
UNIT 26 SOCIAL ROLES

Structure

- 26.0 Objectives
- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 The Concept of Role
 - 26.2.1 Role as a Dynamic Aspect of Status
 - 26.2.2 Refinement of the Concept of Role
- 26.3 Classification of Roles
 - 26.3.1 Ascribed and Achieved Roles
 - 26.3.2 Relational and Non-relational Roles
 - 26.3.3 Basic, General and Independent Roles
- 26.4 Role Systems : Simple and Complex
 - 26.4.1 Roles in Simple Societies
 - 26.4.2 Roles in Complex Societies
- 26.5 Dimensions of Roles
 - 26.5.1 Multiple Roles and Role-set
 - 26.5.2 Role Signs
 - 26.5.3 Role Changing
 - 26.5.4 Role Conflict and Strain
- 26.6 Use of Role Theory
- 26.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 26.8 Key Words
- 26.9 Further Readings
- 26.10 Model Answers to Check Your Progress

26.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the concept of role;
- describe various models of classifying roles;
- identify roles in simple and complex societies;
- discuss the notions of the multiple roles and role-set;
- describe role signs and role changing;
- explain role conflict and role strain; and
- discuss how role theory can be used in sociological research.

26.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we have covered the concept of role as a dynamic aspect of status. This unit follows the one on social structure. We have indicated how roles have been classified. We also describe roles in both simple and complex system. Next, the dimensions of role are taken up. These include a discussion of multiple roles and role set, role signs and role changing, role conflict and role structure. Finally, we examine the use of role theory.

26.2 THE CONCEPT OF ROLE

In everyday usage the word role is used for the part an actor undertakes in a theatrical production, or in a motion picture. Suppose an actor or actress is assigned a part (role) in a play or motion picture. He or she is now supposed to play the role in a convincing manner. To make the playing of the part successful, the actor or actress, must be able to really understand the role, he or she is playing. This includes portraying the feelings. It also includes portraying the responsibilities, and the gestures that go with the role. The dress and speech must also conform to the role. That is, there must be a certain degree of naturalness and consistency in the role performance. If the actor or actress succeeds in his or her performance, he or she is well appreciated. According to Shakespeare, the world is a stage and each person is playing a role. In this view all people are playing roles in life. However, Shakespeare did not elaborate what he meant by this. In Sociology, role and role-playing have been developed as specific concepts. Let us examine how this is so by looking at the concept of role as an aspect of status.

26.2.1 Role as a Dynamic Aspect of Status

The concept of role was initially developed by Ralph Linton (1936). According to Linton, individuals occupy positions in different aspects of social life. Some examples of this are being a father or mother in a family. A person can also be a teacher in a school. He or she can also simultaneously be an office holder in an association. These positions are called statuses by Linton. In Linton's words (1936 : 113-4), 'statuses are the polar positions ... in patterns of reciprocal behaviour'. A polar position comprises 'a collection of rights and duties'. Thus he conceived of status as a group of rights and duties. When a person is enacting these rights and duties, he is said to be performing a role. For example, when a teacher gives a lecture, he is performing his duty or performing his role of a teacher.

Going on from there Linton pointed out that a role is the "dynamic" side of status. It puts into action the various rights and duties. Thus, a teacher when he/she enters the school begins immediately to display the role that is attached to his or her status.

26.2.2 Refinement of the Concept of Role

The above formulation of the concept of role was refined further by Newcomb and Banton. Newcomb (1942) made a distinction between the expected behaviour related to a position and the actual behaviour. He pointed out that the way in which a person behaves may not always be what is expected of him. The expected behaviour conforms to the position that one occupies. That is to say, one's role is directly associated with one's position, and sometimes a person's actual behaviour, may not conform to his or her expected role. Michael Banton (1965) further refined the concept and noted that a role is a set of norms and expectations, applied to the holder of any particular position. Banton distinguished between:

- i) **norms**, which are to be observed as a matter of course. These carry the message that the holder of a role *should behave* in a particular kind of manner; and
- ii) **general expectations**, which indicate that the holder of a position, *will behave* in a certain way in any specific situation.

To understand Banton's ideas, let us take an example. Suppose Rita is a teacher in a school. In this case, Rita becomes the holder of the position of teacher. The school itself has a set of rules and regulations. These are in existence to guide every teacher's conduct in class. This will include;

- i) going to the class, when the bell rings, and
- ii) take the attendance of her students, and so on.

As is usual these norms have sanctions to back them up and make them effective. Apart from this, there are the expectations, such as being well dressed. Also, good conduct in the class is expected. This second set of expectations, includes efficient teaching and so on. These comprise only expectation, because they are not necessarily backed by sanctions.

26.3 CLASSIFICATION OF ROLES

Various methods of classifying roles have been used by sociologists. We are here concerned with classifications of roles in terms of social status.

26.3.1 Ascribed and Achieved Roles

According to Linton roles can be divided into:

- i) ascribed roles; and
- ii) achieved roles.

The ascribed roles are those obtained at birth. Here role learning commences at birth itself. Such learning pertains to one's caste, class, family, gender and so on. Each caste, for example, has its own set of rituals to be performed at the birth of a child, who is subjected to various ceremonial procedures at every stage of growing-up.

Achieved roles are acquired by individuals through merit and competition. Thus, this method of classification is based on the way that roles are allocated.

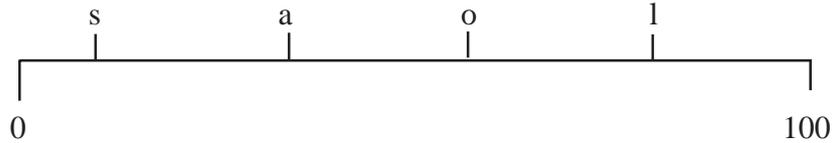
26.3.2 Relational and Non-relational Roles

Nadel (1957) adopted the principle of content (i.e., the kind of conduct expected) of roles and divided them, like Linton, into two categories of ascribed-achieved roles. He further subdivided them into relational and non-relational roles. A relational role can be played only in relation to a complementary role, while non-relational role is not dependent on a complementary role. A husband's role cannot be perceived without the wife's role. Similarly a creditor's role is inconceivable without a debtor. Thus, these can be taken as examples of relational roles. On the other hand, the examples of the role of a poet or a scholar do not require a complementary role, in the sense that a poet does not have to interact with others for writing poetry. Thus, such roles can be described as non-relational. Nadel's classification is based mainly on the conduct that is implied in them. Thus, role differentiation for Nadel indicated to what extent holding of one role, is independent of holding or relating to other roles.

26.3.3 Basic, General and Independent Roles

Banton (1965) outlines a three fold classification which is based on the differentiation. For him, this kind of classification “reveals new facts of social organisation and suggests new problems for investigation” (Banton 1965 : 33). These three types of roles are:

- i) basic roles;
- ii) general roles;
- iii) independent roles, Banton (1965 : 33) uses a scale to indicate these roles:



basic roles general roles independent roles

s = sex roles

a = age roles

o = occupational roles

l = leisure roles

This scale given by Banton compares the degree to which in relation to others certain roles are independent. According to Banton independent roles have few implications outside the concerned activity. Compared to independent roles, one’s occupational roles determine other peoples behaviour in different contexts also. On the other hand, a person’s age and sex roles define his or her conduct in most situations. Banton makes it clear that placing of roles, on his scale, will differ from society to society. According to him primitive societies have a small number of undifferentiated basic roles, linked to sex and age. In technologically advanced societies independent roles become more numerous.

Finally, Aidan Southall (1959) classified roles according to the principal social domains in which they are exercised. They are five: kinship, economic, political, religious and recreational domains. Looking at different ways of classifying roles, we can say that no classification of roles can be said to be the only valid classification. Each of the classification is developed for some specific purpose.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Write a note on the concept of role. Use about five lines for your answer.

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2) Is there only one valid way of classifying roles? Use two lines for your answer.

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26.4 ROLE SYSTEMS : SIMPLE AND COMPLEX

The concept of role can be applied to understand various aspects of life in both simple and complex societies. As every member of the social group has a role to play, an examination of each role shows, what lies behind cooperation or conflict among its members.

26.4.1 Roles in Simple Societies

Let us consider roles in simple societies-such as those of the Bushmen of the Kalahari desert in southern Africa. Roles among the Bushmen are dependent on (i) sex, (ii) age and (iii) kinship/affinity. These roles form a rigid role system in these societies. The role of spirit-medium, is the only role which is independent of this rigid role system. A spirit-medium functions as a person who can contact the other world on behalf of society. He can do this for determining agricultural or any other problems. Here, we first describe the three bases of roles, and then discuss the role of spirit medium.

- i) Differences upon sex provide different roles to males and females. The male takes care of hunting, making weapons and also assisting his wife in collecting wood and water. His wife looks after the hearth and home. She also helps keep the camp clean.
- ii) Age based roles are also very important. For a boy the transition to adulthood comes when he shoots a buck. Following this he is decorated with facial and chest scars. He is also free to marry. He may marry a baby, but the marriage becomes effective only when she matures. Bushmen respect their elders. In old age men and women, take on the role of experts on traditional myths and legends, and family history.
- iii) The ties of kinship and affinity define mutual obligations among the people. Mothers and fathers bring up the children in the traditional way. The grown up children have a set of mutual obligations with their parents. The relationship between husband and wife, also determines the allocation of roles. Again a marriage can be severed very easily. However, divorce is rare, and so are marital quarrels. Marriage between closely related persons is avoided. This is to keep kin ties clear.

These distinctions of sex, age and kinship are all represented in organising socio-political life of the bands. The leader of a band is selected mainly on the basis of a person’s ability to plan the band’s movements, and consideration of its resources. This extra responsibility is not rewarded in any way and an inefficient leader can be easily replaced by another person. However, the role of spirit-medium cannot be replaced in an arbitrary way. The old and experienced mediums, choose men of proven healing ability to act as spirit-medium. Thus, the overall system for allocating roles is very rigid. The harsh environment preclude conflicts in roles. In simple societies, physical distinctions are usually not translated into social distinctions. Thus, men and women feel it is wrong to perform tasks that belong to the other. Among the Bushmen, they even have fixed places to sit.’ Let us see how roles are allocated in complex societies.

Activity 1

Prepare a chart of all the roles that you play as a member of your society, beginning from your family. Relate the kind of status that you occupy as per that role and what are the duties or privileges that you enjoy as a result of your status. Write an essay of about two pages on “My Role and Status in My Society”. Compare your essay with your peers at your study centre and discuss the topic with your Academic Counsellor.

26.4.2 Roles in Complex Societies

Often societies have to develop new ways of role allocation. Societies with advanced technologies have to develop, wider range of criteria for allocating roles. For example, problems arise if one tribe conquers another, and wants to administer it permanently. The simple method of role allocation by age, sex and so on is then not workable, because the king must have retainers. He also needs soldiers whose loyalty is primarily to him. This obligation is even greater than the one to their kinsmen. The king rewards them for their services in money. In this type of society the family into which a person is born, becomes important and the family status assumes greater significance. Thus, we arrive at an important basis for role allocation in a relatively more complex society. In such circumstances, there are developed new criteria for role allocation. Social strata are one such criterion.

i) Social Strata

Clear social strata (estates) make their presence: nobles, commoners and serfs. All the people in the same strata lead a similar-existence. They also have the same obligations and privileges towards the king. Although more flexible than the rigid role system in simple societies, social strata can, become so rigid that they cannot be entered except by birth. After birth they cannot be left. An example of this is the caste system. In India, under Hinduism everyone belongs to a caste.

Caste members pursue the same occupations and have the same religious rites. They are governed by prescribed rules, in the matters of eating and social mixing with other castes. If they contact lower castes they must cleanse themselves of pollution. Similarly in the medieval period, feudal system gave rise to a series of distinct groups (nobels, clergy, commoners, peasants) in Western Europe. A pattern of closed social strata was formed on the basis of these groups.

ii) Specialisation and Diversification

In Industrial systems of today the categories of sex, age and kinship; retain their importance for role allocation, but, the major factor is the increased specialisation of social tasks. There is also a diversification of society into very many sectors with their own rules. Even the smallest of an organisations role have to be defined clearly. Even a small roadside restaurant will have specialist cooks, washerman, cleaners, waiters, gardener, manager and so on. When these roles are all well-defined, there are fewer frictions.

Let us suppose that this restaurant expands, and begins to run its own tours. It then launches its own car rental service. As a consequence the roles needing to be played

will be multiplied. Industrial societies require highly complex incentives. They also require a great deal of flexibility. Large business concerns cannot depend on one person alone. Records and files must be kept meticulously. Rules and regulations

imply much record keeping. The personal touch is lost, and the needs of the complex system very often begins to dominate human beings.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space given for your answer.

b) Compare your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Rules in a simple system are very many and also very difficult to play. Tick the correct box.

Yes No

2) In a complex society roles are very specialised. Comment using about five lines.

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26.5 DIMENSIONS OF ROLES

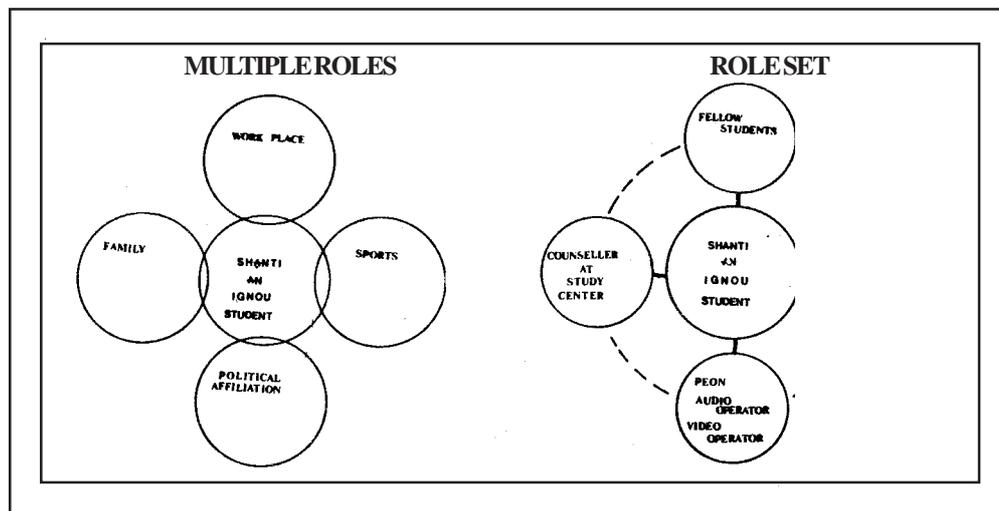
Now, we look at various aspects of the concept of role. First, we speak of the array of roles that an individual may perform, then we discuss the different role-relationships which make up a role-set. Similarly, we discuss the array of role sign, changing of roles, role conflict and strain.

26.5.1 Multiple Roles and Role-set

It is important to realise that one person can occupy more than one role. For example, in the area of kinship alone, one cannot avoid holding many roles at the same time. Try to count how many kinship roles you occupy. In the modern times, we find that people have several roles in other areas of social life than kinship. For example, besides being a son/daughter, brother/sister, husband/wife, father/mother etc., you are an IGNOU student, the citizen of your nation, and you may be occupying many other roles of various types. Occupying of many roles is given the term multiple roles.

Of these multiple roles, some are played together while others are separated. Similarly, some may be carried out in a sequence and other over many years. It is quite common to observe the situation of intra-role conflict, because often a person occupying several roles faces opposite expectations in different role sectors.

While playing one role, a person is linked with many ‘role-others’. According to Merton (1968-84) these ‘role-others’ with regard to a particular person form his/her role-set. Merton distinguishes this idea of role-set from multiple roles, which are several roles of the same person. A role-set, on the other hand, refers to ‘role-others’ in relation to a person playing a role. For example, a student of IGNOU will carry on his/her role (as a student) in relation to specific ‘role-others’ such as the counsellor, fellow students, the librarian, the audio/video operator, the peon at the study-centre. Thus, in relation to a student, all these are ‘role-others’ from role-set. The following diagrams clearly show the difference between multiple roles and a role-set.



26.5.2 Role Signs

The area of role signs is a vast topic and here we will touch only the main points. In all cultures across the world, we find that costume is basic as a role sign that differentiates males from females. Why is this the case?

This is because these role signs serve as an indicator of differences between men and women. Their roles are also different in the social organisation. Thus a role sign tells us more about a person or group. Just as a broken window is sign of violence and a wasted appearance a sign of ill health, a dress can serve as a sign of a role. There are some roles which have more signs while in other cases role signs are few or not at all. Let us consider a situation where all role signs are removed: the general takes off his uniform, and the policeman follows suit. Men start wearing skirts and saris and ladies pants and coats! What would be the result? Basic information would become muddled up. It would take a long time to find out the fundamental information. Thus role signs provide a better means of conveying information than does verbal communication. It would also become difficult to know what good conduct is, as the examples in daily life will be difficult to follow. Thus, role signs further communication as well as control. According to Banton (1965 : 689-92) signs of various roles can be usefully described in terms of basic, general and independent roles.

i) Signs of Basic Roles

In social life basic roles involve a combination of sexual differences, distinctions of age and domestic relations. For example, first name for two sexes are almost always different. Again in both cases, male and female, ways of dressing up, kind of work taken up generally differ as the infant boy/girl matures into adolescence; and then into a young man/woman. In modern Western society efforts are being made to bring about egalitarianism in matters of domestic relations.

Basic role signs provide us fundamental information about what we might expect in behavioural terms. Thus head gear, wearing of rings, skirts, trousers -all have specific indications.

Activity 2

Identify some signs and symbols used by people in your community which relate to the kind of role they are playing in society and the status which they occupy. For eg. The “mangalsutra” or gold necklace that your mother or wife or you may be wearing which denotes your/her married status. Write a note of one page on; “Role Signs” and discuss it with other students at your study centre.

ii) Signs of General Roles

In using signs for general roles, the idea is to distinguish a role because of its relevance in a particular situation. Secondly signs for general roles, are also allocated on the basis of a role's implications, for other role relationships. The role, that is interdependent with other roles is likely to be distinguished by a role sign. In this way, role signs also serve to control and prevent deviant behaviour. For example in the eyes of an ordinary citizen, the uniform of a policeman gives him power to maintain law and order.

iii) Signs for Independent Roles

As independent roles have few, if any, implications for other roles, they hardly require role signs. When placed within a particular setting, such roles may need some distinguishing signs. Within an organisation, such signs may serve a specific purpose while for outsiders, these may simply be prestige signs. Clearly, signs of independent roles carry a specific meaning only in a limited sense, for example, the badge of a particular office in an exclusive club will have relevance for its members only.

26.5.3 Role Changing

To change roles is often very difficult. The person must know the rights and obligations concerning new roles. He or she must change his/her behaviour accordingly. Other people also have to change their roles towards him/her. Role change, therefore, can be problematic. Let us consider the above with the help of some examples. In almost all tribal societies childhood and adulthood are comparatively difficult. A youth, unable to pass his initiation test, is in a bad position. He may never be able to marry if he lives among the Bushmen! Thus, role changing here, is a must if negative sanctions are to be avoided.

Take another example. In an industrial society which changes rapidly, role models themselves undergo change. None of them can be followed uncritically. There is no ready way in which role change can be made.

Let us consider adulthood. This implies readiness for marriage. 'This involves a role change. It is also a fact which alters social relations. All these require alteration of role behaviour by husband, wife, relations and friends. In marriage, the bride undergoes a greater change since it is often a time of extreme emotional changes for her. She may have to leave her home and go to the place where her husband lives.

Finally, a word about retirement and death. Retirement tends to be an individual event. Further there is a sense of loss and despair. This comes from being jerked out of a particular routine. What follows is a lack of routine. This can be very disorienting, and it takes a person time to pick up the threads. Death itself, is a period of adjustment for the widow/widower and others. They will now have to take on more responsibilities. Role changes often take long and tend to be a period of frustrating adjustments.

26.5.4 Role Conflict and Strain

Society is structured in a manner that keeps conflict of roles down to a minimum. However, there are occasions that individuals have to play rather incompatible roles. For example, stepfather and stepson, or the role of divided loyalties between two employers. Such situations cause role conflict to increase. Role-conflict comes when commitment is divided between two or more roles. As a result, usually the overall performance suffers.

Role strain occurs in case of situations where a person does not fit into the slot given to him/her. Thus, if a woman is physically mature but does not marry we have role strain. If a woman marries but is sterile, this again creates role strain. The position is very difficult for a barren woman. She cannot lead the life of an ordinary wife. Among the Nuer of Sudan, she can become a diviner or a trader. She is considered to be almost a man. Again, among the Hindus, the spinster creates role strain. In some communities, this is reduced by marrying her to a tree or a fruit. The small number of roles in society also creates strains. There are customs, therefore, which reduce these strains in an innocuous manner. One such device is the festival or carnival which takes place each year. Ranks are forgotten and everybody intermingles. Role adjustment is more difficult in tribal and peasant societies. In industrial societies the chances of acceptance of roles that do not go into a slot are much larger. However, strain does exist whenever a role faces the problems of choice and adjustment.



Role Conflict

26.6 USE OF ROLE THEORY

The concept of role has been applied in sociological analyses of various dimensions of social life. As we record changes in the notions and expectations around particular roles we arrive at the process of social changes. Similarly, in studying role relationships, we focus our attention at the complex nature of organisational links in social life. Here we point out some of such applications of role-theory in sociological research. Both functionalists and interactionists use this concept.

The functionalists view roles as the culturally defined behaviour which is linked with particular social statuses. For them, roles are determined by social values, norms and attitudes. The interactionists believe that the sense of self comes fully through interaction. They emphasise that we learn meanings by interacting with others, and then organise our social life around these meanings. They lay special stress on the interaction aspect than the social role aspect. They discuss roles in terms of individual choices and interpretation of one's roles.

- Complex role system** : In such role systems there is a great variety and specialisation in roles.
- Cooperation** : This implies that members in a team pull together in the direction of the goal.
- Multiple role** : This indicates the fact that every man or woman has to play different roles in different situations. For example, a teacher in the school; a worshipper in the temple and so on.
- Role** : This is a combination of rights and duties. It is the dynamic aspect of status.
- Role-other** : A role-other is a person with whom a person ;interacts while performing a role.
- Role-set** : Here the multi-links of a single role in a single situation are highlighted, eg. see the diagram in this unit.
- Role signs** : These arise when a person is not able to fully play a role assigned to him or her. Eg. a sterile husband or a barren wife.
- Simple role system** : In such social systems, mainly tribal ones, there are few roles, relatively speaking, in the division of labour.

26.9 FURTHER READINGS

Banton, Michael., 1965. *Roles : An Introduction to the Study of Social Relations*. Tavistock Publications : London. Chapters 3,4,5 and 7 pp. 42-126 and 151-171

Goodenough, l Ward H., 1965. *Rethinking 'Status' and 'Role' : Toward a General Model of the Cultural Organisation of Social Relationships*. In Michael Banton (ed) *The Relevance of Models; for Social Anthropology*. Tavistock Publications : London, pp. 1-22

Worsely, Peter, 1970. *Introducing Sociology*. Penguin Books : London Chapter 2, pp. 294-301

26.10 MODEL ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Individuals have different positions in social life. For example, being a managing director of a company or an editor in a publishing house. Such position are called statuses. A status is, therefore, a set of rights and duties. When a person is enacting these, a person is performing a role.
- 2) No, there are more than one way of classifying roles. One can give at least four different ways of classifying them. Each of these classification has been developed for a specific aim.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) No

- 2) In complex systems, specialisation of social tasks is a necessity. Even in small companies, well-defined roles are needed to make it work properly. Very many roles are subsumed in every endeavour of complex systems.

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) Role signs give pointers to differences between roles. For example, dresses/costumes differentiate between men and women. Role signs tell us, for example, more about the role of a person.
- 2) False.
- 3) Role strain results when the incumbent of a role cannot properly play it. For example, a lady police officer may find it difficult to handle criminals on the one hand and behave in a lady like manner otherwise, as generally a lady of a good family is expected to behave.
- 4) The interactionists explain the concept of role in terms of individual choices, and interpretation of person's roles.