

Status

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the sociological concept of status, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Status and Status Sets
2. Ascribed Status and Achieved Status
3. Master Status

1. STATUS AND STATUS SETS

Status is any social position that a person occupies. When you hear the word ‘status’ in everyday language, you may have a tendency to think of concepts like high status or low status, as in “I have higher status than you” or “You have higher status than I.” In sociology, however, status isn’t viewed in this way—it is simply the position in society that a person occupies.

You can think of the social structure as blanks to be filled in: professor, doctor, mother--these are statuses that are built into the social structure that people occupy. People can hold many statuses at the same time, which is called a **status set**.



BRAINSTORM

What are the statuses that you think you occupy? Son, daughter, student, mother, father, employee, American? Write them all down--what do they mean for your life?



HINT

You might confuse status with the concept of role, but statuses and roles are not the same thing. A clear way to keep them separate in your mind is to remember that statuses are positions that you occupy--those blank spots in the social structure--and roles are something you perform. You perform roles because you occupy a status.

The statuses that you occupy today could change tomorrow. If you broke up with your significant other tonight, then all of a sudden you wouldn’t have the girlfriend or boyfriend status anymore. Or, later in life, you might hope to add statuses to your roster: husband, wife, father, mother, etc. You are continually gaining and losing statuses in your life. You’re always negotiating and changing your statuses, so don’t think of them as set for life.



TERMS TO KNOW

Status

Any social position that a person occupies.

Status Set

The group of statuses that an individual occupies at any one time.

2. ASCRIBED STATUS AND ACHIEVED STATUS

Not all statuses are the same. People differentiate between those statuses that come to them involuntarily, meaning situations that they're born into or life circumstances that simply happened, and things that they actively do in life and achieve. Achievement typically has a positive connotation, but in sociology, achievement is viewed in terms of something that simply happens.

➞ **EXAMPLE** You can 'achieve' being a drug addict or you can 'achieve' being in prison, just as you can 'achieve' being a doctor or a lawyer, so the connotation is not always positive.

There are two types of statuses:

- **Ascribed status:** A social position that a person achieves involuntarily by virtue of their birth or life circumstances.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Statuses like son, daughter, sister, and brother are statuses that you would have no choice over, or ascribed statuses. You occupy them involuntarily.

- **Achieved status:** A social position that a person occupies voluntarily by virtue of their hard work, talent, or effort.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Statuses like teacher, boyfriend, and employee are achieved statuses.

Recall, though, that achievement doesn't necessarily connote positive achievement. People can achieve negative statuses, too. Sociologists recognize that ascribed status strongly influences a person's achieved status. What you're born into, the circumstances of your life, your family, etc., will strongly influence what you achieve in life. If you have the ascribed status of being born into a wealthy family, you're much more likely to have achieved statuses of doctor, lawyer, etc., whereas if you're born of the ascribed status of poverty, you're much more likely to have a life of conflict.



TERMS TO KNOW

Ascribed Status

A social position that a person occupies involuntarily by virtue of their birth or life circumstances.

Achieved Status

A social position that a person achieves voluntarily by virtue of their work, talent, or effort.

3. MASTER STATUS

People have one overriding dominant status, which is called **master status**. A master status is the most important status for shaping your identity and position in the social world. How you define master status is constructed socially.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** In this country, jobs tend to be our master statuses. This is why, when you meet somebody for the first time, they'll ask you the question, "What do you do?" It's because they're trying to pin down and define your master status so they can make other inferences about you, like how much education you have, what you like to do, what kind of person you are, and whether you're liberal or conservative. All of these other things tend to flow from master status.

Master status doesn't necessarily have to be positive. It can be negative, like an AIDS sufferer or a disabled person. In these cases, people will often fight against this master status label and argue, "Don't define me by my condition. I'm more than the master status you're trying to give me. This doesn't define me or my identity. This is not my master status." Even in the U.S., historically race has served as a master status, whereby people's identities have been defined by what race they are.



BIG IDEA

Master status isn't always the same for everyone. It's also a historical and social construct.



TERM TO KNOW

Master Status

The most important status for shaping a person's identity and position in the social world.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **statuses and status sets**, as well as the different kinds of statuses: **ascribed status**, **achieved status** and **master status**.

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



TERMS TO KNOW

Achieved Status

A social position that a person achieves voluntarily by virtue of their work, talent, or effort.

Ascribed Status

A social position that a person occupies involuntarily by virtue of their birth or life circumstances.

Master Status

The most important status for shaping a person's identity and position in the social world.

Status

Any social position that a person occupies.

Status Set

The group of statuses that an individual occupies at any one time.