

Unit 4 - Roles

Podcast text

Hello and welcome to the podcast for Unit 4 of Sociology 1101. Today, we will be discussing roles. Roles are things with which we are very familiar. At the moment, I'm speaking to you in the context of my role as a university professor. You are listening to me in your role as a student. These roles tell us both about how to behave – what is expected and acceptable, and what it not – and also what behaviour to expect of the other person. For example, you don't expect me to start talking about rap music, or whether or not the Ottawa Senators will make the playoffs this year, or how I forgot to buy a license for my dog on time this year. You expect me to talk about sociology. Likewise, I expect you to behave a certain way as a student – completing assignments on time, putting extra effort into the course, asking intelligent questions, and so on.

This also points to a funny thing about roles – we all occupy thousands of them in our lifetime, and often hundreds in a single day or week. I'm not a professor at home, or when I'm talking to my neighbours. I'm a father, a husband, a son, a brother, a neighbour, a PTA member, a teammate, a cyclist, and so on. Some roles are more important and others are less important. Some roles we carry with us, and some roles we put on and take off like a change of clothes.

All roles are important, though, because they give structure to the social world. Remember that if society was just a bunch of people, doing what they wanted to do, it would be incredibly difficult to get along with others. Roles are ways that we pattern our own behaviours and predict the behaviours of others. For example, any time that you go to a walk-in clinic, you can be reasonably sure about how the doctor, nurses, and staff are going to behave, even if you've never been there before. The doctor can also be reasonably sure of what he or she will encounter – a patient who tells a story about illness and then accepts the verdict of the professional. The doctor and patient don't have to figure out who is the authority in this situation – the roles determine that for them. This is true of nearly all jobs and professions, although it is often the client who has more power than the worker – something we'll talk more about momentarily. Encounters are determined and patterned, not necessarily by the individuals who occupy the roles, but by the roles themselves.

In this unit I will also introduce a distinction that will guide us through the rest of the course. Academic disciplines are characterized by things called **paradigms**. Paradigms are sometimes confused with theories, but they are not exactly the same thing. A theory is often very specific. For example, a longstanding theory in sociology is that crime is in part caused by poverty. Therefore, if we can reduce poverty, we should see a reduction in the amount of crime. This is a

theory. A paradigm is broader, and should be thought of as a *perspective*. The sociologist Thomas Kuhn defined paradigms as “ways of tackling very big questions”. In the natural sciences, paradigms tend to succeed one another. For example, physics was dominated for a long time by the Newtonian paradigm – specifically the thinking of Isaac Newton about the laws of gravity, mass, and motion. In the 20th century, though, the Newtonian paradigm was mostly replaced by the Einsteinian paradigm – the thinking of Albert Einstein on general relativity. Once Einstein’s ideas were accepted, physicists changed how they tackled their big questions – building new theories based on the new perspective, or paradigm.

In the social sciences, it is not unusual for *multiple paradigms* to exist simultaneously. This is because human beings don’t follow rules as rigidly as, say, atomic particles or chemicals – leaving a fair amount of room for interpretation. Sociology has three main paradigms – the **structural functionalist** paradigm, the **symbolic interactionist** paradigm, and the **conflict** paradigm. Check the web text for the precise spellings. These three paradigms sometimes overlap, but they also present three very different ways of interpreting the social world. From this point forward, they will recur several times throughout the course. I will demonstrate their core ideas here by applying them to the issue of roles.

First, let’s start with **structural functionalism**, which is often just called “functionalism” for short. The functionalist paradigm starts from the assumption that society is like a living organism. Just like with the human body, then, it is assumed that every part of society has a “function”. If we look at a living organism, nearly every part of it has a purpose. For instance, our brains provide the body with direction, our heart, lungs, and gastrointestinal system provide the body with energy, our legs help us move around, and our hands allow us to do manual work. Functionalists tend to view society this way – their basic assumption is that if a thing exists, it has a social function. If you recall, we used this kind of logic in Unit 2 when we asked “what is the function of the education system?” and answered by looking at what it does – freeing adults to work, keeping young people occupied, and sorting them into future jobs.

The functionalist view of roles is that they are essential for creating and maintaining a complex division of labour. Just like each organ of the body has a specific role to play in maintaining the whole, so do people. For example, a person only has one brain, and that brain has a role to play in keeping the organism viable – a role that also comes with some heavy responsibilities. Does the same apply for society? We live in a democracy, but the day-to-day decisions about how to run our country are delegated to people in a certain role – specifically in government – who make decisions on behalf of all of us. People outside that role have to find a different role, perhaps as society’s defenders (its military) or its hands (its workers), and so on. According to

this view, all are necessary for society to function – even the lowest status roles like janitors and nannies.

Functionalists also assume that roles are more important than the people who occupy them. Governments will change, political parties will come and go, but what matters is that the role is maintained. According to this view, roles “pre-exist”, and people assume them. That’s the reason why doctors are pretty much the same no matter what clinic you’re in, and why janitors the world over behave pretty much the same too. There is a societal need for them, and therefore individuals “become” these roles. Functionalism is a perspective that emphasizes stability.

This is a strong contrast to the **symbolic interactionist paradigm**, or “interactionism” for short. Interactionists essentially take the opposite view – that people don’t conform to roles, we create them: spontaneously and continuously. Interactionists argue that there is an important distinction to be made between *formal roles* and *informal roles*. Functionalists look at the former and essentially ignore the latter. Informal roles, though, are extremely important for social organization. For example, there is a big difference between being “a brother” and “a great brother”. The formal role of “brother” doesn’t tell us anything about the quality of the relationship. As another example, think of the informal roles that emerge within a group of friends – like leaders, followers, pranksters, insiders, outsiders, and so on. These are informal roles that emerge only through interactions with other people.

Interactionists also point out that individuals have more control over their roles than assumed by functionalists. The interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman argued that people spend much of their day engaging in something called “impression management”. Impression management involves crafting our appearance, habits, and way of speaking and acting so that we can claim a certain role or identity in the eyes of others. You can see this sometimes with university students. For example, I sometimes teach courses in the Telfer School of Management, and it is much more common in that Faculty than in Social Sciences for students to dress up, especially for presentations. This is often encouraged by professors as a way for students to project themselves onto a future role – in the business world or otherwise. The next time you walk across campus, pay attention to the ways that people use clothing, hair style, and physical posture and gestures to communicate certain ideas about themselves to others. You might be surprised at how common and variable this role-taking can be as people try to “fit in” with different social groups.

Finally, the **conflict paradigm** offers a third view of roles. Conflict theorists tend to emphasize the role of inequality in social relations. Conflict theorists argue that it is no accident that power tends to be concentrated in a few roles that are closed to most people. For example, the highest

rungs on the ladders of business, government, academia, law, and medicine are usually occupied by people who were already privileged to begin with. They then frequently use their positions to fortify those advantages and exclude others. For example, a recent study in the US found that, of the 535 people who sit in the two houses of Congress, 245 are millionaires. On average, legislators in the US are worth \$4 million dollars more than the average American family. Things are not as bad in Canada, but a substantial gap does exist. The difference between corporate executives and workers in both countries is even more marked.

Conflict theorists therefore argue that roles reflect and reinforce the unequal distribution of power in our society – they make life easier for some people and harder for others. They point out that some roles – like the doctor described earlier – have a lot of power and authority over their clients, while other roles – like a server or a retail worker, have to defer to customers and often take a lot of abuse doing so. They also point out that low-status roles tend to go with low wages, regardless of how difficult the work is. They have a point here. Cleaning toilets is a difficult and unpleasant job that should pay more than it does. Why doesn't it? Is it because access to better roles – such as doctor, lawyer, accountant, and so on – is controlled (primarily through education, which is expensive), leaving a large pool of people who have little choice but to occupy these “lesser” roles? According to this view, roles are way of enforcing the privilege of powerful people, and assigning the more unpleasant roles in society to less powerful people.