Review Article

The Development of Sociological Thought: A Critical Review of Robert K. Merton's Social Theory and Social Structure

Momna Rani(ID)*

Department of Sociology, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203, USA.

*Email: Momna.rani@unt.edu

Abstract

This review critically examines Robert K. Merton's Social Theory and Social Structure, with a special emphasis on the interaction of social structures and the evolution of sociological theory. Merton highlights the frequent miscommunication between sociological concepts and historical contexts, which contributes to misunderstandings about how sociological knowledge evolves over time. He calls for a deeper understanding of the role played by historians and sociologists in recording scientific progress, calling for the combined use of historical and observational sources to trace the development of sociological theories. This review examines Merton's critique of sociology's overdependence on publicly records, which often obscure the realities of scientific inquiry, and his support for middle-range theories as an intermediate between grand theoretical systems and practical hypotheses. Merton offers a framework for comprehending the complex nature of social phenomena, and their impact on society, emphasizing concepts such as manifest and latent functions, functional analysis, and middle-range theories that bridge empirical research with theoretical inquiry. This analysis is based on a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach, based in an in-depth reading and critical synthesis of theoretical literature. The author's work supports contemporary sociologists to draw on both observational and historical evidence with the goal of advancing the discipline. Merton's framework, specifically his ideas of manifest and latent functions and middle-range theories, continues to shape the way in which contemporary sociologists understand empirical research and theoretical analysis.

Keywords

Sociological Theory, Middle-Range Theories, Functional Analysis, Manifest and Latent Functions, Social Structure.

Review

Expanding on the abstract the review, explores into the fundamental theoretical arguments of Merton and the resulting implications for sociological inquiry. The book Social Theory and Social Structure by Robert K. Merton continues to retain its reputation as an important book in the discipline of sociology because of its creative perspectives on the development of theory and scientific knowledge. In the context of current sociological research, this review examines Merton's accomplishments. The paper begins with an overview of Merton and then examines his critique of narratives about history in the field of sociology his theory based on various discoveries, and his advocacy for middle-range theories. The review finishes by thinking the limitations and contemporary relevance of Merton's work

In this section of the book, Merton (1968) examined the disparities between the social structures and the history of sociological thoughts in this section of the book. He argued that the history and sociological thoughts were frequently conflated by sociologists, which caused a misconstruction of the development of sociological theory. Merton (1968) examines the complex development of sociological ideas, including their links to social backgrounds, the conditions of theorists, their development within the discipline, and their adaptation over time. Also, their interaction with shifts in the larger culture and social structure are all points that the author indicates realistic histories of sociological theory should investigate. However, Merton (1968) argues that sociologists often merge critical evaluations of previous theories with the historical accounts of prominent theorists, which can lead to methodological shortcomings. The author also discusses how the roles of sociologists and scientific historians are changing, with sociologists tracking behind in their study of the history of ideas, while historians use the social sciences for theoretical insights. Merton (1968) condenses the themes of this section into three key areas.

1. These include the reversal of roles between sociologists and historians in documenting the history of science.
2. The drawbacks of understanding scientific advancement solely using published documents, and the evolution of sociological practices to include more historical and empirical sources.
3. The roles of historians and sociologists in examining the history of science have substantially shifted in recent times.

Establishing on this, Merton examined how methodological approaches to recording advances in science have changed. Merton (1968) narrated that history methods originally developed by sociologists are being used more and more by historians to record the experiences and perspectives of prominent individuals in academic domains. Studies like Charles Weiner's nuclear physics research at the American Institute of Physics and Allan Nevins' work at Columbia University highlight aspects of scientific progress often omitted from public records. However, this method falls short of providing a complete picture of the development of scientific theory and practice (Marx, Weber, and Durkheim). Sociologists, on the other hand, have historically concentrated on examining published theoretical works, such as those by Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.

Merton (1968) explained the problem with sociology's dependence on public documents is that they frequently fail to precisely reflect the processes and circumstances that go into scientific research. In the past, scientists have often published their results in a way that makes sense, leaving out the logical leaps, mistakes, and discoveries that occur during the study. Scholars like Leibniz and Bacon noted that scientific information is rarely presented in the same order as it develops, bringing attention to this disproportion (Bacon, 1863; Leibniz, 1714). This has been confirmed by more recent researchers such as Moles, who have noted that the full complexity of research methods is frequently ignored in mainstream scientific literature (Moles, 1957).

Merton (1968) stated that to fully capture the evolution of sociological theories and practices, there is a development of understanding in the field of sociology that more historical and empirical sources must be included. The increasing use of sources such as scientific notebooks, correspondence, and autobiographies to comprehend the background and development of sociological concepts is revealing this change (Cooley; Marx and Engels; Ross and Ward). "A more nuanced view of the history of sociology and its methodology is shown by the founding of journals such as the Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences and programs that concentrate on the early origins of empirical social research" (Glazer, 1959).

Merton (1968) demonstrates for historians of ideas, the investigation of continuities and discontinuities in sociological thought poses a tough balancing act. They face the risk of either missing continuity when it exists or emphasizing it when it doesn't. Scientists and other historians tend to prefer a story of gradual advances in knowledge, sometimes laced with gaps from missing data. This perspective, however, ignores the common manifestation of separate multiple findings, implying an intellectual continuity that the subsequent discoverers were unaware of (Merton, 1961). According to Merton ("Singletons and multiples in scientific discovery"), such discoveries which range from instantaneous to rediscoveries highlight the complex relationships between concepts over time, with subsequent discoveries frequently being blind to their historical ancestors (Merton, 1968).

This challenge becomes evident, when one considering the difficulty of distinguishing to original concepts from rediscoveries in the social sciences. Further supporting this argument, Merton (1968) illustrates that in the social sciences, it is especially difficult to distinguish between discoveries or concepts that are original and those that are not. There is disagreement over the amount of overlap necessary to prove "identity" between notions that were separately developed. The line distinguishing a unique discovery from a discovery can become blurry even in exact domains such as mathematics, as demonstrated by the concurrent discoveries in non-Euclidean geometry by Bolyai and Lobachevsky (Petrovievics, 1929). The difficulty increases in the social sciences since formulations are frequently less exact, making it difficult to

distinguish between rediscoveries, anticipations, and adumbrations (early or vague outlines of later-developed ideas) (Kuhn, 1965).

Merton's (1968) discussion of several independent discoveries are highlighted by the practice of recognizing earlier identical work by later discoverers, which is observed across various scientific domains. This acknowledgment, which spans from small details to important theories, exemplifies how complex and overlapping intellectual and scientific advancement is. Due to its intricacy, it is frequently necessary to distinguish between rediscoveries and anticipations to fully comprehend the relationship between earlier and later formulations. Such discernment highlights how scientific knowledge is ever evolving, with the line separating fresh discovery from rediscovery not always evident (Merton, 1968).

Merton (1968) stated that historians who study sociological theory frequently struggle to differentiate between real historical continuities and their superficial manifestations. In their contributions to this discussion, Sigmund Freud and Augustus de Morgan emphasized the distinction between the serious pursuit of an idea and the casual ideation that preceded many significant scientific discoveries (De Morgan, 1914; Freud, 1914). Nevertheless, historians have been known to overstate assertions of continuity by failing to recognize the important differences between pre discoveries, anticipations, and adumbrations. Gordon Allport, for example, developed the concept of functional autonomy; although, Woodworth, Stern, and Tolman had earlier, but more limited concepts that did not substantially advance the idea as Allport did (Allport, 1937).

Merton (1968) stated the case of Cooley's looking-glass self and primary group concept further demonstrates how difficult it is to track the evolution of an idea. Cooley's (1909) articulation of the primary group had greater influence than other authors' (Freud, 1921) earlier or simultaneous mentions of the term. In a similar vein, Cooley's Looking Glass self-constitutes a major advancement in the theory of self and socialization even if it builds on older concepts from William James, James Mark Baldwin, and even Marx (Cooley, 1902). These examples demonstrate how ideas expand into more than just a set of related concepts; rather, they show how ideas evolve in a way that makes sense and strengthens the ideas of earlier formulations.

Merton (1968) explored difficulties historians encounter in distinguishing between genuine intellectual advancements and passing similarities highlighting the necessity of thorough investigation into the history of ideas. Rather than providing an authentic historical narrative, the inclination to interpret any likeness as an anticipation might result in a mythology of ideas. This is especially true in sociology, where the social and intellectual environment of different eras have shaped how ideas like the looking-glass self and the primary group are understood and valued throughout time (Cooley, 1909; Cooley, 1902). Thorstein Veblen and later sociologists' concept of "trained incapacity" serves as an example. This states the difficult challenge historians have in sorting out true intellectual advances from simple repetitions of existing ideas distinguishing between genuine pre discoveries, anticipation, and merely surface-level similarities are typically required for this endeavor (Merton, 1968).

Merton (1968) stated that Veblen's concept demonstrates how previous ideas, like Philip Hamerton's "mental refusals" or John Stuart Mill's understanding of experimental effects, can be seen as indications, but later works, like Veblen's, offer a unique development in sociological thought because of their breadth and depth (Veblen, 1873). This complexity is demonstrated by Pitirim A. Sorokin's extensive work, "Contemporary Sociological Theories" and "Sociological Theories of Today". Which at first presents sociology as a repetition of old-fashioned concepts before subsequently recognizing the unique contributions of contemporary sociologists (Sorokin ,1928; Sorokin, 1966). This change in Sorokin's viewpoint is indicative of a larger movement away from the simple idea of adumbrations and toward a more complex understanding of the continuity and advancement of sociological knowledge. It also shows how modern sociological concepts differ and build upon their historical roots (Merton, 1968).

Merton (1968) mentioned that because of its unique combination of historical respect for masterpieces found in the humanities and the forward-looking, progressive nature of the sciences, sociology stands apart from the other humanities and sciences (Weber, 1946). The humanities continue to engage directly and continuously with ancient works, but the sciences tend to see earlier contributions as stepping-stones to more recent knowledge, with students now surpassing the comprehension of earlier geniuses like Newton or Leibniz (Kessler, 1961). Between these two philosophies, sociologists frequently vacillate between a humanistic dedication to the basic texts of sociology and a scientific concentration on contemporary developments. This intermediate position is demonstrated by citation studies, which show that while a large percentage of references in the sociological literature point to more recent works. Furthermore, they also maintain a strong connection to classical works a pattern not seen in the humanities or physical sciences. Sociology's dual orientation, which combines the progressive accumulative approach of the sciences with a steadfast engagement with its basic texts and theories, represents its distinct place in the academic spectrum (Merton, 1968).

In contrast to broad system-building efforts, Merton suggests middle-range theories as a pragmatic substitute for navigating sociological research. Middle-range theories, as defined by Merton, are frameworks that lie between minor working hypotheses and all-encompassing grand theories. These theories aim to guide empirical research while remaining theoretically grounded (Merton, 1968) The study of theory in sociology often conflicts with the wide range of its definitions, from small theories to large logical frameworks. Merton introduces the concept of middle-range theories, which bridge the gap between grand theoretical frameworks and empirically testable hypotheses. These theories, such as role-set theory and reference group theory, provide a structured yet flexible approach to sociological inquiry. The relevance of middle-range theories, which act as a bridge between common practical hypotheses and broader theoretical systems is emphasized by Merton (1968) that these theories, which include the theories of role-sets and reference groups offer exact empirically verifiable frameworks for understanding specific aspects of social phenomena. One hypothesis that challenges common sense is the theory of reference groups and relative deprivation, which was created by Hyman and Stouffer after ideas by Mead, James, and Baldwin. It suggests that people's assessments of themselves are impacted by comparisons with others (Conant, 1947). In the same way, the theory of role sets deviates from conventional perspectives on role and social status by suggesting that every social status entails a wide range of related responsibilities, which may cause conflicts and demand for the adoption of methods for role integration (Merton, 1968). Despite not coming from full explanations of social systems, these intermediate theories fit with several broad sociological frameworks, emphasizing sociology's unique place between the sciences and humanities (Merton, 1968).

Merton (1968) explored in sociology, that the search for middle-range ideas is very different from the search for a thorough, coherent theory. Early sociologists like Comte and Spencer frequently explored whole systems, influenced by the intellectual history of building comprehensive systems, as demonstrated in the writings of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel (Merz, 1904). Merton (1968) stated that the method, like that of the medical professional system-builders, has moved to the creation of more focused, fact-based theories. In contrast to physics, which is composed of a variety of specialized theories rather than a single cohesive system (Einstein, 1960), sociology is still in the process of developing a full framework that can account for all its many phenomena. Although there has been some progress in the development of ideas, sociologists such as Parsons note that the field mostly consists of broad orientations and conceptions, with relatively few verified theories and theorems (Parsons, 1950). Developing middle-range theory such as tackling facets of social phenomena, such as deviant conduct or social mobility, should be the primary emphasis instead of establishing a comprehensive sociological framework right away. Merton (1968) contends that social instability and social change are products of structural dysfunction in society. This highlights the importance of studying social structures through both static and dynamic lenses to understand the delicate equilibrium between change and stability. Merton's analysis of the American Dream, Merton reveals a society that emphasizes success and the acceptable methods to achieve it. This strain between cultural ideals and the institutionalized means of people's availability leads to both creativity and deviation as people look for different ways to succeed. To prevent confirmation preconceptions in sociological studies, the author presents the idea of the unanticipated effects of social action and makes an argument for a distinct distinction between personal motives and objective results (Merton, 1968).

Merton (1968) explained the polarizing responses to the emphasis on middle-range theories in sociology are indicative of the various ways that sociologists approach their profession. This focus is frequently agreed upon by those conducting theoretically focused empirical research, who consider it as an extension of their current work philosophy. However, this focus is seen as a retreat from higher objectives by sociologists who are dedicated to the creation of a comprehensive sociological theory or the history of social thought. A third, ambivalent reaction recognizes the value of both moderate theories and the slow but steady advancement of more all-encompassing theories (Merton, 1968). Social conflict and stereotyping have resulted from this polarization, with general theorists seeing as unduly speculative and middle-range theorists as just descriptive. Merton (1968) explained this division is made worse by the rise of sociological publications, which makes sociologists more biased by encouraging them to read in particular ways. There is a limited place for impartial mediators in this dispute since it frequently devolves into a struggle for prestige rather than the search for the truth when it arises between equals in public. These polemics can cause cognitive problems and waste energy on pointless arguments, even though they may also have certain positive effects, such as correcting imbalances in sociological research. In sociological research, heterodoxy spurred by these kinds of confrontations might result in a greater variety of scientifically fruitful endeavors, even while there is a chance that they will become new orthodoxies (Weinberg, 1967).

Merton (1968) explained five vital functions of paradigms in sociology are the codification of theory and qualitative analysis: First, they serve as a notational tool, providing a condensed list of key ideas and how they relate to one another, which helps interpreters self-correct Second, by forcing new assumptions and concepts to be logically integrated or formally introduced, paradigms help prevent hidden assumptions and spontaneous hypotheses. Thirdly, they serve as a basic framework for the accumulation of theoretical interpretations, thereby assessing the strength of the paradigm.

Fourthly, by recommending cross-tabulations of important concepts, paradigms promote systematic study and make analysts aware of theoretical and empirical issues that they may have otherwise missed (Bensman and Vidich, 1960). Ultimately, they make sociological findings repeatable and verifiable by emulating the logical rigor of quantitative analysis in qualitative data analysis. Nonetheless, effort must be taken to ensure that paradigms remain flexible and subject to change to avoid becoming restrictive and changing from a field-glass to a blinder (Merton, 1968).

Merton (1968) stated functional analysis can be complicated by the frequent substitution of the term "function" and its synonyms, such as use, utility, purpose, motive, goal, aim, and consequences, in the field of sociology. This inconsistent use of language causes meanings to change, leading to questionable conclusions. For instance, terminology like purpose, function, and motive are used interchangeably in the sociology of crime, although they refer to various notions, such as the victim's or the state's explicit intentions, or the subjective expectations about the consequences of punishment. This contrasts with the objective sociological interpretation of function, which places more emphasis on observable outcomes than on personal preferences. Discussions on the roles of social structures like the family are a good place to start since they confuse the objective purposes of these institutions with subjective ones, such as love or other personal motivations. Limiting the usage of the term "function" and separating subjective dispositions from objective consequences in sociological interpretations are essential to ensuring clarity in functional analysis (Merton, 1968).

Prevailing Postulates in Functional Analysis

Merton (1968) explained three related but controversial postulates that have been adopted by functional analysis in anthropology, p.   first, that standardized social activities or cultural objects serve a functional purpose for the entire social or cultural system; second, that all these items serve sociological purposes; and third, that these objects are indispensable. The functional unity of society hypothesis, which holds that all facets of a social structure coexist peacefully and without ongoing conflict, is not always true and differs throughout societies. Merton (1968) illustrates that universal functionalism ignores the potential of non-functional or dysfunctional cultural elements in its theory that all cultural forms have positive functions. A single religious system is frequently associated with a better level of social integration in illiterate communities, which may be the source of this oversimplification. However, this is not always the case in more complicated literate societies with a diversity of possibly conflicting values. Because of the potential for varied outcomes for various groups within society, it is crucial for functional analysis to identify the units for whom a certain social or cultural item is functional.

Despite their apparent disparities, dialectical materialism and functional analysis in sociology have comparable ideological stances when it comes to studying social structures and development. Marxist philosophy is the foundation of dialectical materialism, which emphasizes the transitory nature of social states and sees them as necessary steps toward ultimate change and revolution. It recognizes the historical flexibility of societal forms, which are fundamentally critical and revolutionary. It also emphasizes the transience of social institutions and their fleeting existence. When it comes to acknowledging the dynamic and ever-changing character of social structures, functional analysis which is sometimes attacked for seeming to support the status quo agrees with dialectical materialism. Though their ideological interpretations of this process vary both viewpoints consider social structures as subject to ongoing development and eventual transformation. When used critically, functional analysis is ideologically neutral, concentrating on both the functions and dysfunctions of social systems. As a result, it may be used to uncover the forces that influence societal change and stability. It looks at how current systems either succeed or fail in meeting the demands of people or groups, which could result in social transformation and institutional collapse. Like dialectical materialism, this analytical technique offers a framework for comprehending the complex dynamics of societal history and transformation without necessarily implying a particular ideological stance. The concept of indispensability argues that specific cultural forms are essential for the function of society. The author explained the functional analysis that supports the status quo and applied it to all existing social structures (Merton, 1968).

According to Merton (1968), social functions satisfy the social and physical needs that allow a society to continue functioning and grow. He highlights the significance of particular social roles, norms, and processes in executing these duties. He brings attention to the concept of manifest and hidden functions, emphasizing the distinction between the unintended and unrecognized effects of social acts and their intended ones, demonstrating the complexity of social structures. The author's grasping the complex nature of social behaviors and their effects requires a grasp of the contrast between visible and latent functions in sociology. Manifest functions are the acknowledged and planned results of any social activity that help a particular unit a person, a group, or a society adapt or adjust. Conversely, latent functions are those unintended and unacknowledged consequences that also contribute to society's adjustment or adaptation. This distinction aids in avoiding the confusion that frequently occurs in the literature on sociology between objective consequences, or the actual outcomes of an action, and conscious motivations, or the reasoning behind a behavior. An advanced understanding of

social phenomena requires this kind of difference because it recognizes that social activities can have numerous levels of impact, both known and unseen and that these layers all contribute to the functioning of social systems. Therefore, understanding the wider significance of social behaviors within the context of society is just as important as simply seeing them in this conceptual framework. Merton (1968) explained Veblen's work that explores the distinction between the manifest and latent functions in the overall context of consumption. Manifest functions refer to direct reasons for purchasing goods such as cars for travel and food to stay alive. Latent functions included the hidden and deep reasons of consumption that symbolize social status and wealth. This review examines the implications of latent functions in social behavior and argues that there is a potential for behavior patterns if the latent functions are not hidden. This perceptive further raises the question of the evolution of norms in society when the underlying motives become transparent. The author further delves into the political machines that suggest by applying functional perspectives such as systems that are on the verge of criticism exits because they fulfill society's needs (latent functions). Although they conflict with the morals and laws of society still, they serve as an important part beyond manifest functions. (Merton, 1968). Merton's emphasis on the complexity of social systems and the unintended consequence of action remains highly relevant in analyzing contemporary phenomena such as social media behavior, institutional trust, and systemic inequality. Additionally, middle-range theories provide a flexible framework for studying emergent topics like digital sociology and global migration, where neither purely macro nor micro theories suffice.

Though Merton's work continues to be important, several scholars have criticized its limitations from various theoretical perspectives. While Merton's work offers valuable insights, some critics argue that his approach lacks sufficient attention to power dynamics and structural inequalities. For instance, Bourdieu's theory of habitus provides a more nuanced view of how social practices are embedded in power relations. Similarly, intersectional and postcolonial scholars have questioned the universality of Merton's functionalist lens, particularly in contexts outside the Western industrial world. Taken together all the given ideas, these discussions contribute to a recognition of Merton's lasting contributions and his significance for contemporary sociology.

In conclusion, Merton's (1968) analysis of the complexities of sociological theory, social structure, and dynamics of scientific knowledge altogether provides us with the framework to understand the development of sociology as a discipline. The author's assessment highlights inconsistencies present between social structure and the history of sociological theories highlights the need for a deep analysis of the evolution of sociological theories. Merton's assessment further highlights the importance of empirical and historical evidence in the development of sociology and the author challenges the traditional methods of theoretical analysis. The analysis and discussions on the role of historians and sociologists in the documentation of scientific progress, the limitation of relying solely on published scientific documentation and the importance of middle-range theories in bridging the gap between grand theories and practical hypothesis offers valuable output for contemporary sociological tradition.

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