



**9**

## **STATUS AND ROLE**

The task of sociology is to examine and analyze the nature of the fundamental order that society exhibits. A part of this task, we have now accomplished. We have noticed in our earlier lesson on “norms and values” that the order and regularity of social interaction are attributed to the existence of norms and values which guide and canalize the relations that people have with one another. It is the norms and values that give predictability to these relations and interactions, from them into a patterns and thus give a structure to society. We now wish to discuss another phenomenon, intimately related to the norms and values, which also contributes to the order that we find in society. This is the phenomenon of social position: status and role.

### **OBJECTIVES**

After reading this lesson, you will be able to:

- explain the meaning of social position;
- define status and discuss its types; and
- define social role and discuss its types.

### **9.1 SOCIAL POSITIONS**

We know that the participants in a social system are not all expected to do the same things. Whether a norm applies to a particular person or not depends upon



Notes

his social position in the system. One of the most important aspects of the social organization or "structure" of any social system is the fact that its members are differentiated according to social positions they occupy in the group as a whole and in any of the sub-groups to which they may belong. The content of a social position, that is its complex of rights and obligations, is entirely normative.

Johnson discusses that a social position has two parts, one consisting of obligations and one consisting of rights. A person is said to occupy a social position if he has a certain set of obligations and enjoys a certain set of associated rights within a social system. These two parts of social position, we shall call its *role* and its *status*, "role" referring to obligations and "status" referring to rights. Thus, social position is a status-role entity.

**Social Position:** Social identity an individual has in a given group or society; Social positions may vary in nature (such as those associated with gender roles) or may be much more specific (as in the case of occupational positions).

## 9.2 STATUS AND ROLE

The concepts of status and role have a growing significance in the social sciences. We want to define them and to distinguish between them. A distinction between status and role is simplified by Ralph Linton when he said, 'you occupy a status, but you play a role' Every position or status in society carries with it a set of expected behaviour patterns. Status and role are 'two sides of the same coin' says Linton.

Although all statuses and roles derived from social patterns are integral parts of patterns, they have an independent function with relation to the individuals who occupy particular statuses and exercise their roles.

The concepts of status and role are the initial tools for the analysis of social structure. A status is simply a position in society or in a group. Every society and every group has many such positions and every individual occupies as many positions as there are groups to which he belongs.

Thus, each person holds a number of positions in society known as statuses. A woman might be a musician, a teacher, a wife and a mother. Each of these social positions, with the rights and duties it entails, is a status. Although a person may hold a number of statuses, one of them, which we might call a master status, defines the person socially.

With the development of modern anthropology and sociology, the concept of status has been broadened to encompass all culturally prescribed rights and duties inherent in social positions.

**9.3 SOCIAL STATUS**

The term *status*, like the term *culture*, has come to be used with a double significance. A status, in the abstract, is a position in a particular pattern. It is thus quite correct to speak of each individual as having many statuses, since each individual participates in the expression of a number of patterns. However, unless the term is qualified in some way, the status of any individual means the sum total of all the statuses which he occupies. It represents his position with relation to the total society.

A status, as distinct from the individual who may occupy it, is simply a collection of rights and duties. Since these rights and duties can find expression only through the medium of individuals, it is extremely hard for us to maintain a distinction in our thinking between statuses and the people who hold them and exercise the rights and duties which constitute them.

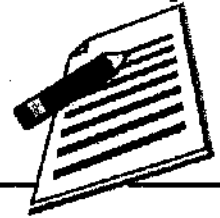
Broadly, status has two meanings in sociology.

**(1) Relational Term:** Most sociologists define status simply as a position occupied by an individual in a social system. "Wife" and "husband" for example are statuses in marital systems just as "lawyer", "junior" and "judge" is statuses in court systems. Note that status is purely relational term, which means that each status exists only through its relation to one or more other statuses. "Husband", for example, is a category that makes no sense at all except in relation to the category "wife", just as there can be no "judges without corresponding positions that comprise the rest of a judicial system.

The concept of "status" once referred only to inherited status, a fixed, usually hereditary, position within the social order. Such was the usage of writers like the distinguished nineteenth century English evolutionist, Sir Henry Maine and two vastly important American sociologists, Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess. Maine had written of the transition from status to contract.

**(2) Participatory Status:** Since statuses are positions in social systems, they exist independently of the particular individuals who occupy them. Indeed, a status can exist even though no one is occupying it at the time, such as the status of "Prime Minister" when the current minister has died and new one has yet to be elected or the status of "candidate" when there is no election forthcoming. People are associated with statuses only through their participation in social systems that include them. In this relatively simple principle lies the core sociological insight that social systems can not be reduced to the people who participate in them.

If we take the sum of all of the statuses that we occupy, the result is known as a status-set. Every status-set includes a large number of different statuses that we



Notes



Notes

occupy in a social system. The status-set situates individuals in relation to the multi-dimensional network of social systems that make up the world we live in.

**Status:** The social honour or prestige which a particular group is accorded by other members of a society. Status groups normally involve distinct styles of life – patterns of behaviour which the members of a group follow. Status privilege may be positive or negative.

### 9.3.1 Characteristics of Status

A status often includes the following characteristics:

1. Status is the result of needs and interests of society;
2. Status has some degree of authority over others;
3. Status is relative;
4. Status may also indicate social stratification;
5. Status has certain privileges and immunities, such as the right to use certain premises, the services of a secretary; etc.
6. Status has some degree of prestige;
7. Status may also have right to remuneration.
8. Status cannot be isolated from role.

### 9.3.2 Types of Status

Statuses are culturally defined, despite the fact that they may be based on biological factors such as sex, caste or race. There are two different kinds of status that people occupy; ascribed status, and achieved status.

An ascribed status is a social position that is assigned at birth and is, therefore, usually permanent. Hence, an ascribed status is one into which a person is born and in which he or she remains throughout his or her life, e.g., sex, caste, race and age. A Brahmin, for example, enjoys the ascribed status of a Brahmin by virtue of his birth. In addition, sex, ethnic background, place of birth, and family name supply assigned statuses. Such statuses are said to be ascribed. Ascribed statuses are usually fixed at birth. In India, caste status is generally ascribed, although it has been going through several changes through 'sanskritization' and 'inter-caste marriages'. In some countries social class also comes under ascribed status which is arbitrarily given by society.

An achieved status is one that is chosen or achieved, such as a married person, a parent, a friend, a doctor or an engineer. An achieved status is acquired through one's own efforts. Society recognizes such changes in achieved status.



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Statuses which are not fixed by inheritance, biological characteristics, or other factors, over which the individual has no control, are known as achieved statuses. An achieved status is entered as a result of some degree of purposive action and choice. Thus, an achieved status, by contrast, is one that is based on something the person has done. The status of author is gained by publishing books; that of husband is gained by obtaining a marriage license and getting married. No one is born as an author or as a husband. Thus, an individual's marital status and occupational status are achieved.

Some statuses appear to have both achieved and ascribed elements. To gain a Ph.D. is definitely an achievement. But once one has it, it becomes a permanent part of one's self and role and is also referred to as such by others. So for all intents and purposes it becomes ascribed. Some statuses are ascribed to individuals; others are achieved by them. Ascribed derive from membership in involuntary groups, achieved statuses from membership in voluntary groups. Age status and sex status, for example, are both obviously ascribed, not achieved. These statuses depend upon biological conditions and there is little we can do about them, beyond concealing our real age.

### INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.1

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words:

- Members in a social system are differentiated according to \_\_\_\_\_ they occupy in the group.
- Two parts of a social position are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
- You occupy a status but you play a \_\_\_\_\_ in society.
- Two types of status are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
- Give an example of ascribed status \_\_\_\_\_.
- Give an example of achieved status \_\_\_\_\_.

### 9.4 SOCIAL ROLE

The concept of status is related to the concept of "role" that is, what Linton calls the more dynamic aspect of status that we shall discuss both in this context and in relation to reference groups. It is impossible fully to dissociate them. Thus, a role is the dynamic or the behavioural aspect of status. It is the dynamic aspect of status and is a combination of rights and duties.



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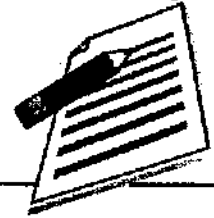
Every status has one or more roles attached to it. Statuses are occupied, but roles are played. Role is the expected behaviour pattern attached to a status, carrying certain specific rights and obligations. A role is the manner in which a given individual fulfills the obligations and enjoys its privileges and prerogatives. A role is what an individual does in the status he occupies. It is obvious that different individuals do different things in the same statuses, and it is the concept of role that enables us to take account of these differences.

The concept of **social role** is widely used for the purpose of social interaction in sociology, originating from a theatrical context. Roles are socially defined expectations which a person in a given status or **social position** fulfills. In this context, a role is a set of ideas associated with a social status that defines its relationship with one or more position. The role of teacher, for example, is built around a set of ideas about teachers in relation to students. *Beliefs*, about whom they are, *values* related to goals they are supposed to pursue, *norms* about how they are supposed to appear and behave, *attitudes* about their emotional pre disposition towards their work and students. The role of student usually includes the belief that students know less than teachers; the value that learning is good an end of itself and the expectations that student will arrive on time, work hard, and learn what is assigned to them and that they will maintain an attitude of respect towards their teachers and other students.

If all of the various roles associated with occupying a particular status are combined, the result is role set. Sometime role conflict occurs when people are confronted with contrary or incompatible role expectations in the various social they occupy in their lives. For example, a parent may feel conflicting obligations to employer who demand full devotion from him/her and children who need to be cared for, when they are sick.

There are a variety of responses for resolving or minimizing the effects of role conflict. The first is to choose which role is more important and then violate the expectations associated with the other role. A second response is to leave one of the conflicting statuses (a person might quit a job if it interferes too much with parenting responsibilities). A third response is to engage in role segregation, the practice of separating various role-partners from one another (doctor, for example, often refuses to treat members of their own family). A fourth response involves maintaining a role distance, a method for minimizing role strain associated with a disagreeable role. For example, managers who must dismiss large numbers of employees in order to lower costs and make firms more competitive may resort to a variety of techniques to dissociate themselves from what they have to do.

**Social Role:** The expected behaviour of an individual occupying a particular social position. The idea of social role originally comes from the theatre, referring to the parts which actors play in a stage production. In every society individuals play a number of different social roles, according to the varying context of their activities.



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### 9.4.1 Characteristics of Role

1. Role is a dynamic aspect of the status;
2. Role exists in status. Role can not be isolated from status;
3. Role is not found in vacuum. It has a strong cultural aspect;
4. The normative aspect of role is culture;
5. Role is relative.

There are no roles without statuses or statuses without roles. Just as in the case of status, the term role is also used with a double significance. Every individual has a series of roles deriving from the various patterns in which he participates and at the same time a role in general, which represents the sum total of these roles and determines what he does for his society and what he can expect from it.

Each status typically includes a number of roles. A person who holds the status of teacher behaves one way with students, another way with other faculty members and still another way with the principal. The collection of roles that goes with a given status is termed a - roles set.

Social roles regulate and organize behaviour. In particular they provide means for accomplishing certain tasks. It can be argued, for example, that teaching can be accomplished more effectively if teacher and student perform their appropriate roles. This involves the exclusion of other areas of their lives in order to concentrate on the matter in hand. Roles provide social life with order and predictability. Interacting in terms of their respective roles, teacher and student know what to do and how to do it. With knowledge of each other's roles they are able to predict and comprehend the actions of the other. As an aspect of culture, roles provide an important part of the guidelines and directives necessary for an ordered society.

### 9.4.2 Types of Role

A role-pattern emphasizes "performance" if one pays particular attention to what the occupant can do and how well he can do it, relatively regardless of his age, sex and group memberships. Linton makes distinction between "ascribed" and "achieved" roles. A role is said to be "ascribed" if its occupants acquire it automatically as a result of certain objective characteristics or relations to others



Notes

which are beyond their control. The most important bases of ascription are birth into a particular family, birth order, sex and age.

**Ascribed roles:** A role that an individual acquires automatically at birth, or on the attainment of certain age. The most universally ascribed role is one's sex role, male or female. Different age levels are also associated with different expectations. Roles based on one's birth as a member of particular racial, caste or religious groups are ascribed. Thus, in these types of roles, birth is the basic influence, for example traditionally speaking being born in a certain caste will imply certain role behaviours as a priest's son will train to be a priest.

Technically any role is said to be "achieved" if it is not "ascribed".

**Achieved roles:** A role that an individual has because he has either chosen or earned it. It is the result of his efforts and his action. Thus, roles, which are gained by personal efforts, are known as achieved role such as a general in the army, doctor or an engineer and so on.

## INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.2

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words:

1. A \_\_\_\_\_ is the dynamic aspect of status.
2. A combination of various roles associated with a particular status is called \_\_\_\_\_.
3. Role cannot be \_\_\_\_\_ from status.
4. The normative aspect of role is \_\_\_\_\_.
5. Two types of roles are \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.



## WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT

- We began this chapter with some intimations of the importance of status and suggested that the total meaning of many social situations depend upon the statuses involved.
- We emphasized in addition that a very large number of the social relations between individuals in a complex society are status relations.





**Notes**

- We also made a distinction between status and role. Status is a structural phenomenon and role is a behavioural phenomenon: status is a concept of sociology, role a concept in social psychology; status depends upon social structure, role upon the personalities and capabilities of individuals. Although status and role are usually found together, it is impossible to imagine situations involving status without role and role without status. People occupy statuses, they play roles. The norms, however are attached to the statuses. Since the norms are constantly changing in a changing society, statuses too do. Statuses and roles may, however, change in relative interdependence of each other. New statuses arise in society and old ones disappear. In occupational statuses especially, competent and capable incumbents may expand the range of obligations and privileges whereas incompetent and incapable incumbents may exert an opposite influence. We have also discussed "ascribed status" and "achieved status" and also "ascribed role" and "achieved role"

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 9.3**

1. What is master status?

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2. What are Relational and participatory statuses?

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3. Mention any four characteristics of role.

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**TERMINAL EXERCISE**

1. Define social position.
2. Define social status. Discuss the interrelationships between social status and role.
3. Define status and role and distinguish between them, using examples.
4. What are the basic differences between ascribed and achieved status? Illustrate each.
5. What is role? Discuss different kinds of role.



Notes

6. "Statuses are occupied, but roles are played." Comment.
7. What is role conflict? Discuss the mechanisms for handling role conflict.
8. Write short notes on following:
  - a) Status set
  - b) Role set
  - c) Ascribed and Achieved Status
  - d) Ascribed and Achieved role
  - e) Role strain and Role conflict
  - f) Role distance



**ANSWER TO INTEXT QUESTIONS**

- 9.1**
- |                                   |  |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1. Social positions               | 2. Role and status                     |
| 3. Role                           | 4. Ascribed; achieved                  |
| 5. e.g. Brahmin: male-female etc. | 6. e.g. Engineer; doctor; teacher etc. |
- 9.2**
- |            |                       |             |
|------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| 1. Role    | 2. Role set           | 3. Isolated |
| 4. Culture | 5. Ascribed; achieved |             |
- 9.3**
1. Refer to section 9.2
  2. Refer to section 9.3
  3. Refer to section 9.4



**SUGGESTED READINGS**

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