople (e.g., Chonko, 1982; Dubinsky & Hartley, 1986a). Ours may be the first study to examine the relationship between self-monitoring personality and role conflict using a sample consisting of a wider range of jobs within a firm. Because our sample does not consist exclusively of sales persons, the findings of our research suggest that the relationship between self-monitoring and role conflict is a robust one (cf., Day et. al., 2002). Future work should examine the relationship between self-monitoring and role conflict using samples drawn from other work contexts to explore the boundary conditions for this relationship.

Although we have emphasized how individuals choose positions that are consistent with their self-monitoring orientations, it is possible that other related mechanisms may be responsible for the clustering of individuals with different self-monitoring orientations in different structural locations within the firm. For example, it may be that high self-monitors are more likely to be selected into boundary spanning positions by superiors; it is also possible that high self-monitors actively transform the jobs they find themselves in into boundary spanning positions through a process of role innovation. An important task for future studies in this line of research is to more carefully examine, using longitudinal data, the relative extent to which choice, selection, and

innovation explain the observed tendency for high self-monitors to cluster in boundary spanning positions (cf. Tushman and Scanlan, 1981).

Another vital task for future researchers is to distinguish self-monitoring from the seemingly related construct of emotional intelligence, which refers to one's ability to be aware of one's own and others' feelings, and to use these feelings to guide one's thinking and behavior (for a review, see Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Like self-monitoring, emotional intelligence has been found to be related to positive organizational outcomes, such as leadership and performance. However, although the "list of other measures with which self-monitoring is *not* meaningfully correlated is a long one" (Snyder, 1987: 27), we were unable to locate any published studies that include both of these measures so that they might be empirically distinguished. One could argue that an important conceptual distinction between the two constructs is that whereas highly emotionally intelligent people apparently focus on both their own emotions and the emotions of others, self-monitoring theory suggests that high self-monitors are especially focused on the emotions of others rather than on their own emotions. A related conceptual distinction may be that whereas high self-monitors have been shown to be highly attentive towards and compliant with external expectations, especially those emanating from high-status others, it is unclear what effect the external expectations of high-status others have on the comportment and self-presentation of emotionally intelligent people. Nonetheless, there are significant parallels between the construct of self-monitoring and that of emotional intelligence. Research that empirically and conceptually distinguishes these constructs is needed to tackle the criticism that the construct of emotional intelligence may merely be old wine being cleverly marketed in a new bottle (cf. Locke, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

In the thirty years since it first made its appearance, self-monitoring has emerged as a useful dispositional predictor of important workplace attitudes and outcomes (see the recent review in Leone, 2006). In organizational settings, prior work has overwhelmingly emphasized the benefits of self-monitoring. Our paper points, instead, to a potential liability of the high self-monitoring orientation: higher levels of perceived role conflict. We argue that high self-monitors experience higher levels of role conflict because they tend to gravitate towards boundary spanning positions within the firm. Our theoretical approach suggests that in organizational life the characteristics of actors and the characteristics of situations will be frequently confounded. People often choose, and are often chosen for, the situations to which they are exposed because of their manifest or presumed abilities or dispositions (cf. Ross and Nisbett, 1991: 19). By focusing on the processes whereby individuals choose the settings of their work lives, organizational researchers could gain new insights into the dynamic relationship between individuals, their social worlds, and workplace perceptions.

## REFERENCES

- Baron, R. M. and Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(6): 1173-1182.
- Caldwell, D. F. and O'Reilly, C. A. (1982). Boundary spanning and individual performance: The impact of self-monitoring. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 67: 124-127.
- Day, D. V., and Kilduff, M. (2003). Self-monitoring personality and work relationships. In M. R. Barrick and A. M. Ryan (eds.), *Personality and Work: Reconsidering the Role of Personality in Organizations*: 205-228. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.
- Day, D. V., Schleicher, D. J., Unckless, A. L., Perrin, T., and Hiller, N. J. (2002). Self-monitoring personality at work: A meta-analytic investigation of construct validity. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(2): 390-401.
- Day, D. V., and Schleicher, D. J. (2006). Self-monitoring at work: A motive based perspective. *Journal of Personality*, 74 (3): 685-710.
- Dobbins, G. H., Long, W. S., and Dedrick, E. J. (1990). The role of self-monitoring and gender on leader emergence: A laboratory and field study. *Journal of Management*, 16(3): 609-618.
- Dubinsky, A. J. and Hartley, S. W. (1986). A path-analytic study of a model of salesperson performance. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 14(1): 36-46.
- Gangestad, S. W., and Snyder, M. (2000). Self-monitoring: Appraisal and reappraisal. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(4): 530-555.
- House, J. S. (1974). Occupational stress and coronary heart disease: A review and theoretical integration. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 15: 12-27.

- Hughes, M. A. and Garrett, D. E. (1990). Intercoder reliability estimation approaches in marketing: A generalizability theory framework for quantitative data. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 27(2): 185-195.
- Ickes, W., Snyder, M., & Garcia, S. 1997. Personality influences on the choice of situations. In R. Hogan & J. A. Johnson & S. R. Briggs (Eds.), *Handbook of personality psychology*: 165-195. San Diego, CA: Academic Press, Inc.
- Kahn, R. L., Wolfe, D. M., Quinn, R. P., and Snoek, J. D. (Eds.). (1964). *Organizational stress: Studies in role conflict and ambiguity*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Katz, D. and Kahn, R. L. (1966). *The social psychology of organizations*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Kilduff, M. and Day, D. V. (1994). Do chameleons get ahead? The effects of self-monitoring on managerial careers. *Academy of Management Journal* 37(4): 1047-1060.
- Leone, C. (2006). Self-monitoring: Individual differences in orientations to the social world. *Journal of Personality*, 74 (3): 633-657.
- Lepine, J. A. , Podsakoff, N. P., and Lepine, M. A. (2005). A meta-analytic test of the challenge stressor-hindrance stressor framework: An explanation for inconsistent relationships among stressors and performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 48: 764-775.
- Locke, E. A. (2005). Why emotional intelligence is an invalid concept. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 26: 425-431.
- Mehra, A., Kilduff, M., and Brass, D. J. (2001). The social networks of high and low self-monitors: Implications for workplace performance. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 46(1): 121-146.
- Miles, R. H. (1976). A comparison of the relative impacts of role perceptions of ambiguity and conflict by role. *Academy of Management Journal*, 19(1): 25-34.

- Perrewé, P. L., Zellars, K. L., Ferris, G. R., Rossi, A. M., Kacmar, C. J., and Ralston, D. A. (2004). Neutralizing job stressors: Political skill as an antidote to the dysfunctional consequences of role conflict. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47(1): 141-152.
- Rizzo, J. R., House, R. J., and Lirtzman, S. I. (1970). Role conflict and ambiguity in complex organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 15(2): 150-163.
- Ross, L., and Nisbett, R. E. (1991). *The person and the situation: Perspectives of social psychology*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia.
- Salovey, P., & Mayer, J.D. (1990). Emotional intelligence. *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, 9: 185-211.
- Snyder, M. (1974). Self-monitoring of expressive behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 30: 526-537.
- Snyder, M. and Gangestad, S. (1986). On the nature of self-monitoring: Matters of assessment, matters of validity. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51(1): 125-139.
- Snyder, M., Gangestad, S., and Simpson, J. A. (1983). Choosing friends as activity partners: The role of self-monitoring. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51: 181-190.
- Snyder, M., & Ickes, W. 1985. Personality and social behavior. In G. Lindzey & E. Aronson (Eds.) *Handbook of Social Psychology*(3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). New York: Random House.
- Tushman, M. L., and Scanlan, T. J. (1981). Characteristics and external orientations of boundary spanning individuals. *Academy of Management Journal*, 24: 83-98.

**TABLE 1**  
**Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations <sup>a</sup>**

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5
1. Rank	0.25	0.56					
2. Tenure	54.69	38.70	.13				
3. Sex	0.63	0.49	.12	.02			
4. Self-monitoring	7.13	3.93	.14	.07	.12		
5. Boundary spanning	0.24	0.43	.33	.03	-.28	.26	
6. Role conflict	3.71	1.09	.16	.12	.28	.24	.23

<sup>a</sup> n = 93. Correlations greater than .22 are significant at  $p < .05$ , and those greater than .27 are significant at  $p < .01$ .

**TABLE 2**  
**Results of Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Role Conflict <sup>a</sup>**

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Rank	.11	.09	.00	.00
Tenure	.11	.12	.11	.12
Sex	.27**	.21*	.34**	.29**
Self-monitoring		.20*		.14
Boundary spanning			.29**	.23*
Model <u>F</u>	3.55*	2.92*	4.74*	3.15*
<u>R</u> <sup>2</sup>	.10	.13	.17	.16

Note: The focus of this research is role conflict. The results on role ambiguity are presented here for comparative purposes only.

<sup>a</sup> n = 93; values in table are standardized regression coefficients.

\* p < .05

\*\* p < .01

**TABLE 3****Results of Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Boundary Spanning Position <sup>a</sup>**

---

Variable	Beta Coefficient	Standard Error
Intercept	-2.32**	.81
Rank	1.83	.53
Tenure	.00	.01
Sex	-2.31**	.73
Self-monitoring	.26**	.09
Goodness of Fit Index <sup>b</sup>	9.69 ( $p = .29$ )	
Model Chi Square <sup>c</sup>	24.32**	

---

<sup>a</sup>  $n = 93$ ; values in table are standardized regression coefficients.

<sup>b</sup> Based on the Hosmer-Lemeshow Chi-square statistic (1989). A non-significant value indicates good fit across the entire predictor range.

\*  $p < .05$

\*\*  $p < .01$