CHAPTER V
THE ROLE THEORY

Status and role are a pair of sociological concepts that have been diversely understood and varyingingly adopted time and again for the study of social patterns and structures. It is a major link in understanding individual behaviour and social structure. It is helpful in delineating the minimum of attitudes and behaviour which an individual must assume if one is to participate in the manifest expression of pattern. There is general agreement among sociologists of different perspectives that social roles somehow provide cohesiveness for society, and promote order and stability which permit individuals to live in relative harmony. Though the role theory substantially fell out of use after the mid-twentieth century, the concept of role remains a basic tool for sociological understanding.

Chiefly there are two approaches within the role theory, namely the structural approach headed by Ralph Linton, and the social-psychological approach that has emerged particularly in the traditions of symbolic interactionism. According to Jonathan H Turner, the structural approach and the more processual strategy are the two extremes in the matter. The analogy of a play in which individuals are seen as players in the theatre, and of a game in which players are considered to be participants in a pick-up game illustrate

the difference between the two perspectives. We shall examine below certain aspects of the role theory which will illumine our study. An exhaustive study is neither possible nor called for here.

1) The Structural Role Theory

According to Ralph Linton, status and role may be understood abstractly or concretely. A status, abstractly understood, is a position in a particular pattern. It denotes a collection of rights and duties. A role represents the dynamic aspect of a status. These are quite inseparable. When one puts into effect the rights and duties which constitute his/her status, he/she performs a role. There are no roles without statuses or statuses without roles. An individual may have many statuses and accordingly many roles because one participates in the expression of a number of patterns, and corresponding to the various statuses, one has a series of roles. But concretely, the status of an individual is the sum total of all the statuses one occupies. It is one’s position with relation to the total society. Similarly, the role represents the sum total of all the various roles of an individual, and determines what one does for the society and what one may expect from it. Fichter, while discussing the sociological aspects of authority in religious community, paraphrases the view of Linton as “a person’s

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status is that which he is in relation to other people, and the role is that which he does, the functional pursuit of goals."

Although all statuses and roles are derived from social patterns and are integral parts of patterns, each individual in a particular status fulfils one's role in a singular manner. Therefore, there are ascribed statuses, assigned to individuals without reference to their innate differences or abilities, and achieved statuses, requiring at least a minimum of special qualities, and filled through competition and individual effort. In terms of authority, Fichter calls the former as positional leadership which may be inherited, assumed, or elective; and the latter as personal leadership.

Talcott Parsons, in his first book, *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), exposes a voluntaristic theory of action, conceiving of human beings as making choices between means and ends, in a physical and social environment that limited choices. An important aspect of the social environment is the norms and values by which we make our choices. Within the context, actors aim at maximum gratification, and behaviour and relationships that achieve this goal become institutionalized into a system of status roles. Though he sees the social system as a system of interaction, the basic unit of his study is the status-

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262 Parsons Talcott, *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology*. 
role complex. "This is neither an aspect of actors nor an aspect of interaction, but rather a structural component of the social system. Status refers to a structural position within the social system, and role is what the actor does in such a position, seen in the context of its functional significance for the larger system. The actor is viewed ... as nothing more than a bundle of statuses and roles."263

Florian Znaniecki notes among sociologists the use of the concepts of social role and social circle. He understands that social role is applicable not only to individuals who specialize in certain activities, for example, a teacher, a priest, but also to individuals as members of certain groups, for example, an American, a Methodist, a Communist, a club member, a child, a father. The social personality of an individual is a synthesis of all the different roles he/she performs simultaneously or successively throughout the course of one's life. Social circle denotes a smaller or larger set of people who participate in his/her performance. Between social roles and their corresponding social circles, there is a common bond made up of a complex of values. While the society bestows a definite social status upon a person who is needed by a social circle, and possesses the qualities required to fulfill the role demanded, the individual in turn is obliged to achieve certain tasks to satisfy the supposed needs of the social circle.264


Znaniecki adjoins that a role being a dynamic system, its performance is coloured by the dominant tendencies of the performer. An individual may manifest interest in one of the components of his/her role - the social circle, one's own self, the status or the function. He/she may tend to conform to the demands of his circle, or may be a reformist demanding independence from his social circle. He/she may be optimistic about the opportunities offered by his/her role, or may mistrust them, and be minimalistic in performance. These leave room for differences in the performance of roles. However, as a result of a reflective or unreflective use of the same cultural patterns, there are also fundamental uniformities in social systems which are denoted by the term, social role. It is in accordance with these that all kinds of lasting relationships between individuals and their social milieus are normatively organized.565

Robert K. Merton deviates from the 'multiple role' theory of Linton, and introduces the concept of role-set by which he means that each social status involves not a single role, but an array of associated roles. For Merton, a role-set denotes "a complement of social relationships in which persons are involved simply because they occupy a particular social status."266 He distinguishes it from "multiple roles" which refers to "the complex of roles associated not with a single social status, but with the various statuses (often, in differing institutional spheres) in which individuals find themselves - the roles." This complement of social statuses of an individual is his status-set, each of the statuses in turn having its distinctive role-set. These concepts of role-set and of status-set are

265 Ibid., pp. 112-3.

266 Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, p. 42.
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structural, and so refer to a particular time. Consequently, from the perspective of their evolution in time, a status-sequence and a role-sequence are spoken of.\textsuperscript{267}

Merton posits that the notions of role-set and status-set at once lead to the inference that social structures confront men with the task of articulating the components of countless role-sets - that is, the functional task of managing somehow to organize these so that an appreciable degree of social regularity obtains, sufficient to enable most people most of the time to go about their business without becoming paralysed by extreme conflicts in their role-sets.\textsuperscript{268}

Advancing further his conceptualization, Merton admits that "it is evident that according to role-set theory there is always a potential for differing expectations among those in the role-set as to what is appropriate conduct for a status-occupant." Striking a chord with general theorists such as Marx, Spencer, Simmel, Sorokin and Parsons, Merton locates the basic source of the potential for conflict "in the structural fact that the other members of a role-set are apt to hold different social positions differing from that of the status-occupant in question." Agreeing with Marx in his theory that social differentiation generates distinct interests among those variously located in the structure of the society, Merton holds that, "To the extent that members of a role-set are diversely located in the social structure, they are apt to have interests and sentiments, values and moral expectations, differing from those of the status-occupant

\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., Social Theory and Social Structure, pp. 424-5.

\textsuperscript{268} Ibid., p. 42.
himself.\textsuperscript{269} At this juncture while recalling the processes of conventionalization and role-segmentation proposed by W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki as means to reduce role-conflicts, Merton observes certain responses such as delay of decisions or escape from conflicts that performers resort to in cases of conflict.\textsuperscript{270}

Sanford Labovitz distinguishes between status as position and status as rank. Defined as position, status means the social categories that people occupy. Herein the reference is to the offices or social niches in society. These include categories or offices such as males, females, children, parents, married, unmarried, policemen, car drivers and ministers. In such a definition, \textit{relationships} between persons in positions are of paramount concern; for example, wife-husband, doctor-patient, brother-sister, or professor-student. Status as rank means the social evaluations that enable people to be placed in positions on a scale. It denotes \textit{individuous comparisons} between persons in positions, for example, wealthy or poor, educated or uneducated. The distinction between status as position and status as rank is extremely important in terms of measurement and conceptualization. As position, qualitative or nominal distinctions suffice. Sex (male, female), marital status (single, married, widowed, divorced), race (black, white, Oriental) all refer to positions in a social structure, and are not defined by a prestige or power hierarchy. When defined in terms of rank, status takes on a quantitative dimension. Difference may be

\textsuperscript{269}Merton, \textit{Social Theory and Social Structure}, p. 44.

\textsuperscript{270}Ibid., p. 170.
in kind (the wealthy are different from the poor) or also of order (the wealthy are ranked higher on income than the poor).\textsuperscript{271}

In relation to status (as position), Labovitz varyingly defines a social role as a collection of rights and duties, or as the behaviour that is attached to a position. In the former case, status is shown by a label, for example, minister, student. When status is a label, and role is a cluster of norms, in the sense of the activities expected of the people in certain specific roles, an additional concept called as role behaviour, role performance, or role enactment, is applied to behaviour. Though role behaviour or role performance may be spoken of any behaviour performed while a person is “in” role, or only of those activities that are performed by all or most people in the same social role, in the final analysis, role behaviour is limited just to those activities that are consistent with, or conform to, the cluster of norms that define the role. In this understanding, there can be a status or role without somebody filling that position or role at a particular time. When a social role is defined as a behaviour that is attached to a position, it is impossible to have a role without an incumbent. “For there to be behaviour in a role, a person is obviously required.”\textsuperscript{272}

Robert A. Nisbet, while underscoring that “where there is no authority there is no organization. Or ... without authority there can be no organization,”\textsuperscript{273} discovers the roots of social authority in the roles, the statuses and the norms

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Labovitz, \textit{An Introduction to Sociological Concepts}, p. 134.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 94-5.
\item Nisbet, \textit{The Social Bond: An Introduction to the Study of Society}, p. 117.
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He describes social roles in terms of certain fundamental attributes: patterned behaviour, correspondence to social norms, relation to a social circle or structure, the felt sense of duty, and authority.\footnote{Ibid., p. 142.} Firstly, roles are ways of behaviour, distinctive, more or less prescribed, and handed down from generation to generation. Secondly, social roles embody norms. Every recognized role is linked to the normative order. "Implicit in any role is a set of norms that define and give it identity. In so doing, the norms provide guidance or direction in individual conduct."\footnote{Ibid., p. 154.} These norms are evaluative points of reference by which we assess ourselves. Thirdly, a social role is invariably a part of some structure or system of interactive relationships.\footnote{Ibid., p. 115.} The identity of any role is taken from interactive, complementary, or reciprocal relation to other roles in society. Fourthly, in every social role there is the strong element of duty - that is, perceived duty, whether with respect to oneself or another person. The idea of duty is a manifestation of the larger system of authority that exists in any social aggregate. The vitality of any social role is in large measure correlated with the degree of duty or obligation one feels in the performance of the role. Many social relationships are kept going indefinitely on account of the strong sense of duty. Not infrequently duty consciousness urges role players to rise up to the occasion. Fifthly, legitimacy is a very strong element in any established social aggregate.\footnote{Ibid., p. 150.}
Acceptance is easily granted to a conduct that proceeds from a role that is legitimate.\(^{278}\) Thus, for Nisbet, to the question, "Why do human beings obey?" The answer is plain: they obey because, holding roles of one kind or other, they can hardly escape the normative demands of the roles; and, belonging to one kind of social aggregate or other, they can hardly escape its pattern of organization.\(^{279}\)

Nisbet reckons status, rank or hierarchical position as embedded in human consciousness itself. Status denotes a position that permits considerations of 'higher' and 'lower.' Hierarchy, stratification, and rank are the very essence of a status. Status and role have much in common, and the former may be described in the same way as the latter. Nevertheless, there are some differences. While role does not carry with it any necessary implication of ranking in a vertical scale, the term status assuredly does. Precisely the same way of behaviour can be, and usually is, both a role and status. But the distinction is vital, from the point of view of social analysis. Status is something that is attached, especially in societies where social class or caste is strong, to specific families and persons. It is quite possible for an individual, through education or extraordinary personal ability, to assume a role that is regarded as a high role but that does not materially affect his low status. Nisbet concludes his discussion saying that, "Status is, like role or authority or any major element

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\(^{278}\)Ibid., pp. 151-2.

\(^{279}\)Ibid., p. 117.
of social behaviour, essentially a dimension or perspective. It is one through which we see ourselves and others around us."\(^{280}\)

2) The Process Role Theory

Ralph H Turner is an advocate of a more processual approach to role. He finds the structural approach too rigid and static for a realistic understanding of society. He finds it overly concerned with "abnormal" social process such as role conflict and role strain, while ignoring the normal processes of human interaction. He emphasizes the process of interaction over the dictates of social structures. He views roles as "general configurations of responses that people negotiate as they form social relations. They are not mere enactments of expectations, and they are not always tied to positions in structure."\(^{281}\)

It is mainly from the symbolic interactionists that Turner draws the dynamic aspects of working at roles. To George Herbert Mead 'Role-taking' - being able to put oneself in another's place - is an essential process in the development of the 'self'. He postulates three stages in its development: the play stage - in which children learn to take the attitude of particular others to themselves; the game stage - in which the child takes the role of everyone else involved in the game; and the stage of the generalized other - in which the child assumes the overall perspective of a community, on general beliefs, values, and norms. Hereby in no way does Mead advocate conformism of his actors to expectations of the generalized other. The selves share a common structure, but as each self is different from all others, it can, nay must, construct its own

\(^{280}\)Ibid. p. 186.

\(^{281}\)Turner, The Structure of Sociological Theory, pp. 369-70.
larger generalized other, and then respond to it. There are many generalized others in society, because there are many groups in society. People, therefore, have multiple generalized others, and as a result, multiple selves.\textsuperscript{282}

Within the larger process of the self, Mead poses two distinguishable phases which he labels the 'I' and the 'me.' The 'I' is the immediate response of an individual to others. It is the incalculable, unpredictable, and creative aspect of the self. We know the 'I' only after the act has been carried out. The 'me' is the "organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes... The 'me' is a conventional, habitual individual."\textsuperscript{283} People are conscious of the 'me'; it involves conscious responsibility. Every personality is a mix of 'I' and 'me,' but it is the former that gives Mead's theoretical system dynamism and creativity. The latter denotes stability, while the former entails creativity and dynamism.\textsuperscript{284}

Ralph Turner advances Mead's "role-taking" into "role-making," and posits three senses of role-making. Firstly, humans are faced with only a loose cultural framework in which they must make a role to play. Secondly, they assume others are playing a role and thus make an effort to discover the underlying role behind a person's acts. Thirdly, humans seek to make a role for themselves in all social situations by giving others signs that give them claim on a particular role.\textsuperscript{285}


\textsuperscript{283}Ibid., pp. 175; 255.

\textsuperscript{284}Ibid., p. 197.

\textsuperscript{285}Turner, \textit{The Structure of Sociological Theory}, p. 372.
Another symbolic interactionist source of Turner is the *looking glass self* developed by Charles Horton Cooley. This concept can be broken down into three components. First, we imagine how we appear to others. Second, we imagine what their judgement of that appearance must be. Third, we develop some self-seeing, such as pride or mortification, as a result of our imagining others' judgements.  

A third source of Turner's theory is the work of Erving Goffman. Goffman notes the tension between Mead's "I" - the spontaneous self, and "me" - social constraints within the self. The tension is due to the difference between what people expect us to do and what we may want to do spontaneously. People seek to overcome the tension by *performing* for their social audiences. So Goffman focuses on *dramaturgy*, or a view of social life as a series of dramatic performances akin to those performed on the stage. For Goffman, the self is not a possession of the actor but rather a product of the dramatic interaction between actor and audience.  

Along the line of thought of Mead, Znaniecki and Goffman, Nisbet too holds that social life and the theatre are analogous. Much of the social behaviour is role behaviour, behaviour that appears to us as does the behaviour of actors on a stage. It is not individuals that we see most often. We see persons. Originally a *persona* was a mask, and it is derived from the theatre. The concept of person is inseparable from that of role. "But roles are nevertheless persons... We never see roles except as they are personified... It

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is well to think of role-in-person and of person-in-role rather than run the risk of introducing any false antinomy between role and person.” We find roles waiting for us in society. They are, as it were, parts that have already been written by time and circumstance before we are born. New roles are forever being created through the process of change, and old roles are forever being modified in their character. But the fact remains that there are roles which are central in the lives of most of us: infant, child, adolescent, student, husband or wife, father, or mother etc. It is also found that at various moments of history, changing prominence is given to the major social roles in society: at one point of history it may be the kinship role with supreme honour to the patriarch; at another it may be the religious role, and at another still, it may be the role of warrior or the role of scholar.

The examination of the role theory prepares the ground for the deployment of the concept of the role in the empirical study. With the Symbolic interactionists, the researcher admits that role is inclined to evolution and modification, subject to differences in the performance of individuals. With the structuralists it is upheld that it is the society that imprints its seal of approval and thereby exalts and establishes the behaviour of individuals as roles.

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