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THEORY OF STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONALISM- R. K. MERTON

Robert King Merton has been widely recognised as one of the leading figures in the 20th century American sociologist. He has made an important contribution to the discipline by successfully combining theory and research. He has a wide range of sociological interest among which –sociology of science, sociology of profession, sociological theory and sociology of mass communications- are very significant.

Robert K. Merton's signal contribution to functionalism lies in his clarification and codification of functional analysis.

Specifically, Merton:

1. strips functionalism bare of the unexamined and insupportable assumptions of many of its practitioners,
2. broadens the analysis to incorporate change as well as stability,
3. makes critical distinctions between functions and personal motives,

4. develops a descriptive protocol for functional analysis to guide the analyst in social observations, and
5. Engages in the functional analysis of a variety of sociocultural phenomena to demonstrate the utility of the perspective.

One assumption of traditional functionalism is that all widespread activities or items are functional for the entire system. Functional unity, Merton stated, cannot be assumed; at most it is an empirical question to be determined by social research. Further, it is possible for some social or cultural items to have functions for some groups within a social system and not for others. Instead, Merton offered a “provisional assumption” that widespread and persisting sociocultural forms have a “net balance” of positive over negative consequences. A second assumption of traditional functionalism is that all such prevalent activities and cultural elements have sociological functions and are therefore necessary for the maintenance of that system. Sociocultural systems may well have functional needs or prerequisites, Merton asserted, but these needs may be met by a diversity of forms.

One of the charges hurled against functional analysis in the 1940s and 1950s, and still echoed today, is that functionalism is an inherently conservative perspective devoted to preserving the status quo. Merton suggested that this charge is due to the fact that analysts, chiefly in anthropology, have

adopted these postulates that are untenable and unnecessary to the functional orientation. To offset the focus on stability of traditional functionalism, Merton introduced the concept of “dysfunction.” Whereas functions contribute to the adjustment of the system, dysfunctions are those consequences that lead to instability and ultimately change. The analyst must recognize, Merton asserted, that institutional structures and cultural elements are interrelated and mutually supporting, and that the dominant orientation of sociocultural systems is to stability. “As we survey the course of history, it seems reasonably clear that all major social structures have in due course been cumulatively modified or abruptly terminated. In either event, they have not been eternally fixed and unyielding to change”

Merton insisted that social structures can only be analysed in terms of both statics (stability) and dynamics (change). The concept of dysfunction allows functional theory to focus on change. The concept of dysfunction is based on tension, strain, or contradictions within component elements of sociocultural systems. Dysfunctional elements create pressures for change within the system. Social mechanisms within the system, including the interrelation and predominantly mutually supporting elements of the system, operate to keep these strains in check, attempting to limit or minimize change of the social structure. However, such mechanisms are not always effective, and the accumulation of stress and resulting conflict often cause systemic change. One of the primary goals of functional analysis is to identify these dysfunctions and examine how they are contained or

reduced in the sociocultural system as well as how they sometimes cause systemic or fundamental change.

“Functions are those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and dysfunctions, those observed consequences which lessen adaptation or adjustment of the system.” Motive, on the other hand, is the subjective orientation of the actor engaged in the behaviour. The failure to distinguish between functions and motives is one of the chief sources of confusion for students of functionalism. The observer Merton is implicitly referring to is the social scientist.

The descriptive protocol recommended by Merton consists of four postulates. First, the analyst should make a systematic account of the pattern of behaviour of interest as well as the people participating in the behaviour. This account should include a detailed description of the social status of participants and onlookers as well as the types and rates of their interactions. Merton, always concerned with the relationships between theory and methods, attempted to summarize the types of data needed to be collected to perform functional analysis. What types of data need to be included in observations, and what types of data can be safely excluded? These descriptions, Merton claimed, go a long way toward suggesting functional interpretations. The second item of the descriptive protocol calls for the analyst to explore other possible patterns, perhaps those of other sociocultural systems that represent alternative ways of dealing with the problem under study. For example, Merton pointed out that the “romantic love complex” as the basis for American marriage excludes other patterns for choice of

mates such as parental selection or marriage as an economic alliance. By comparing the American pattern to these other cultural forms, the analyst often can tease out the different structural positions that benefit (functions) or are hurt by (dysfunctions) the cultural form under analysis.

The third item in the protocol is to describe the various meanings that the pattern of behaviour has for the various participants and members of the group. Such meanings often give the analyst clues as to the social functions of these sociocultural items. Such meanings often give the analyst clues as to the social functions of these sociocultural items.

The fourth protocol is for the analyst to give account of the motivations of the people who both conform or deviate from the pattern under study. Again, these personal motives should not be confused with social functions, but they do serve a purpose in functional analysis. "Inclusion of motives in the descriptive account helps explain the psychological functions sub served by the pattern and often proves suggestive with respect to the social functions".

As part of his functionalist perspectives on society, Merton took a close look at social actions and their effects and found that manifest functions could be defined very specifically as the beneficial effects of conscious and deliberate actions. Manifest functions stem from all manner of social actions but are most commonly discussed as outcomes of the work of social institutions like family, religion, education, and the media, and as the product of social policies, laws, rules, and norms.

Take, for example, the social institution of education. The conscious and deliberate intention of the institution is to produce educated young people who understand their world and its history and who have the knowledge and practical skills to be productive members of society. Similarly, the conscious and deliberate intention of the institution of media is to inform the public of important news and events so that they can play an active role in democracy.

Manifest and Latent Function

While manifest functions are consciously and deliberately intended to produce beneficial outcomes, latent functions are neither conscious nor deliberate but also produce benefits. They are, in effect, unintended positive consequences.

Continuing with the examples given above, sociologists recognize that social institutions produce latent functions in addition to manifest functions. Latent functions of the institution of education include the formation of friendships among students who matriculate at the same school; the provision of entertainment and socializing opportunities via school dances, sporting events, and talent shows; and feeding poor students lunch (and breakfast, in some cases) when they would otherwise go hungry.

The first two in this list perform the latent function of fostering and reinforcing social ties, group identity, and a sense of belonging, which are very important aspects of a healthy and functional society. The third performs the latent function of redistributing resources in society to help alleviate the poverty experienced by many.

Concept of Dysfunction

The term dysfunction refers to “any social activity seen as making a negative contribution to the maintenance of effective working of a functioning social system”

Merton in his functional analysis makes a distinction between ‘function’ and ‘dysfunction’ depending upon their consequences. Thus according to Merton “consequences that interfere with the system and its values are called dysfunctional while those that contribute are called function”

As Merton says functions increase the adaptation and adjustment. The consequences of function lead towards harmony and adjustment whereas the consequences of dysfunctions lead towards disintegration and maladjustment. Aspects of systems often have both functional and dysfunctional consequences. Divorce, for example, often has the dysfunctional consequence of interfering with family members’ material needs, but it also can have the functional consequence of providing a solution to destructive conditions such as family violence.

Merton's version of functionalism differs from other arguments. "Like Durkheim, Merton argues that deviance and crime are "normal" aspects of society, but he does not argue that crime is required to generate solidarity or to achieve social progress. Instead, Merton suggests that there is something about American social structure here, its distribution of wealth and opportunity that requires crime to

maintain society's very stability in the face of structural inequality.

"Picturing society like a vast machine, Merton argues that a society should best be considered as a cross between the cultural "goals" of a society what it holds its members should strive for and the "means" that are believed, legally or morally, to be legitimate ways that individuals should attain these goals. In a ideally organized society, the means will be available to deliver all of its members to their goals."

Merton also noted that there may be functional alternatives to the institutions and structures currently fulfilling the functions of society. This means that the institutions that currently exist are not indispensable to society. Merton states "just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same functions be diversely fulfilled by alternative items. This notion of functional alternatives is important because it reduces the tendency of functionalism to imply approval of the status quo.

CONCLUSION:

As further clarification of functional theory, Merton pointed out that a structure may be dysfunctional for the system as a whole yet may continue to exist. One might make a good case that discrimination against blacks, females, and other minority groups is dysfunctional for society, yet it continues to exist because it is functional for a part of the social system; for example, discrimination against females is generally functional for males. However, these forms of discrimination are not without some dysfunctions, even for the group for which they are functional. Males do suffer from their

discrimination against females. One could argue that these forms of discrimination adversely affect those who discriminate by keeping vast numbers of people underproductive and by increasing the likelihood of social conflict.