

CHAPTER - 4

SOCIOLOGICAL THINKERS (ROBERT K MERTON)

Robert K Merton

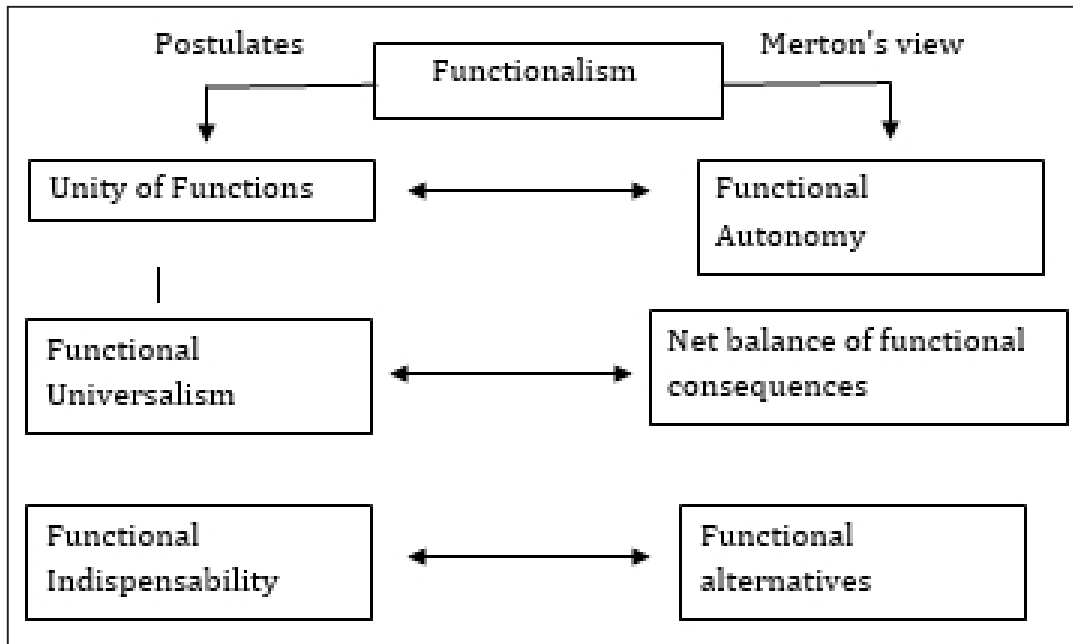
Merton is an American Sociologist, who was a student and famous critic of Talcott Parsons. Although, both Merton and Parsons are associated with structural functionalism, there are important differences between them.

- Parsons advocated the creation of grand theories while Merton favored more limited, middle range theories.
- Merton was more favorable toward Marxian theories than Parsons was
- Merton broadened the functional paradigm prevalent at the time

Merton's structural functional model/ Criticism of functional analysis/ Paradigm of functional analysis-

Merton criticized the three basic postulates of functional analysis as developed by anthropologists such as Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown

- **Postulate of the functional unity of society-** This postulate holds that all standardized social and cultural beliefs and practices ensure unity of the system ie society. This view implies that the various parts of a social system must show a high level of integration.
- However, Merton maintained that although it may be true of small, primitive societies, this generalization cannot be extended to larger, more complex societies. In a highly differentiated society, institutions may have high degree of **functional autonomy**. For example, religious pluralism- in a society with multiple faith, religion tends to divide rather than unite
- **Postulate of Universal functionalism-** It states that all standardized social and cultural forms and structures have positive functions. Merton argued that not every structure, custom, idea, belief, and so forth, has positive functions. They can have dysfunctions and unanticipated consequences as well. For example, rabid nationalism can be highly dysfunctional in a world of proliferating nuclear arms.
- **Postulate of functional indispensability-** It states that all standardized aspects of society are functionally necessary for society. No other structures and functions could work quite as well as those that are currently found within society. Merton's criticism was that various structural and **functional alternatives** are found within society. For example, family's function of socialization of children can be done by crèche.



Relevance of functional paradigm

- Early structural functionalists tended to focus almost entirely on the functions of one social structure or institution for another. Merton developed the idea of a dysfunction to clear ideological bias
- He classified functions as manifest and latent functions and introduced the concept of unanticipated consequences
- He is referred as neo- functionalist because he modified functionalism and promoted empiricism
- He emphasized on specifying the social context of the study as meaning of social items may change with change in context

Manifest and Latent Functions

Functions, according to Merton, are defined as those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system

Manifest functions are those that are intended and recognized. These are functions which people assume and expect the institutions to fulfil. For example, schools are expected to educate the children in the knowledge and skills that they need.

Latent functions are unrecognized and unintended functions. These are the unforeseen consequences of institutions. For example, schools not only educate young they also provide mass entertainment

Manifest functions	Latent Functions
They are intended	They are unintended
They are inspired by Weber and Parson's motivational orientation	They are inspired from Durkheim and Radcliff Brown
It comes under micro- perspective	It forms macro-perspective

Let us try answering some previous year questions based on manifest and latent functions

■ Persistence of corruption

Manifest functions can be overcoming red-tapism and increase in efficiency, time-efficiency in work done, accountability.

Latent functions can be compensating for low wages of bureaucrats, establishment of bureaucracy-politicians nexus.

■ Security of tenure for bureaucrats

Manifest functions can be job security, risk-taking attitude, increase in initiatives at work as no fear of job loss. Latent functions can be

Significance of Manifest and Latent Functions

- They provide an explanation for why irrational practices still continue in society
- Eliminate naive moral judgements from social research
- They broaden the understanding of the subject

Merton introduced one another concept called unanticipated consequences.

Unanticipated consequences

A latent function is one type of unanticipated consequence, one that is functional for the designated system. But there are two other types of unanticipated consequences - those that are dysfunctional for a designated system called **latent dysfunctions** and those which are irrelevant to the system which they affect neither functionally or dysfunctionally **called non-functional consequences**

Unanticipated consequences = Latent functions + Latent dysfunctions + Non functions

Let us understand this with the example of slavery-

- Latent function of slavery is it raised the social status of white super class.
- Latent Dysfunction of slavery is exploitation of slaves
- Non functions of slavery is the survival of remains from historical time which serves no purpose in contemporary society

Middle-Range Theories

Middle range theories of R.K Merton came as rejection of mega theory of Parsonian sociology. As the name suggests, they are the middle path between macro theories which were too ambitious and micro-theories which had little practical consequence.

Middle range theories bridges the gap between raw empiricism and abstract generalization

Advantages of Middle range theories

- Middle range theories are constructed on real time concerns rather than historical phenomenon on which ideal types are created
- It balances between facts and theory by limiting assumptions, specific hypothesis and empirical testability
- It has practical applicability as it study specific aspects of social reality

Merton's strain theory or Conformity and Deviance or 'social structure and Anomie'

Merton defines culture as the organized set of normative values governing behavior which is common to members of a designated society or group

Docial structure can be defined as the organized set of social relationships in which members of the society or group are variously implicated

Anomie occurs when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them

For example, in American society, the culture places great emphasis on material success. However, a person born into the lower socio-economic classes have thin chances of achieving economic success in the generally accepted way leading to deviant behavior like drug dealing

According to Merton's strain theory, deviance is most likely to occur when there is a discrepancy between a culturally prescribed goal (e.g., economic success) and a legitimate means of obtaining it (education). The resulting strain leads some people to engage in deviant behavior. Merton asserts that culture determines the things people should want (goals) and the legitimate ways (means) of obtaining these things.

Merton outlines five possible responses to the state of anomie-

Conformity- Members of society conform both to success goals and the normative means of reaching them. They strive for success by means of accepted channels.

Conformity by definition is not deviant behavior, the other four are

		Institutional Means		
		Accept	Reject	
Cultural Goals	Accept	Conformity	Innovation	
	Reject	Ritualism	<u>Retreatism</u>	
				Rebellion

- **Innovation**- This response rejects normative means of achieving success and turns to deviant means to attain success goals.
- For example, Teenagers may steal an expensive automobile. Prostitution, robbery, drug dealing, or other lucrative criminal behavior to be successful
- Scientists also come under this category. Innovations like facebook, instagram has also replaced traditional means of interaction like face to face meets
- **Ritualism**- Those who select this alternative are deviant because they make a fetish of the means and cling to them even though it means losing the sight of the goals.
- One example is the bureaucrat who continues to go about the daily routines of work while abandoning any idea of moving up the ladder
- **Retreatism**-It is a deviant response in which both the legitimate means and the approved goals are rejected. For example, alcoholics, drug addicts. Retreatists fail to be successful by either legitimate or illegitimate means, they do not even seek success
- **Rebellion**-It is a rejection of the success goals, the institutionalized means and their replacement by different goals and means.

Modes of Adaptation	Attitude to Goals	Attitude to means
Conformity	+	+
Innovation	+	-
Ritualism	-	+
Retreatism	-	-
Rebellion	-/+	-/+

Significance of Strain Theory

- Strain theory has been used most extensively in the study of juvenile delinquency. **Albert Cohen** uses the theory to explain the prevalence of gang delinquency among lower-class youth
- Its emphasis on social structure rather than on individuals make deviance a social phenomenon rather than a individual psychic
- Used neofunctionalism by highlighting dysfunctions
- Through the idea of anomie, Merton emerged as a critic of Davis and Moore's social stratification theory as they considered it inevitable and function for society

Criticism of strain theory

- It assumes a consensus in values, it assumes that everyone values success and defines success in economic terms.
- Strain theory does not seem to explain an individual's preference for one mode of adaptation over another. For instance, why do some people choose to conform rather than to rebel?
- Although, strain theory helps explain crime and delinquency, it offers no help in explaining other types of deviance such as mental illness
- **Walter Millar** argues that criminals are not always those who failed to gain legitimate opportunity structure. They may do deviant acts out of thrill i.e. to become smart-pick pocketing, boxing etc.
- **Howard Becker** in his *Labeling Theory* argues that society applies label in context of behaviour. The behaviour becomes deviants when others label it as such i.e. Give the dog a bad name and there are all chances that he will live up to that expectation.
- **John Bowlby**, in his study of 44 juvenile thieves, pointed out that they have habitual tendency to commit crime. Even if they are punished they continue to commit crime. He found that most juvenile delinquents lacked intimate relations with their mother in their childhood hence they became indifferent to pain & sufferings of others.

Reference Group

Reference group theory was first given by **Herbert Hyman** in his book *The Psychology of Status*. He founded that individuals imitate some of their superiors in order to enhance their social status. According to Merton, reference groups are groups people refer to evaluate themselves and to acquire attitudes, values, beliefs, and norms of the referred group. Reference groups may include families, teachers, college classmates, student government leaders etc

Characteristics of reference group

- Reference groups influence self-esteem and behavior. For instance, because of the imagined reaction by reference groups such as parents and teachers, a student is motivated to study
- A person may have a reference group without being a member, he/she may only aspire to be a member

- Reference groups need not be positive. Observing the behavior of a group you dislike may reinforce a preference for contrary ways of acting, feeling, and behaving. For example, a violent gang may provide a blueprint for behavior to avoid. Reference group may emerge out of sense of relative deprivation. One's own group can be a reference group to individual.

Relative Deprivation- It is lack of resources to sustain the diet, life style, activities and amenities that an individual or group are accustomed to that are widely encouraged or approved in the society to which they belong. For example, Non- English speakers in an English medium school

Self-fulfilling prophecy- When an expectation leads to behavior that then causes the expectation to become a reality. For example, if two nations are convinced they are going to war, they may engage in hostile interaction that actually leads to war. Similarly, if members of a minority are constantly treated as if they are less intelligent than the majority, the minority members may eventually accept this limitation.

Anticipatory socialization

Merton speaks of anticipatory socialization in the context of non-membership reference groups. It is a process facilitated by social interactions in which non- group members learn to take on the values, life-styles and standards of groups that they aspire to join. It is done to ease their entry in the group and help them interact competently once they have been accepted by it.

M N Srinivas's concept of Sanskritization also states the same where people follow the rituals and life style of other castes to enhance their status in society.

Significance of Anticipatory socialization

Merton speaks of the possibility of functional consequences of anticipatory socialization, he, however, does not fail to see its dysfunctional consequences.

Functional consequence is social mobility, however, dysfunction can be rejection from their own group. Also, anticipatory socialization is functional for the individual only within a relatively open social structure providing for mobility

Steps to be a member of reference group

- Identification of reference group
- Gathering information about it
- Acceptance of values and culture of reference group ie internalization
- Resolution of role conflict within one's own group
- Entry into reference group
- Resolution of conflict within reference group
- Assimilation into reference group

Significance of reference groups

- It ensures social mobility in the system
- It serves as a guideline for future course of action
- Reference group theory has potential to weaken group conformity and increases the chances of marginalization

Criticism of reference groups

Reference group theory was already popular in social psychology as a concept of role model and Merton is accused of having nothing new to offer
