

Status and Role of a Person in Society

According to sociologists, *status* describes the position a person occupies in a particular setting. We all occupy several statuses and play the *roles* that may be associated with them. A role is the set of norms, values, behaviors, and personality characteristics attached to a status.

Status:

'Status' is the position that an individual is expected to hold in a group or a community; and the behaviour that we expect from the person holding such a position is his 'role'. Society itself works out into an orderly division of labour by giving different persons different positions in it and assigning to each such position of behaviour that would generally be expected of such person.

Rights and duties conferred by society upon a particular status would be typified and impersonal, and never personalized. We would, therefore, have a common idea of the role that any woman would have to play if she were to occupy the status of a mother, and, similarly, an impersonal standard of behaviour is expected of a student, a teacher, an office executive or the person who holds the status of the highest executive in the country.

Sociologists find that status can be mainly of two types: 'ascribed' or inherited and 'achieved' or acquired. If an individual's status is determined at his birth, it would be regarded as an ascribed status. Birth determines the sex and age of the child finally and conclusively, as also his ethnic and family background. While age is a changing factor in life, the others remain unchanged; and in the United States a baby born into a black family will have certain limitations which the white baby will not suffer from.

Similarly, in India, being born a female is still quite a disadvantage in large parts of the country, although we have a legal guarantee as to the equality of the sexes. Again, in our country, birth in a particular caste among the Hindus is clearly an inherited status and the question of changing it in his life time is virtually as absurdity.

An individual may be born into a status, as when he is born rich or poor, but he may 'acquire' another status in his life time with the exercise of his ability, skill or knowledge. If society can be divided into several economic classes or divisions as we shall look up in a later chapter people may be poor, rich or of the middle category.

With his own ability, or the lack of it, one who is born into any of such statuses may change in his life time to another status. In an industrial society, different specialized occupations have been made available to persons without any regard to their ethnic or family backgrounds and, in modern times, even sex is no barrier to holding a specialized position.

However, achieved statuses will be important in such societies only which are not very rigid about maintaining the differences between inherited statuses; and on the question of rigidity no uniform observation can be made, since standards, norms and ideas vary from one status to another. However, now that inherited as well as acquired statuses are important in most societies, we can even talk in terms of 'multiple statuses'.

An average middle-class man is at home husband and father; and in public life he may be an educationist, a debater and an actor on the stage besides being a TV newsreader. He may also be an important member of a social club and an assistant in his wife's boutique business.

However, he may not be as efficient in role playing in a particular status as he may be in respect of another. He may be an excellent educationist, a good actor but a poor executive in a commercial office. The number of statuses in which the individual will have to play roles will be determined by the type of society that he belongs to. In a simple society, status tends to remain inherited and simple; in a complex one, multiple statuses are quite in order as is the concept of the acquired status.

Role:

In some sense of the word or the other, every individual adorning a status has to play a role as if he were dramatizing it. An individual's role is the behaviour expected of him in his status and in the determination of his relationship with other members of his group.

The expectancy as to the standard of behaviour is so conscious and well-defined that the person playing it has little independence to waver away from it; and, in this sense, he in society is like the actor on the stage delivering the dialogue according to his script, waiting for the cue to come from the co-actor and watching the audience reactions to his performance.

However, there is an important point of difference between the 'social role' that an individual in society plays and a dramatic role played on the stage. While the dramatic role is fixed, unchangeable and simple in character, the individual's social role can be made changeable and Multiple in character.

A person playing a multiple role may have to play them all concurrently or sequence-wise, according to the condition of his life or his occupation; and one of his roles may be so dominant that it will distinctly condition his individuality. An industrialist may be so engrossed in his occupational duties that he fails to play his roles as husband or father effectively.

Sociologists have noted that social roles can be played in different ways. Early in life, as we have discussed earlier in the chapter, a child begins the practice of role – playing by 'playing-at-a-role" when it takes up a doll and enacts the roles of both mother and child with it. The child at this stage gathers certain ideas about certain standards of behaviour; it forms an idea as to how mother behave and how the child bears itself to the parent.

However, when 'role-playing" begins, each individual plays his own role not only according to the definition of his particular role as set by society, but according to the actual expectation of the other party or parties in relation to whom he plays it. The individual who plays the role of the father must bear in mind the reactions of the child to his behaviour, and so will the child be

conscious of the parents' reactions to his behaviour and to any deviation on his part from the fixed standards expected by society.

It is no longer a one-sided affair as in the case of a child playing-at-a-role with a doll in hand. Sooner or later, the adult learns to play the role of the parent and the child more or less knows how to conform to the expected role of a child. A newly-married individual also in good time knows how to play the role of a husband or a wife.

It is true that in the performance of the role individual differences can become noticeable. No two fathers and no two daughters can behave exactly in the identical fashion, but minor degrees of variations from an idealized, normative standard are accepted by society. When the variation tends to be abusive or destructive of the standard, society frowns upon such role playing.

The concept of 'role taking' follows from the 'looking-glass' theory as Cooley puts it and, according to this analysis of behaviour, a person plays his or her role according to an assumed understanding of what the other persons in society envisage of such a role. A woman behaves as a coquette when she imagines that others in her group find her best in that role. Gradually, as a person gets more and more socialized, he changes from 'role-playing' to 'role-taking'.