



Social Roles, Interaction, and Organization

5

Learning Objectives

After reading chapter 5, you will be able to

- distinguish between status/status set and role/role set.
- explain the difference between ascribed and achieved status using examples.
- distinguish between role strain and role conflict using examples.
- define role exit and provide an example.
- outline the emergence of bureaucracy and formal rationalization.
- explain the four elements and consequences of Max Weber's formal rationalization.
- describe the four elements of George Ritzer's McDonaldization using examples.

Chapter Summary

Status and role are two central concepts in the study of sociology. They are the basis of individual identity and social interactions and impose responsibilities and expectations in relation to other members of society. A **status** is a recognized social position that an individual occupies. The collection of statuses held by an individual is called a **status set**. An **ascribed status** is one you are born into or enter involuntarily (e.g., sex). In contrast, an **achieved status** is one you enter voluntarily at some stage in your life, often reflecting individual ability and/or accomplishment (e.g., an occupation). Everett C. Hughes (1945) introduced the concept of **master status**, the status of an individual that dominates all other statuses and plays the greatest role in an individual's social identity.

Status hierarchy is a term used to describe the ranking of statuses from high to low based on their power and prestige. In Canadian society, male is ranked over female, heterosexual over homosexual, and white over non-white, for example. When a person occupies statuses that are highly ranked in one status category, but not in others, **status inconsistency** can result. For example, a working-class, white male is highly ranked in terms of "race" and gender but lowly ranked in economic class. On the other hand, **status consistency** means that all of the social status hierarchies line up for an individual.

A **role** is a set of behaviours and attitudes associated with a particular status. Robert Merton developed the idea of a **role set**, which comprises all the roles attached to a status. **Role strain** develops when there is conflict between roles *within* the role set of a particular status. **Role conflict** occurs when a person is forced to reconcile incompatible expectations generated from two or more statuses they hold. **Role exit** involves disengaging, voluntarily or involuntarily, from a role that has been central to one's identity and attempting to establish a new one.

The study of small-group interaction has long been a part of sociology. Georg Simmel was one of the first sociologists to focus on the daily social interactions of individuals. William I. Thomas furthered work on individuals and small groups by developing an important sociological concept known today as the **Thomas Theorem**, which states that when a situation is defined as real, it becomes real in its consequences. This theorem became central to symbolic interactionist theory, and builds on the concept of the **definition of the situation**, which states that individuals will define the same situation in different ways based on their own subjective experiences. Therefore, in order to understand a person's actions and reactions in any given situation, we must first understand how that individual defines the situation.

Social organization refers to the social and cultural principles around which things are structured, ordered, and categorized. Max Weber was one of the first sociologists to systematically examine social organizations and bureaucracy. Advances in the fields of **organizational theory** and **organizational behaviour** were made in the 1980s, when the study of organizations shifted from the examination of social institutions to the examination of businesses and corporations in an effort to uncover more effective management practices. During the last two decades, these studies have become more interdisciplinary (such as anthropology) and shifted their focus to **organizational culture**. In the wake of increasing globalization, **critical management studies** have gained prominence. These are analyses which are critical of traditional theories of management and their focus on increasing profits above all else. **Feminist organizations** are generally structured around feminist principles and challenge traditional patriarchal, hierarchical organizations, paying particular attention to internal distribution of power and control, the division of labour, and decision-making rules.

Bureaucracies have existed for at least 5,000 years; however, sociological analyses of them only began in the nineteenth century, particularly through the work of Max Weber, who studied bureaucracy marked by **formal rationalization**. Weber described formal rationalization as a model for improving organizational effectiveness composed of four basic elements: efficiency, quantification, predictability, and control. Weber was critical of bureaucracy, because of its dehumanizing nature and of formal rationalization because it led to disenchantment and alienation. Building on the notion of formal rationalization, Frederick W. Taylor developed **scientific management**. Now known as **Taylorism**, this practice was designed to maximize efficiency for any given job by eliminating non-essential movements. However, efficiency standards limit the work processes to a single set of repetitive actions, thereby undermining skill development. Taylorism was still practised in North America through the 1990s, but now alternate practices like the **team approach** are being implemented more widely.

George Ritzer built on Weber's four elements of formal rationality—efficiency, quantification, predictability, and control—in his conception of **McDonaldization**, which he described as the application of principles used in the fast-food industry to other sectors of society (e.g., health care, education). In Ritzer's analysis, **efficiency** involves streamlining the movement of people and things, often by breaking tasks up into smaller, repeated tasks performed only by specific people. **Quantification** involves counting and measuring as many elements as possible so that success is defined in terms of completion

of quantifiable tasks rather than in terms of quality, which is more difficult to measure. **Predictability** means creating a uniform set of rules so that administration, workers, and clients know what to expect from each other. **Control** is always hierarchal and involves an explicit division of labour, through which each employee is assigned well-defined tasks with limited room to exercise judgment.

Society requires social organization in order to avoid chaos. But organizational principles and structures greatly affect society and must therefore be examined critically. Organizations, instead of serving the interests and needs of individuals, often dictate values and interactions. By doing so, they ensure that societal norms and values are obeyed and supported. Organizational bureaucracies have become increasingly self-serving, losing sight of “the greater good” and their social connections to others.

Study Questions

1. Define ascribed and achieved status and provide an example for each.
2. Consider your own status set. What are your ascribed statuses? What are your achieved statuses?
3. Think of a situation at school or in your life that was interpreted differently by the various people involved. Describe the situation in terms of the Thomas theorem and the concept of the *definition of the situation*.
4. Briefly describe the three different models of feminist organizations identified by Carol Mueller (1995) and provide an example for each.
5. How has scientific management been applied to the automobile industry?
6. Differentiate between status and role.
7. What is a master status? What is your master status?
8. Why might a woman who is both a mother and a student experience role conflict?
9. Compare Aboriginal and Judeo-Christian cosmologies.
10. Describe the principles of McDonaldization and apply these to an organization with which you are familiar.

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. Watch the movie *Avatar*. Explore how the two societies depicted in the movie are structured and organized. What are the cosmologies that underlie each society? Describe the social organization of each society. Explore the roles and statuses of individuals in each culture.
2. Do your own study of a bureaucracy or organization in which you have been involved. Apply some or all of Weber’s elements of formal rationality (efficiency, quantification, predictability,

and control), as George Ritzer did in his study of fast-food restaurants. What conclusions can you draw about the effects of this organization on individuals?

Further Readings

Briody, E., T.M. Pester and R. Trotter (2012). A story's impact on organizational-culture change. *Journal of Organizational Change Management* 25(1): 67–87.

Qualitative research on organizational culture change at a General Motors manufacturing plant.

Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. New York: Anchor Doubleday.

Applies to both sections: status and roles and organizations

Merton, R.K. (1940). Bureaucratic structure and personality. *Social Forces* 18(4): 560–568.

On the relationship between structural functionalism and bureaucracy

Film recommendation: *Office Space* (1999)

Addresses issues of organizational culture, bureaucracy, status

Helpful Websites

***Tales from the Kingston Pen*:** <http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/episodes/tales-from-the-kingston-penn>

Status and Role: <http://www.sociologyguide.com/basic-concepts/Status-and-Role.php>

Additional information on the concepts of status and role

Lou Gehrig's Disease: <http://www.lougehrigsdisease.net/>

Good resource to understand living with disabilities as a master status

Sociology of Organization: <http://www.sociosite.net/topics/organization.php>

Good resource for sociology of organizations research

Individuals in Organizations: <http://www.sociologyguide.com/organization-and-individual/index.php>

Additional information on organizations and the role of the individual in organizations