

Role Conflict and Presentation of the Self

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn more about statuses and roles, particularly about the challenges that we face when roles are overwhelming or come into conflict with each other. You will also be introduced to the work of sociologists who theorized about how roles and statuses help us form our sense of identity. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Role Conflict

You learned previously how we each hold many different statuses, and that these statuses lead us to fulfill many different roles. Sometimes, this can be a lot! Sociologists have identified a few specific ways in which an individual role might become overwhelming, or in which a person's overlapping or contradicting statuses might cause conflict. If too much is required of a single role, individuals can experience **role strain**. Consider the duties of a parent: cooking, cleaning, driving, problem-solving, acting as a source of moral guidance—the list goes on. Similarly, a person can experience **role conflict** when one or more roles are contradictory. A parent who also has a full-time career can experience role conflict on a daily basis. When there is a deadline at the office and a sick child needs to be picked up from school, that's role conflict. When you are traveling for work but your children want you to come to their school play, which do you choose? Being a college student can conflict with being an employee, being an athlete, or even being a friend. Our roles in life powerfully affect our decisions and help to shape our identities.



THINK ABOUT IT

Have you ever felt that you don't have time for yourself or even time to be a person? That you're wanted everywhere for something, by someone, all of the time? You might be feeling what is called role strain. When you have to decide among priorities, that is role conflict, which is conflict among various roles from different statuses.

It's difficult being a parent, worker, student, child, or spouse, all at the same time. These are many different statuses and they each have a nested set of different roles. To balance them all the time is quite difficult, which is role conflict. It's a very familiar adult feeling.

IN CONTEXT

Suppose you are stressed out due to an upcoming exam, so you are consumed by performing your student role, and in addition, you have to go work another job in the evening. All day, you're

performing both of these roles, and your mother calls you—probably about nothing important, but yet she calls you two or three times.

You may say to yourself, “Mom, I don't have time to deal with this right now,” because you don't have time to perform the roles of a son or daughter at that moment. In fact, you may even tell your mother that you won't be able to talk to her until the weekend. In this manner, you separate everything to avoid feeling role conflict, a familiar feeling most people experience weekly.

Similarly, you can experience stress from one single status. This is called role strain, which is stress and tension that result from roles of a single status, like your job. That's often a very stressful status because the roles demand a lot of you.



TERMS TO KNOW

Role Strain

Stress and tension resulting from the role of a single status like a job status.

Role Conflict

The feeling of conflict and stress when faced with juggling multiple roles from multiple statuses.

2. Role Exit

Not all roles are permanent or lifelong. There are many times that a role might end, whether by choice or by circumstance. **Role exit** is when you go through a transition in life, or you leave something behind and start something new. It encompasses transitions that cause you to disengage from old roles and engage with something new. Anytime a person becomes an "ex" in life is an example of a role exit:

1. A married person who becomes divorced
2. An alcoholic who becomes sober
3. A student who becomes a graduate
4. A worker who becomes a retiree

Often, the old roles form habits and they stay with you. It can be a complicated process whenever you have to become an "ex" and engage in role exit.



THINK ABOUT IT

What are some examples of a role exit that is voluntary, such as choosing to leave a job? What are some examples of a role exit that is involuntary, such as getting fired from a job? How about a role exit that's somewhat ambiguous? How might the experience of role exit feel different when it is chosen and when it is not?



TERM TO KNOW

Role Exit

A transition where a person disengages from old roles in order to start something new.

3. Presentation of the Self

How do our roles and statuses help us understand ourselves, and to have a sense of who we are at all?

Charles Horton Cooley introduced the concept of the **looking-glass self** to describe how a person's sense of self grows out of interactions with others (1902). "Looking-glass" is an archaic term for a mirror, so Cooley theorized that we "see" ourselves when we interact with others. Cooley proposed a threefold process for this development: 1) we see how others react to us, 2) we interpret that reaction (typically as positive or negative), and 3) we develop a sense of self, based on those interpretations.

Of course, it is impossible to look inside a person's head and study what role they are playing. All we can observe is outward behavior, or **role performance**. Role performance is how a person expresses his or her role. Sociologist Erving Goffman presented the idea that a person is like an actor on a stage (1956). Goffman believed that we use **impression management** to present ourselves to others as we hope to be perceived. Each situation is a new scene, and individuals perform different roles depending on who is present. Think about the way you behave around your coworkers versus the way you behave around your grandparents or with a blind date. Even if you're not consciously trying to alter your personality, your grandparents, coworkers, and date probably see different sides of you.

As in a play, the setting matters as well. If you have a group of friends over to your house for dinner, you are playing the role of a host. It is agreed that you will provide food and will choose the music and probably be stuck with a lot of the cleanup at the end of the night. Similarly, your friends are playing the roles of guests, and they are expected to respect your property and any rules you may set forth ("Don't leave the door open or the cat will get out."). In any scene, there needs to be a shared reality between players. In this case, if you view yourself as a guest and others view you as a host, there are likely to be problems.

Goffman's dramaturgical approach expands on the ideas of Charles Cooley and the looking-glass self. We imagine how we must appear to others, then react to this speculation. We put on certain clothes, prepare our hair in a particular manner, wear makeup, use cologne, and the like—all with the notion that our presentation of ourselves is going to affect how others perceive us. We expect a certain reaction, and, if lucky, we get the one we desire and feel good about it. But more than that, Cooley believed that our sense of self is based upon this idea: we imagine how we look to others, draw conclusions based upon their reactions to us, and then we develop our personal sense of self. In other words, people's reactions to us are like a mirror in which we are reflected.



THINK ABOUT IT

Draw a large circle, and then "slice" the circle into pieces like a pie, labeling each piece with a role or status that you occupy. Add as many statuses, ascribed and achieved, that you have. Don't forget things like dog owner, gardener, traveler, student, runner, employee. How many statuses do you have? In which ones are there role conflicts?



Relationship Building: Apply Your Skill

Take a minute to reflect on your personal role conflicts, role exits, and presentation of self. How do these roles affect your relationships? For instance, think about a time in which you had a major life event such as the ending of a relationship, a long-distance move, or graduating from high school. How did this change your role, and subsequently, how did it change your relationships? Learning to

navigate relationships through changes in roles strengthens your relationships and your ability to find new ways to relate to others.



TERMS TO KNOW

Looking-Glass Self

How a person's sense of self grows out of their interactions with others.

Role Performance

How a person expresses their role

Impression Management

How we present ourselves to others in order to influence how we are perceived.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about how tensions can arise in roles and statuses, resulting in **role conflict**, or role strain, and the notion that we have **role exits** as a result of life transitions. You learned about the concept of the looking-glass self, and how impression management is an important component of **the presentation of the self**.

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REFERENCES

Cooley, C. H. (1902). *Human nature and the social order*. C. Scribner's Sons.

Goffman, E. (1956). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Doubleday.



TERMS TO KNOW

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How a person's sense of self grows out of their interactions with others.

Role Conflict

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A transition where a person disengages from old roles in order to start something new.

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How a person expresses their role.

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Stress and tension resulting from the role of a single status like a job status.

