**Essay on Status and Roles**

The point was made in class that conflict was "built into the structure of society and that most conflicts occur when people are living up to the expectations associated with the social positions (statuses) that they occupy - they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Explain why this is the case and then, using an example from your life, illustrate this point.

Next, discuss one example of (a) status-conflict, (b) status-strain, (c) role-conflict, and (d) role-strain in your daily life. Describe the conflicts and strains and indicate how you resolve these issues.

Most sociologists agree that conflict is “built into the structure of society” and that most conflicts occur when people are living up to the expectations associated with the social positions (statuses) that they occupy – they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. Why is this the case? It follows from the way that sociologists think about individuals and the social positions – the statuses – that they occupy.

Statuses are the building blocks of all societies. These statuses actually define who we are – they locate us in social space and indicate whom we typically interact with in our everyday life and how those interactions take place. If one were to dissect and examine a particular status – for example, the status of “professor” or “student” – one would various social attributes attached that the individual who occupies the status must take into account. First, there are certain responsibilities and obligations that come with the position. This tells the status-occupant *what* they are supposed to do. Next, there are normative guidelines that tell the occupant *how* they are supposed to fulfill these obligations and responsibilities. Equally important, there are various *legitimate interests* and variable degrees of *power* that come to be associated with each status. That is to say, that if two different individuals occupy two different statuses, it is likely that they will each have legitimately different interests – and these might very well be in conflict with one another. Consider, for example, the situation of a father and his daughter. One of the main interests of a father – any father – is the safety and well being of his children. His sixteen-year old daughter has a legitimate interest in having the freedom and autonomy to go various places with her friends – places that the father might consider dangerous and/or hazardous. Each has a legitimate interest – each one’s interest potentially comes into conflict with the others.’

These sorts of conflicts occur on a regular basis. An example from my life can illustrate this point. When I was a member of the executive board of the Samaritan Inn – a homeless shelter in McKinney – I had a strong interest in helping homeless people in Collin County secure safe housing and nutritious meals and, as a result, advocated for the expansion of the shelter. At the same time, local politicians in McKinney had a vested interest in getting re-elected, and many of their constituents living in an affluent community in the west side of McKinney were not in favor of this expansion, arguing that it would draw more homeless people to the area and have a negative effect on their property value. As a result, these politicians, pursuing their legitimate interest in getting re-elected, chose not to support the expansion of the Inn, an issue in which I had a strong interest as a board member.

Since all members of society occupy multiple statuses—we all have *status-sets* – we all find that there are times when we experience conflicts and strains due to the fact that different and often incompatible demands are made upon us by virtue of occupying different statuses.

*Status-conflict* occurs when living up to the demands and obligations of one of your statuses *precludes* – prevents – you from living up to the demands and obligations of one of your other statuses. As a Professor (one status), for example, I am scheduled to teach a class on Wednesday evening and am obligated to do so. But as a father (a different status), I am required to attend my child’s teacher-parent meeting. They are scheduled at the same time and by doing one I cannot do the other.

*Status-strain* refers to a situation where you could, theoretically, live up to the demands and obligations of each of your statuses, but you must prioritize your actions and perhaps “cut some corners” in fulfilling your obligations. You are unable to operate at peak efficiency as you are “juggling” your responsibilities. For example, my daughter (my status of father) is flying in from San Francisco next week and needs to be picked up from the airport. Her flight arrives at 3:30PM. But I have a class (my status of Professor) that meets from 2:30-3:45. My plan is to let my class out one-half hour early and arrive at the airport by 4:15, arriving 45 minutes late.

One can “unpack” a status and break it down into its corresponding roles, which is called a “role-set.” The role-set is the equivalent of a status, but by prying the concept open we can now ask different questions. As an analogy, think of a beam of light passing through a glass prism and being broken up into different colors of the spectrum. Just as in the case of status-conflict and status-strain, incompatible demands can be placed upon an individual by members of the role-set that corresponds to one particular status. In other words, role-conflict and role-strain are the result of incompatible demands that arise from two or more roles that are found in the role-set that corresponds to one status.

For example, students, my Dean, and my colleagues are all members of the role-set that corresponds to the status of Professor. As a Professor, I am obligated (by students) to be in class at a specified time, but at the same time my Dean requires that I meet with him about an issue of importance. Since, by doing one, I cannot do the other, I am experiencing *role-conflict*.

In some cases, I can live up partially to the demands and obligations of two or more members of my role set but, as in the case of status-strain, not be able to do so in an optimal way. For example, when two of my daughters (members of the role-set that corresponds to my status of “father”) had sporting events scheduled for the same time – each hoping that I would attend their entire games – I would instead attend the first half of one game and then attend the second half of the other game.

These conflicts and strains occur on a regular basis and affect everyone because we all occupy multiple statuses. If the *source* of the incompatible demands placed upon us is coming from two or more different statuses that are located in our status-set, we experience either status-conflict or status-strain. If, instead, the *source* of the incompatible demands placed upon us is coming from two or more members of the role-set that corresponds to one status, we experience either role-conflict or role-strain.

How conflicts and strains are resolved depends upon the particular circumstances. In some cases, we simply decide based upon our own personal preferences – we’d rather do one thing rather than another. But other times we know that it is in our best interests to defer to those individuals who have the most power in the situation. My Dean, for example, has more power over me than do students. In other instances, we resolve these incompatible demands through compromise.

Everyone experiences these conflicts and strains – they are built into the structure of our status-sets and their corresponding role-sets – and they are typically resolved in a patterned – as opposed to totally idiosyncratic or random – manner.