

SOCIOLOGICAL THINKERS -

ROBERT K MERTON

Merton is an American Sociologist, a one-time student and famous critic of Talcott Parsons. Among the wide range of ideas to which he contributed, the important ones are relating to **THE NATURE OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND A RECODIFICATION OF THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH**.

Most of his writings have been in essay form. An important compilation of these essays is '**THE SOCIAL THEORY AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE**'. He was a distinguished sociologist perhaps best known for having coined the phrase "**self-fulfilling prophecy**." He also coined many other phrases that have gone into everyday use, such as "role model" and "unintended consequences". He was heavily influenced by Pitrim Sorokin who tried to balance large-scale theorizing with a strong interest in empirical research and statistical studies. This and Paul Lazarsfeld influenced Merton to occupy himself with middle-range theories.

Merton launched a critique of Parson's functional strategy or building sociological theory. At the heart of his criticism was Merton's contention that Parson's concern for developing an all-encompassing system of concepts would prove both futile and sterile. For Merton such grand theoretical schemes are premature, since the theoretical and empirical groundwork necessary for their completion had not been performed. In the absence of these foundations what passes for sociological theory in Merton's view consists of general orientation towards data, suggesting types of variable which sociologists must somehow take into account **rather than** clearly formulated statements of relationships between specified variables.

According to Merton, **Sociology, in the present state of its development, needs theories of the Middle Range**. such theories would be grounded in empirical data and at the same time should use concepts which are clearly defined and operationalized. middle range theories are so formulated that specific and verifiable hypothesis can be deduced from these theories and can be subjected to **empirical verification**.

Further, Merton suggested that the **functional approach** would be utilized in formulating the theories of middle range. Thus, the functional approach for Merton was primarily a method for sociological research in order to build theories.

Merton presented the steps involved in functional approach in the form of a systematic arrangement known as the **functional paradigm**.

THEORIES OF THE MIDDLE RANGE:

theory and (iv) Conflict theory

1. Anomie theory: Anomie according to Merton

Anomie refers to a social and cultural condition in which there is either conflict of norms or ambivalent orientation towards norms. The credit for bringing out the implications of anomie for a general theory of deviant behavior goes to the American sociologist, Robert K. Merton (1968). He aimed at showing how some social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in the society, to engage in non-conforming rather than conforming conduct. Merton attempted to specify the social and cultural situations which generate varying rates and types of deviant behaviors in different social structures.

He identified two important elements of social and cultural structures:

- **Culturally prescribed goals:** These culturally prescribed goals are held out as legitimate objectives, for all the members of the society. The members are supposed to strive for these objectives.
- **Actual structures:** provide the accepted modes or ways of reaching these goals. They are normatively controlled means to pursue the ends. It also depends upon what Merton calls, **Opportunity structure in society**. As these opportunities are unequally distributed there is unequal access to legal means to achieve goals.

Thus, cultural goals are held out equally for all where institutional means to achieve them are not equally available. This differential access to legitimate means and opportunities to achieve goals results in strain, namely, a sense of frustration and injustice. Deviant behavior can be seen as a symptom of this strain. When people are unable to realize the culturally prescribed aspirations, through socially structured avenues which are not equally available to them, they may adopt alternative, illegitimate means to achieve them.

Thus, Merton propounds that deviance is present in so called normal people and is a result of mismatch between culturally prescribed goals and means. The **term anomie**, derived from Émile Durkheim, for Merton means a discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means available for reaching them.

Merton believes that all subscribe to the American Dream, but the ways in which people go about obtaining the Dream are not the same because not everyone has the same opportunities and advantages as the next person