

By Frank W. Elwell

ROBERT K. MERTON'S FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

NOTE:

This presentation is based on the theories of Robert King Merton as presented in his *books* listed in the bibliography. A complete summary of his and other macro-social theories can be found in [Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems](#), by Frank W. Elwell. If you would like to receive a .pdf file of the chapter on Merton, please write me at felwell@rsu.edu and put Merton.pdf in the subject line.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

Robert King Merton (1910-2003) is a self-styled “Durkheimian,” writing very much in the functionalist tradition.



FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

In conceiving of society as a system it becomes natural to see it, like other systems, as composed of parts that are interrelated and whose operations have consequences for the system as a whole.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

The functional orientation has long been implicit in biology and physiology, as well as in the social sciences of anthropology, economics, and sociology. Social scientists as diverse as Malthus, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber have engaged in describing the interrelationships between social phenomena.

MERTON'S CONTRIBUTIONS:

Merton's signal contribution to functionalism lies in his clarification and codification of functional analysis, Specifically, he:

1. Strips bare the unexamined 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. Engages in analysis of a variety of sociocultural phenomena to demonstrate the utility of the perspective.

FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

One of the charges hurled against functional analysis in the 1940s and 50s and still echoed today, is that functional analysis is an inherently conservative perspective devoted to preserving the status quo. Merton suggested that this charge is due to the fact that analysts have adopted three postulates that are untenable and unnecessary to the functional orientation.

UNTENABLE FUNCTIONAL HYPOTHESES:

- × These postulates are:
 - + That all widespread activities are functional for the entire sociocultural system.
 - + That all such prevalent activities have sociological functions.
 - + That the items are therefore necessary for the maintenance of that social system.

FUNCTIONAL FALLACIES

Merton examined each of these postulates in turn and found them inconsistent with logic and observation.

FUNCTIONAL UNITY FALLACY

This may well be tenable in social anthropology, in which the analyst is chiefly concerned with highly integrated, homogeneous, non-literate societies. It clearly does not hold for more complex heterogeneous societies. Functional unity cannot be assumed; at most it is an empirical question.

FUNCTIONAL UNITY FALLACY

It is possible for some social or cultural items to have functions for some groups within a sociocultural system and not for others. Therefore, the analyst must clearly delineate the group or groups for which a given sociocultural item is functional. Such items often have diverse consequences—positive and negative—on various groups as well as on the total sociocultural system.

VITAL FUNCTION FALLACY

Merton found the second postulate, that all widespread items of the system perform vital functions for that system, equally invalid. Although widespread sociocultural forms may be functional for the society as a whole, it is a problem for investigation, it cannot be assumed.

VITAL FUNCTION FALLACY

Merton instead offered a “provisional assumption” that widespread and persisting sociocultural forms have a “net balance” of positive over negative consequences. This net balance will hold either for society as a whole or for elite groups within the society.

VITAL FUNCTION FALLACY

Here Merton is pointing out that there are elites within society who have the ability to coerce or manipulate others, and that these power differentials lead to practices that benefit elites and may well have negative consequences for other groups within society or even for the total sociocultural system.

INDISPENSABILITY FALLACY

The final postulate of the indispensability of cultural items for the maintenance of the sociocultural system is also problematic. Sociocultural systems may well have functional prerequisites, Merton asserted, but these needs may be met by a diversity of items.

INDISPENSABILITY FALLACY

Merton asserted that “Just as the same item may have multiple functions, so may the same function be diversely fulfilled by alternative items.” In other words, there are a variety of ways to fulfill any function. Although these ways are not limitless, no single social institution, cultural form, or widespread practice is indispensable, there is a range of “functional alternatives or substitutes.

UNTENABLE FUNCTIONAL HYPOTHESES

The unexamined use of these postulates, singly or combined, has give rise to the charge that functional analysis is a conservative perspective adopted by social scientists committed to the current social order. But Merton admitted another reason that the conservative label seems apt for the traditional functional perspective: traditional functionalism seems almost wholly focused on social stability rather than change.

INCORPORATING CHANGE

A focus on stability, Merton maintained, will give the analyst a conservative orientation. A focus on change alone will lead the analyst toward a radical orientation. Functionalism in and of itself, Merton claimed, is neither. However, traditional practitioners, working with the limited concept of function alone, consequently tend to focus on stability.

INCORPORATING CHANGE

To offset this focus, 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.

INCORPORATING 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 system is to stability. However, to recognize this is not to give affirmation to all elements of the status quo. Change is also very much a part of sociocultural systems.

INCORPORATING CHANGE

“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” (1948/1968, p. 95).

DYSFUNCTION

The concept of dysfunction allows functional theory to focus on change. It is based on tension, strain, or contradictions within component elements of sociocultural systems. Dysfunctional elements create pressures for change within the system.

DYSFUNCTION

Sociocultural elements of practices may be functional for some groups and dysfunctional for others, which often produces conflict within the system. Examining both functions and dysfunctions causes the analyst to focus on the range of units (people, groups, as well as the total society) which the item impacts.

DYSFUNCTION

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.

DYSFUNCTION

One of the primary goals of a 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 AND MOTIVES

The failure to distinguish between function and motives is one of the chief sources of confusion for students of functionalism. Functions are observed consequences which cause adjustment within a social system. Motive, on the other hand, is the subjective orientation of the actor engaged in behavior. The two are often (though not always) very different.

MANIFEST & LATENT FUNCTIONS

“Manifest functions are those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system that are intended and recognized by the participants of the system; Latent functions, correlatively, being those which are neither intended nor recognized” (1948/1968, p. 105).

MANIFEST & LATENT FUNCTIONS

With the addition of these two terms, as well as the term “dysfunction,” the functional analyst is equipped to explore the critically important area of the unintended consequences of social action.

MANIFEST & LATENT FUNCTIONS

One of the significant advantages of the distinction is that it aids in the identification and explanation of seemingly irrational social behavior. Behavior such as the Hopi ceremonials to bring rain, or the Hindu worship of cows are, on the surface, seemingly irrational behaviors that bear little relationship to their avowed purpose.

MANIFEST & LATENT FUNCTIONS

Consequently, outsiders tend to label such behavior as mere “superstition” or “primitive,” although they may well serve many latent functions for specific groups or for the entire society. The persistence of these seemingly irrational behaviors may well lie with these latent functions rather than in the manifest functions that people cite as their primary motivation.

MANIFEST & LATENT FUNCTIONS

Merton illustrated this point by discussing the latent functions fulfilled by the Hopi rain dance. Merton pointed out that such ceremonials are essential for the expression of group sentiment. They are a basic source of group unity. This latent function is far from the minds of the Hopi participating in the ceremony, yet this function is important in understanding the persistence of the ceremony as a social form.

MANIFEST & LATENT FUNCTIONS

Merton went on to suggest that it is through the focus on latent functions that sociologists can make their distinctive contributions to understanding human societies. The exploration of latent functions can point the analysis toward theoretically important issues, can advance our knowledge of sociocultural systems.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

Of the various contributions to social thought by Merton, perhaps the best known has been his considerations of the nature of deviant behavior, Merton is concerned with more than merely stating a truism that deviants are the sorry products of the society that spawned them. Rather, he is interested in specifying the process whereby deviant action is generated within a social structure.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

Rather than view deviant behavior as the product of abnormal personalities, Merton is concerned with the extent to which it is the result of the social structure.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

In his approach to this problem Merton strips social structure down to two elemental conditions that hold for any society. He makes a distinction between the goals of a culture and the means the culture provides for achieving those goals.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

By making these distinctions Merton is attempting to locate the social conditions that increase the likelihood of getting one kind of behavior over the other.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

American culture, for example, places great emphasis on the value of individual attainment of success. At the same time, the means of achieving success are unevenly distributed among the population, Merton is concerned here with the problem of how people adapt to society and the ways in which the structural feature of society affect the form which adaptations take.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

Merton claims that in those social circumstances where social goals are highly valued and the means for obtaining the goals are not as highly valued, the likelihood of innovation is increased. Criminal behavior is likely in a society which places great emphasis on success and wealth and does not emphasize the value of legitimate means for obtaining these goals.

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

Merton recognizes that culturally held values have a strong effect on individual behavior. A culture that values individual initiative and innovation, following rules and established procedures, will be populated by such individuals. A society that places high value on consumption and leisure will be populated by...

DEVIANT BEHAVIOR

Modes of adaptation: Cultural goals Inst.

means

1. Conformity	+	+
2. Innovation	+	-
3. Ritualism	-	+
4. Retreatism	-	-
5. Rebellion	<u>+</u>	<u>+</u>

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