

Sick Role

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of sick role, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Sick Role
2. Psychosomatic Disorders

1. SICK ROLE

A **sick role** is a temporary role that a person assumes when they are sick, which exempts them from normal obligations. Society has constructed a discourse around being sick: what does it mean to be sick in our society? It has meaning, because you aren't required to do everything you normally do--when you're sick, you're constructed as the victim.

It's not your fault that you're sick, so you get a temporary pass from your standard obligations. You don't have to go to work, you don't have to go to school, and you don't have to do things in the household that you normally do, like cleaning, cooking, etc. Society tends to pity the sick and frees them from their obligations.

However, there are limits to what society will sustain. You have to want to get well--society says that you can't simply milk the sick role indefinitely. If you do, then people will stop pitying you. You have to actively try to get better and you are expected to engage with the medical professionals to help you get better. If this is a long term sick role, like cancer, for instance, you're expected to try and get better. The sick role loses its power if you bring the sickness upon yourself.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** Suppose you're hungover because you drank too much. It's a little more difficult to claim the sick role because it's less involuntary, meaning you consciously made the choice to get drunk and now you're sick. Therefore, calling into work 'sick' is far more questionable because it's harder to claim the sick role. You can see that there's an element of involuntary assumption in claiming the sick role.



TERM TO KNOW

Sick Role

A temporary role a person assumes when sick that exempts them from normal day-to-day obligations.

2. PSYCHOSOMATIC DISORDER

One type of illness that enable people to be assigned to the sick role is **psychosomatic disorder**, which is a mental illness that has physical symptoms. This means that the mental illness you're experiencing is so intense that it manifests itself physically. As with other disorders and illnesses, mental illnesses are no different--society constructs the discourse around mental illness centered around you being the victim of mental illness. It's not your fault that you have a psychosomatic disorder, therefore you are allowed to adopt the sick role and society will treat you accordingly.



TERM TO KNOW

Psychosomatic Disorder

A mental illness with physical symptoms.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **sick role**, a temporary role that a person assumes when sick, that exempts them from normal day-to-day obligations. You also learned about **psychosomatic disorders**, which are mental illnesses that manifest physical symptoms.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

Psychosomatic Disorder

A mental illness with physical symptoms.

Sick Role

A temporary role a person assumes when sick that exempts them from normal day-to-day obligations.