

# Status and Roles

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about status or the positions that a person occupies in society. You will also learn about roles, or the tasks performed, and behaviors adopted by people in society. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Status and Roles

When you hear the word "status" in everyday language, you may think of concepts like high status or low status, as in "her fancy job is very high status" or "they're too low status to lead the group." In sociology, however, **status** isn't viewed in that kind of competitive, relative comparison way—it is simply the position in society that a person occupies. Sociologists use the term status to describe the responsibilities that a person holds and the benefits that a person experiences according to their rank and place in society. By recognizing your status, you can determine what this means for your role in society, strengthening your **self and social awareness skills**.



### BIG IDEA

Status is any social position that a person occupies.

As you can imagine, people employ many types of behaviors in day-to-day life. Roles are patterns of behavior that we recognize in each other, and that are representative of a person's social status. Currently, while reading this text, you are playing the role of a student. However, you also play other roles in your life, such as "daughter," "neighbor," or "employee." These various roles are each associated with a different status.

You can think of the social structure as full of empty roles, like professor, doctor, mother: these are statuses that are built into the social structure, which are occupied by individuals. People can hold many statuses at the same time. All the statuses that one person occupies is known as their **status set**.



### THINK ABOUT IT

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?

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. It's a little bit like performing in a play. If you are performing in a play, your status is "actor." And your role is, well, your role! As the person with the status of actor, your behaviors and tasks are dictated by your role as performing Hamlet.



HINT

Status are occupied; roles are performed.

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 new statuses to your roster: spouse, parent, home-owner, etc. You are continually gaining and losing statuses in your life. You're always negotiating and changing your statuses.



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.

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## 2. Ascribed Status and Achieved Status

Not all statuses are the same. Sociologists 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 choose in life and achieve. 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 sibling, first grandchild, or latch-key kid 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 talent, choices, or effort.

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

Note that achievement typically has a positive connotation in regular speech, but in sociology, achievement is viewed in terms of something that one can become—it is not necessarily something esteemed. The connotation is neutral, so you can achieve becoming a doctor and you can achieve becoming a thief.



HINT

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 financial and family situation you are born into and the emotional and material circumstances of your childhood 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 college graduate or professional, whereas if you have the ascribed status of poverty, it is much more difficult to achieve the status of college graduate or professional.



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 the United States, our jobs tend to be our master statuses. Most Americans will ask “what do you do?” when they meet someone new. It’s because—consciously or unconsciously—they are trying to pin down and define your master status, so they can make other inferences about you. These inferences might include how much education you’ve had, what your interests are, where you are from, and whether you’re liberal or conservative. All of these other attributes tend to flow from master status. In other countries or communities, the first question might be “what town are you from?” or “what’s your family name?” These questions would be prevalent in a culture where master status flows more from geographic origin or family than from career.

Like achieved status, master status has a neutral connotation. And like ascribed status, an individual may have no choice over which status is seen as their master status by strangers, especially those making snap judgments.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Think about how you might casually refer to a stranger on the street who is an older Black man using a cane. You might say “that old guy,” or “that Black guy,” or “that guy with the cane,” but you are unlikely to know that his actual master status—the status that is most meaningful to him, and that has the greatest impact on his life and outlook—is “retired cardiologist.” “Elderly,” “Black,” “disabled,” and “male” are more visible to strangers than his profession, and so he may be defined by others by these statuses. But when he thinks about himself and his role in the world, he is, first and foremost, a cardiologist, and that is his master status.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Master Status

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



### Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Reflect on the statuses you hold and how they have affected your self and social awareness. Consider your status set, ascribed status, achieved status, and master status. How have your statuses changed over time?



### SUMMARY

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

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## 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.