Rethinking Social Roles: Conflict and Modern Life
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Abstract

Does sociology have anything to gain by returning to the concept of social role? Has this concept been irretrievably damaged by its significance in functionalist theory? This paper aims to recover the role concept through a consideration of alternative perspectives on normativity, illustrated through research on motherhood. A pragmatist re-conception of role is defended as a way of focusing on those aspects of social structures which exert normative authority over agents, while remaining open to some degree of interpretation. This perspective treats roles not as fixed mechanisms of functional coordination or social reproduction, but instead as variable sites mutual accountability. The paper argues that a pragmatist version of the role concept supports explanation of non-determined agency and complex, uncertain, and conflictual forms of normative authority. Treated in these terms, the role concept offers a valuable route to understanding the creative quality of agency and normativity.

Keywords
Social role, pragmatism, agency, normativity, emotion, reflexivity.

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‘... everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role ... It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves. (Park, 1950: 249)’

‘In my student’s papers (and manuscripts under review), I always strike out the language of "roles" and suggest a more nuanced, accurate concept.’ (Risman, 2018: 15).

The concept of social role has all but disappeared from contemporary sociology. This paper aims to recover the concept through a consideration of competing accounts of social normativity, particularly those emerging from Parsons, Foucault, Bourdieu, and practice theory. A rehabilitation of the role concept will then be defended, through a discussion of a pragmatist perspective on normativity. The value of this concept for sociological analysis will be explored through a consideration of explanations of motherhood, as both an experience and a set of intensely contested practices.

The central question this paper aims to address is whether sociology has anything to gain by returning to the role concept. While non-functionalist conceptualisations of role, particularly from interactionist perspectives, are not new, these have largely gone unnoticed in mainstream sociology. This paper will argue that a pragmatist conceptualisation of social roles provides a non-voluntarist route to understanding agent engagements with normative authority, as well as interests and situated needs (Joas, 1996: 161). This involves attending to patterns of agent experience of and response to complex and potentially conflictual normative structures, through the institutionally situated demands of their social worlds.
This is contrasted with a focus on broadly similar non-reductive action perspectives, including practice theory, where the emphasis tends to fall instead on patterns of routinized, materially oriented action (Nicolini, 2012). It is also contrasted with symbolic interactionism, where action is examined primarily through the contingency of situations, rather than the normative demands embedded in relevant social institutions (Blumer, 1969: 87-88; Gross and Hyde, 2017: 366).

**The Rejection of the Role Concept**

The concept of a social role supported explanations of modernity and selfhood until the later twentieth century. Sociology treated modern selfhood as something distinct from the unthinking performance of traditional, ascribed roles (Durkheim, [1933] 1984). As attention focused on questions of agency, conformity and change in modernity, the role concept supported examinations of the tensions between selfhood and social structures, as ‘it [became] possible for individuals to change masks yet remain in some sense the same’ (Laidlaw, 2014: 36; Goffman, 1971).

The role concept was important in efforts to explain the connections between actors and complex institutions. Simmel’s account of the actor, for instance, underscored the creative, interpretive quality of role performance, both in the theatre and in everyday social life. Arguing that there is no single right way to perform a role, even those which are formally scripted by a dramatist, he insisted that ‘[t]he actor is not the marionette of the role’ (Simmel, [1921] 2017: 6). A convincing performance involves neither dishonesty nor self-abnegation, he argued, but instead the realization of an interpretation: ‘most often we see a pre-existing form in front of us that we fill up with our individual content’ ([1921] 2017: 7).
The role concept was consequently relied on to support examinations of the connections between institutions and the normative structures which constrain action (Williams, 2006: 2010; Elias, [1939] 2000; Mead and Morris, 1934). As actors face multiple, sometimes competing normative demands in modernity, the role concept provided a way of capturing the roughly patterned, but ambiguous, parameters of action. Anxiety about role performance is one significant consequence (Elias, [1939] 2000: 443).

However, the role concept has been largely discarded, largely in reaction to its importance in Parsonian functionalism (Joas, 1993: 221; Alexander, 1984). Attacks on Parsons’ work for its political conservatism and blindness to power and domination, particularly with respect to women’s lives, were important features of this abandonment (Sciulli and Gerstein, 1985; Joas and Beckert, 2001; Lopata and Thorne, 1978). As Stanley and Wise famously argued, Parsons’ claim that actors are socialized into sex-based roles in early life was not only determinist and reifying, but depended on a non-reflexive, behaviourist model of selfhood (1983: 92-97).

Parsons’ hugely influential normative theory of action had sought to synthesize the dynamic interaction between systems and culture (Alexander, 1984). This involved conceiving of roles as functional co-ordinating mechanisms, on which complex modern systems depend for differentiation and specialization within and between institutions (Sohlberg, 2017). Parsons explained the social order as an effect not of accumulated individual self-interest, but instead of common action orientations embedded, through norms, in roles (Joas and Beckert, 2001: 271). However, despite an emphasis on the subjective perception and effort
of the actor, the social physics underpinning his explanation of action emphasized functional integration at the expense of conflict and power. This was surprisingly combined with a strong voluntarism, as norms were treated as having no momentum beyond the voluntary effort of agents to bring them to life and sustain them. Consequently, the effort of actors was treated as essential to systematic, patterned human action ([1937] 1968: 752).

Despite his sustained effort to develop a non-utilitarian and non-positivist normative theory of action, Parsons did not extend his conception of authority beyond the agent to encompass institutionalized norms, in ways that a more fully interactive model of action would (Bloor, 2001: 104). Roles were not conceived as supplying this authority. Consequently, it was not obvious how the subjective perception of the actor might shape action, other than through the voluntary exertion of effort by each discrete agent to somehow give life to the normative structure. At the same time, the normative structure was understood as a system of functionally interconnected rules which socialized actors would follow. It remained similarly inexplicable why institutionalized norms appear to have no authority over action through roles, and instead were treated as dependant on the actor to make a voluntary effort to confer that authority on them.

Parsonian structuralism has been described as relying on a model of ‘oversocialization’, as norms were assumed to be simply internalized early in life and then followed automatically, in tightly scripted roles (Granovetter, 1985: 485). The work of socialization does away with the need for agents to respond intelligently to complex and ambiguous situations, and conflicting normative expectations (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 97). Rather than social context being treated as a significant feature of action, early socialization instead supplied the
explanation for why we act as we do (Bicchieri and Muldoon, 2011). This was despite the incorporation of strong voluntarism, whereby agents were understood to be entirely driven by unambiguous norms, with which they feel compelled to conform (Wrong, 1961: 190). Roles were not conceived as aspects of structures which either exert normative authority over agents or are available for interpretation. Instead, they were treated as rules of coordination which socialized actors will simply perform, not unlike marionettes.

**Normativity Without ‘Role’**

**Foucault: The Disciplinary Society**

The critique of a structural functionalist theory of action was one important landmark in the demise of the role concept. Another was the rise of poststructuralist ideas, especially the rejection of the humanist assumption that intentionality and cognition can be relied on to explain action (Joas and Beckert, 2001).

Growing doubt over the enlightenment presumption that human agents are essentially autonomous, intentional, and rational, was an important feature of this, particularly in the wake of the holocaust (Wagner, 2012). The possibility that social progress could be systematically pursued through the social sciences, for instance by managing economic forces or the relations between social classes or other collectivities, was largely abandoned as the very idea of progress itself was questioned. Assumptions that a ‘good’ society could be developed, for example by harnessing sociology to perfect a functionally differentiated and integrated social order, were largely replaced by post-structuralist understandings of society as de-centred, uneven, and asymmetrical. Sociology became marked by a new
emphasis on particularities rather than general patterns and processes (e.g. Bell, 1960). One consequence of this has been a shift away from analyses of patterned interactions between agents and social institutions, including pragmatist conceptions of agents as intelligent interpreters of norms in action, in favour of a focus on the power of binary codes of meaning, such as for gender, sexuality, or ‘race’, to construct social reality through incitements, hierarchies and exclusions.

As the pursuit of certainty about causal mechanisms and relations in the humanities and social science was largely replaced with explorations of fluidity, difference and plurality, the tools of systematic analysis were also discarded (Hedström and Swedberg, 1998). Binary distinctions underpinning earlier work in sociology, such as between natural/social, or human/animal, came to be treated as modern fictions, invented through an apparatus of power which defines and the social world, albeit in non-stable ways.

This shift in focus was heavily indebted to Foucault, not least his conception of discursive power. While not without controversy (e.g. Ramazanoglu, 1993; Benhabib, 1995), the account of power as decentralised and diffused across levels and contexts came to prominence towards the end of the twentieth century. Mainstream sociology came to be characterised by the Foucauldian conception of power as circulating through and across the ‘capillaries’ and ‘nodes’ of social life, residing not in agents or institutions, but in and across forms of knowledge, as it informs and moves bodies, selves and whole populations (e.g. Foucault, 1978: 157).
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From this point of view, social role interpretation can reveal little about normativity. Instead, situated forms of knowledge, through which uncertain and shifting ‘truths’ are generated, became the focus of interest, since this is how societies and selves are understood to be disciplined for conformity (Foucault, 1977: 217). Human action is treated here as the epiphenomenal effect of power mechanisms which both capture agents and invent the very idea of intentional agency, as a self-governing social order (re)generates.

It is worth considering how this perspective has informed analyses of a changed and contested form of action and identity, such as mothering and motherhood. Foucauldian-inspired research on motherhood focuses on specifying widely held idealisations, or ‘discourses’, of good motherhood, as a route to revealing the operation of bio-power in disciplining the maternal self (e.g. Wall, 2001; Smart, 1996; Henderson et al., 2010; Liamputtong, 2006; Blackford, 2004). A focus on discursive power is not, however, equipped to consider the non-determined and uncertain ways in which mothers might respond to the array of often conflicting pressures they face. Consequently, the ways in which mothers might experience the demands of strong or conflicting maternal norms through their emotions, especially those of pride, shame, guilt or anxiety, is beyond the scope of this approach, given the assumption that agency is always already an illusion of power (Smyth, 2012; Henderson et al., 2010).

The interpretive quality of mothering and motherhood, involving complex engagements with authoritative norms, is consequently beyond the reach of poststructural sociology. How mothers might recognise, revise or reject contemporary social norms, such as self-sacrifice or self-realization, as they inhabit and interpret motherhood, is lost from view
when both meanings and expectations, but also agent perceptions and subjectivity itself, are treated as the outcome of ‘blind social processes’, in the form of non-sovereign, discursive power (Elliott, 2002). The significance of social emotions in everyday life, for example the way motherhood is often infused with anxiety and guilt, cannot be readily explained from this perspective.

**Bourdieu: Dispositions, Practices and Distinction**

The more recent turn towards Bourdieu's analysis has refocused attention on power as a resource which agents struggle over, rather than a dispersed disciplinary mechanism. Bourdieu’s multi-dimensional perspective allows analysis of the wide range of symbolic, economic, and relational capitals which may be at stake in social life. The return to questions of ‘habitus’, or non-conscious, culturally sedimented orientations to action, as they guide actors in distinct ‘fields’ of power, offers an important route for examining social reproduction as agents struggle over resources, largely through claims to social distinction. Bourdieu’s practice theory is not averse to a pragmatist conception of social roles, given his focus on regularly patterned or rule-bound interactions which allow for some interpretation and modification by agents (Bourdieu, 1977).

This has allowed for important studies of how class advantage is routinely secured, whether through parenting (Lareau, 2003), public education (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Reay, 2017), or the professions (Lamont, 1992). Such studies focus not only on the establishment of durable, non-conscious dispositions which allow some actors to play well and others
badly in the relevant field, but also on the more calculating efforts of actors to improve their access to the relatively tangible resources, or ‘capitals’, in circulation.

The turn to Bourdieu has restored questions of actor engagements with power structures. In contrast to Foucault, Parsons, or even Marx, social action is not treated ultimately as a consequence of overbearing structures, which ‘[make] the agent disappear by reducing it to the role of supporter or bearer of the structure’ (Bourdieu, 1996: 179). Instead, action is understood as both dispositionally driven, and so largely non-cognitive, but also, paradoxically, strategically interest maximizing. This is an effect of conceiving the social world in terms of systematically related positions in a game, involving complex and unpredictable trade-offs and transfers (Joas and Knöbl, 2009: 375).

The contention that Bourdieu nonetheless treats agency in quite narrow terms, while over-emphasizing structure, is well known. Laidlaw, for instance, points out that agency tends to be identified only when self-interested action is evident (see Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Agent values and motivations are assumed to be given by the social ‘game’, and room for manoeuvre is limited to the tactics of play (Laidlaw, 2014: 5-8). The emphasis on dispositionally driven action treats actors as always already determined, largely non-reflexive, what Garfinkel referred to as ‘dopes’ (1964: 244). Intelligent responses to specific situations are overlooked as actors are understood to be led by social inscription, not least through the education system, in ways that reproduce structural power (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 20-21).
Nevertheless, Bourdieu’s focus on dispositional, field-relevant practices has prompted interesting research on mothering as a practice, rather than a role. This approach tends to focus on how maternal practices contribute to the reproduction, for instance, of class and other distinctions across generations (e.g. Reay, 2000; O’Donoghue, 2013; Cooper, 2017). The explanatory priority which Bourdieu’s theory of practice gives to historically generated cultural schemes, as they are embedded in dispositions and field dynamics (Bourdieu, 1977: 21, 72), is important. However, it misses the ways in which actors, such as mothers, might intelligently interpret, revise, and seek recognition for how well they enact their social ‘position’.

Bourdieu’s focus on explaining informally regulated action through dispositional practices lacks an explicit account of corresponding normative expectations (1977: 82). From his point of view, a normative attitude is not a necessary aspect of practices, where the emphasis is on regular patterns of action involving practical mastery or tacit knowledge (1977: 4). Struggles over the accumulation of symbolic capital, rather than over normative authority, are also emphasized. The ways that practices might attract controversy or intense public scrutiny, as is the case, for instance, with mothering (Edwards and Gillies, 2019), is not the primary focus of interest for Bourdieusian analysis. Instead, the focus is on the connection between practices and the sustained reproduction and transfer of social distinction or prestige, in ways which reinforce inequalities and suffering (Bourdieu and Accardo, 1999).
Practice Theory

Practice has been conceptualised as an important aspect of processual perspectives on social life beyond Bourdieu, focusing on routinized, embodied and materially oriented purposive action. Practice theory, broadly conceived, assumes that routine action is recursively connected to the material conditions it responds to. It is through this recursivity that structures take shape and agency is possible, since practices are understood as the primary site of interaction and social innovation, both in themselves and in their systematic connections to other practices and structures (Nicolini, 2012: 3-6; Swidler, 2001: 85).

Practices have become a major focus of contemporary sociological analysis, offering a way of addressing questions about the non-determined materiality, spatiality, and temporality of interconnected and structured human action (Ortner, 1984: 146). Practice analysis tends to focus, albeit from a variety of different perspectives, on how variable, patterned activity emerges from accumulations of embodied and material pressures, resources and capacities, in ways which can resist, undermine or reorganise those patterns (Ortner, 1984: 146-148).

Practices are consequently assumed to be ontologically prior to meaning, power, and social institutions. These all emerge and change as aspects of the ‘field of practices’, the social order of ‘shared practical understandings’ (Schatzki, 2001: 2). The assumption here is that we can only examine institutions, for example, through a focus on the practices through which they are constituted. Tacit knowledge, embodied skill and dispositional capacities are the focus of attention, rather than norms, beliefs, or emotions (Schatzki, 2001: 3, 7). Studies
of motherhood in this vein focus, for example, on practices of conspicuous consumption as the site of maternal and familial identification (e.g. Kehily and Thomson, 2011).

While a pragmatist role concept can rely on practices to take account of materiality and embodiment in patterned, purposive action, it does depart from most accounts of practices in the focus on normative accountability and creativity, over routinized, purposive activity (Nicolini, 2012; Joas, 1996). While practice theory is concerned with the material dynamics of human action, struggles for normative reassurance or recognition, in the routine experiences and creative responses of actors, are not a major focus of interest. Similarly, the emotional quality of actor responses to normative demands which they face, as they inhabit, enact, and revise their interpretations, are generally not a central focus of interest in practice theory.

Practice theorists tend to focus on patterns of purposive, routinized activity, rather than on actor experiences, interpretations, or responses. They also tend to focus on how practices relate to each other (Nicolini, 2012: 144). This is concerned not only with what should constitute a ‘unit’, or focus, of analytic attention, as the boundaries between practices are often conceived as fluid (Nicolini, 2012; Turner, 1994: 43), but also the question of whether some practices are more powerful than others, a source of organization and constraint, perhaps not unlike institutionalized authority, which ‘anchors’ the ‘constitutive rules’ which practices enact (Swidler, 2001: 74).
Some versions of practice theory do focus on how actors intelligently cope with the situations they find themselves in (Nicolini, 2012: 166). For instance, Bloor explains a Wittgensteinian perspective on practices as necessarily caught up in institutions, particularly through their action dispositions and ‘shared evaluative currency’. However, practice theory generally tends to focus instead on processes through which embodied actors are orientated to their socio-material environment (Miettinen, 2006: 394).

What follows will advocate a return to the role concept in pragmatist terms. This offers a valuable route to understanding actor creativity in response to complex, uncertain and conflictual forms of normative authority.

**Normativity with Role: Pragmatism**

The pragmatist account of norm-guided social action does not treat human actors as always already determined, whether through discursive power, dispositional tendencies, or the logic of practices (Joas, 1993). Instead, pragmatism relies on humanist assumptions in treating agency as a significant and independent feature of action. Norms are not conceived as static, stable rules, which dominate agents through roles. Unlike Parsonian voluntarism, the agent is not assumed to be free from normative authority. Neither is agency understood as self-interested resource accumulation; a consequence rather than a driver of practices; or an illusion of power. Instead, a pragmatist perspective assumes that agency emerges through a complex interaction between normative structures, institutional interests, social practices and subjective self-evaluation, as the actor struggles to secure recognition of
themselves as an agent, in ways that can generate social conflict (Honneth, 1992; Mead and Morris, 1934: 204). Social roles are central to this struggle for agency.

Practical ‘know how’, what Bourdieu calls the ‘feel for the game’, is important in pragmatism, but in a way that attends to the intelligent agent as they respond to, adapt, revise or reiterate normatively oriented practices (Bernstein, 2010: 9-10; Dewey, [1922] 2012). Consequently, cognition and action, as well as emotion and reason, are not assumed to be sharply distinct. Instead, each is caught up in the other (Emirbayer and Goldberg, 2005; Joas, 1998).

For pragmatism, the intrinsic connections between thinking and acting allow us to adapt to and cope with our circumstances, revising our intentions and practices as we go, in non-determined ways (Gross, 2018: 89-90). Attention focuses on the ways in which actors apprehend and respond to contextually significant norms (Dewey, [1922] 2012: 9). The relative stability, yet revisability, of selfhood depends on agent evaluations of ongoing performances and narrations, as they take shape through institutionally embedded roles (Burkitt, 2008: 35). Through this process, the self is understood as dynamic, complex, and intersubjective, rather than a pre-social essence or original invention by the agent.

A pragmatist role concept is centrally concerned with the question of normativity. More specifically, pragmatism focuses on the interaction between actor interpretations of situations, norms, and situational imperatives (interests and needs) (Joas, 1996: 161). This supports analysis of how norms can become embedded in and disembedded from institutions through roles.
In the insistence on intelligence as a component of action, pragmatism offers an important counter to poststructuralist anti-humanism (Westphal, 2001: 83). Sedimented norms, institutionalized through routine practices, are assumed to interact with emotions, as well as human intelligence, in the process of acting. Patterned action is understood as revisable, in light of situated evaluations. The authority of specific norms is treated as contingent on whether they seem plausible, or ‘warranted’, in context (Joas, 1993; Geddes, 2001).

The breadth and strength of institutionalisation is important in these judgements. This contrasts with other forms of interpretivism, such as symbolic interactionism, where forces operating indirectly on situated interactions are not considered if they cannot be directly observed (Gross and Hyde, 2017: 366-367). For pragmatists, human action is understood as institutionally anchored, normatively oriented, yet experimental and revisable in the light of situated agent evaluations (Joas, 1996: 161).

It is noteworthy, nevertheless, that the pragmatist perspective on roles defended here is almost indistinguishable from some interpretive perspectives. Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology is notable for its emphasis on the normative accountability embedded in practices. His ‘expectation breaching experiments’ demonstrated the importance of norms in role-based action (1964: 237). Practices are treated as intentional, accountable forms of action which carry established meaning for those who are ‘members’ of a context. Rather than treating actors as ‘cultural dopes’, automatically following rules as an effect of socialization, actor capacity for reflection and deliberation is given priority.
The normative pressures felt by actors in any context are assumed to be not uniform or agreed, but instead often complex and contested, given that these are expressions of social power. For pragmatists, ‘nobody has the final word’, as conflict over normative authority is treated as a basic feature of a differentiated and complex society (Bernstein, 2010: 124). It is through interpreting, navigating, and responding to these pressures that actors struggle to secure recognition for themselves as agents (Honneth, 1995). This may involve affirming, interpreting, or revising those norms which structure what Honneth describes as the grammar of social life.

The role concept supports a focus on this process of normative accountability, where the accumulation of meanings and expectations associated with specific forms of action are captured, as well as contested. As agents interpret roles, norms gain and lose authority, becoming more or less relevant to mutual accountability (Jaeggi, 2014: 40). The modern agent, in claiming recognition as such, needs not only to demonstrate their freedom to select and interpret specific practices and purposes, but also to justify these in normative terms which they have not invented (Pinkard, 1996: 271-302). Alternatives to the role concept, such as ‘discourses’, ‘dispositions’, or ‘practices’, are not equipped to prioritise this process.

For example, the late-modern normative landscape has been characterized by a growing expectation of authentic self-realization, not only in employment and culture, but also in personal and family life (Honneth, 2004; Petersen, 2011). How this norm takes shape across institutions, and how it interacts with other strong norms, including instrumental rationality,
as they are contingently bundled into recognisable roles, such as motherhood and fatherhood, would depend on actor interpretations (Björnberg and Kollind, 2005; Smyth, 2012).

This is a very different conception of role normativity to the Parsonian model of functional equilibrium. The focus for pragmatism is on the uncertain interactions between agents and institutionalized expectations. Additionally, it is quite unlike Foucault’s systematic model of the disciplinary society, characterized by an absence of conflict and unevenness, and an overly efficient account of power (Honneth, 1994). Normativity generates actor conformity for Foucault by treating agents as always already caught in the ‘panoptic machine’ (1977: 217), irrespective of the parameters and substance of social roles. Instead, pragmatism assumes that normativity is navigated intelligently as the actor is confronted with potentially competing or vaguely formulated expectations and evaluations from herself and others. The institutional context is, consequently, not secondary but fundamental in shaping the dynamics of action and authority.

This is also very different to understanding normativity in Bourdieusian terms, as principally located in historically sedimented dispositions. Instead, pragmatist understandings assume that social life is closer to drama than ritual, involving performances, interactions and interpretations between actors, audiences, and critics (Alexander, 2006).

For norms to become authoritative, they must be institutionalized in ways that make demands on actors, as well as demanding recognition from them, by becoming embedded
in roles. An actor feels accountable for their actions through their emotions, as they recognise and interpret the potentially conflicting norms involved in roles (Williams, 2006). For example, a woman might account for becoming a mother as a matter of self-realization, indicating a rejection of a norm of female subservience through family roles and instead insisting on individual freedom (Honneth, 2004). The creation of such normative attitudes, through roles which generate mutual expectations and mutual accountability, allows her some authority over what counts as important in her life, even if those attitudes are also costly, perhaps through the excessive burden of responsibility they entail (Smyth, 2012). The normative justifications we rely on in evaluating ourselves and each other are treated as central to understanding social processes (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006). Thus, normative attitudes, embedded in our role interpretations, enactments and criticisms, guide how we create self-understanding as well as recognise institutionalized expectations, as we account for how we act and what we expect from each other (Brennan et al., 2013: 36-37).

This pragmatist model of normativity assumes that reflexive agency involves not disembedded or nomadic actors newly facing the burden of discovering norms (Beck et al., 1994; Lash, 2003; Giddens, 1991), but instead actors routinely caught up in revision and evaluation as they perform roles (Elliott, 2002). The agent is understood as necessarily drawing on their own and others’ emotional responses in this process of reflexive coping (Holmes, 2010: 147).

A Pragmatist Role Concept: Revisability, Accountability and Self-Understanding
As outlined above, a pragmatist conception of social role necessarily involves a focus on normative attitudes, as they gain or lose authority through conflict and struggle, and are realized in the emotionally charged interpretive effort of actors (Turner, 1956: 317). Roles are treated here not as coordinating mechanisms to support systematic functions, but instead as sites of accountability (Brennan et al., 2013: 15). By enabling actors to cope with problematic situations in relatively non-intentional, yet intelligent, ways, roles offer rough guidance through the various complex situations we are caught up in (Jaeggi, 2018: 55-61; Blumer, 1969: 87-88).

As clusters of institutionally anchored, but dynamic and unstable normative expectations (Joas, 1993: 222), roles are not the only site where strong norms play upon action and evaluation. For Fearon (1999) they are distinguished by having substantive normative content. He contrasts roles with ‘types’, those hierarchical classifications based on broad stereotyping. In these terms, ‘wife’ or ‘professor’ count as roles, whereas ‘Italian’ or ‘Black’ count as ‘types’. Some categories, he notes, can count as both, notably ‘mother’ and ‘father’. The argument here is that roles tend to be more personally demanding than types. While it may be possible for an actor to detach her self-understanding from stereotyping presumptions concerning race/ethnicity, gender or disability, for instance, at least when such presumptions are not overwhelmingly coercive (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 18), this is much more difficult for her involvement with a role, such as mother or friend, where self-understanding is inescapably at issue. Role performances often become connected with powerful emotions concerning the moral evaluation of the self, in ways that are distinct from the impact of prejudicial stereotyping. The more complex the role, as it is embedded
within and across institutions, the more substantive, complex, and potentially conflictual, the normative content (Fearon, 1999: 24).

Turner’s three-part categorisation of roles allows some further refinement. Informal interaction roles, such as ‘joker’ or ‘peacekeeper’, while potentially important for the actor’s self-understanding, tend not to carry significant normative expectations beyond the immediate situation, since they are not usually attached to organisations and institutions. Similarly, roles which express socially recognized values, such as artist or athlete, tend to be available for broad interpretation, since they are not caught up in mutual expectations with other actors in and across institutions. It is the third form of role, those attached to institutional positions and reciprocally caught up with other roles as sites of accountability, which are of primary interest to sociologists interested in the relationship between agency and normative authority (Turner, 1956: 316).

Consequently, the role concept does not capture all forms of social categorisation, focusing only on those aspects of the social structure that directly inform self-reflexive human action. Institutionally anchored roles can be understood as one product of the interplay between social categories and self-understandings (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Major social ‘type’ categories, including ‘race’, gender, or disability, are not necessarily formalised through social roles, although they can be (Fearon, 1999).

A complex and contested normative landscape exerts significant pressure on institutionalized roles. Norms can gain or lose authority through the justifications offered by agents for their role performances (e.g. Herrigel, 2010). Rather than providing formalised or
bureaucratically codified rules, the fuzziness, contingency and conflicting logics of informal roles demand that agents creatively interpret them as they act, in non-voluntarist ways (Joas, 1996). Interpretation depends on normative recognition, whereby the agent affirms, or recognizes, specific norms, while rejecting others, as authoritative guides (Joas and Beckert, 2001). This intersubjective and evaluative process involves interpreting what might be expected of ‘someone like me’, in this situation. Roles, from this perspective, necessarily rely on reflexive attitudes, which can adapt to changing conditions, structures, and relations.

Role enactment is both a formative social practice and normatively somewhat ambivalent, leaving room for more or less successful interpretations. When less successful, the consequences for selfhood can be damaging. For instance, when the possibility for role interpretation is closed down, the actor may feel they are engaged in an artificial or overly constrained form of action which is at odds with their self-conception, leading to an experience of alienation (Jaeggi, 2014) or depression (Petersen, 2011). This may occur, for instance, when a powerful institution attempts to secure broad conformity with a preferred role interpretation, such as healthcare has sought to exert over early motherhood with respect to breastfeeding in certain contexts (Smyth, 2018; Taylor and Wallace, 2012).

As institutions and norms change, expectations attached to associated roles can become more or less significant, or become of focus of social, as well as personal, conflict. Given the emergent, non-instrumental and dynamic character of roles in this pragmatist sense, crises are not assumed to be rare or necessarily fatal, but instead provide instances where revisions and transformation can occur.
For example, while gender might generally be understood as a ‘type’ rather than a ‘role’, it can become a stronger focus of social and political power, generating detailed expectations for action to which actors are held personally accountable. In a context such as the fictional Gilead (Atwood, 1985), the intensification of gender as a site of power generates a variety of closely defined roles, notably those of ‘the handmaid’, ‘the Martha’, ‘the wife’, and ‘the aunt’, supported by a system of brutal punishment for violations.

This can also go in reverse, as gender may weaken as a site of categorical power in the face of strengthened norms of equality or individual freedom (Honneth, 2014: 145-146). This was arguably the case in Ireland when the abortion ban, in place for 37 years, was repealed in 2018 (Smyth, 2015; Browne and Calkin, 2020). While gender remains an important focus of inequality in that society, it competes with strengthened expectations of individual autonomy in ways have arguably loosened the parameters of roles such as ‘mother’ and ‘father’, while at the same time generating overt conflict over the persistence of gender stereotyping and efforts to delineate roles as gendered (e.g. see Girvin, 2008).

Motherhood, specifically, appears to be caught up in a conflict between norms of gendered devotion and self-sacrifice, and liberal individualist norms of instrumentality and authentic self-realization (Hays, 1996; Blair-Loy, 2003). This conflict spans family, healthcare, education, popular culture, and employment, making the experience of the role particularly strained, overlaid with anxiety and guilt, and a major site of inequality (Smyth, 2012; Benard and Correll, 2010; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). From this perspective, distinct normative expectations for mothers and fathers go beyond the co-ordination of the concrete tasks of
parenting to encompass gendered moral responsibility, in ways which are emotionally felt (Doucet, 2015: 231).

The highly differentiated character of late modern roles and institutions intensifies the pressure of interpretation, as we struggle to realize our self-understandings through our mutually accountable role interpretations, experiments, and revisions (Jaeggi, 2014: 75). The risk to selfhood comes not simply from powerful, institutionally anchored roles, but when the self loses the distance from roles that supports interpretation and revision.

**Conclusion**

A return to the role concept is overdue, given its promise for revealing the broad dynamics of social change, as well as on fine-grained efforts to enact roles through ‘social challenge and response’ (Pippin, 2008: 188). Sociology needs to be able to explain, for example, why and how motherhood tends to be routinely caught up in negative social emotions such as anxiety, guilt and even shame. The role concept can get at this in ways that practices, disciplinary techniques, or narrowly framed interactional analysis, do not. The focus on agent responses to potentially conflicting and uncertain normative demands through role interpretation includes attending to emotions, such as anxiety, in the face of normative conflict and uncertainty.

Reviving the role concept will not return sociology to functionalism. Instead of conceiving roles as behaviourist tools for systematic coordination, they are conceived here as sites of normative accountability. This attends to how human actors respond, in non-voluntarist
ways, to the normative grammar of highly complex and conflictual societies. Drawing on pragmatist insights allows for a focus on agents as intelligent evaluators (Laidlaw, 2014), who creatively interpret, reproduce, and change roles, and the normatively structured institutions they support. Roles, normatively caught up in each other as they are, can be examined as sites of interpretation and mutual accountability. A revival of the role concept in the terms outlined here raises questions of normative conflict and reflexivity in modern ethical life that are not being raised in other ways. This approach focuses on how we understand ourselves, each other, and our wider social context, as we act and interact, holding ourselves and each other to account, in uncertain conditions.

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