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Robert K. Merton (1910-2003): A Biographical Sketch

- Born in South Philadelphia to working class, Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe.
 - o Rough childhood – member of local street game
 - o Performed magic tricks in neighborhood
 - o Changed name from previous “Meyer R. Schkolnick”
- Earned scholarship to Temple University
 - o Graduated with degree in sociology in 1931
 - o Earned doctorate in sociology from Harvard
 - Student of Talcott Parsons
- Developed “The Sociology of Science”
 - o Awarded National Medal of Science in 1994
- Wrote *On the Shoulders of Giants* in 1965
- 1941-2003 he was a professor of sociology at Columbia University.
 - o Mentored several students who became prominent in their own ways.

Intellectual Influences & Core Ideas

- Studied wide variety of subjects:
 - o Deviance, drug addiction, friendship formation, medical education, technology, media, and the history of science.
- Established connections between theory and research
- Drew inspiration from many theorists:
 - o Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, Marx, Bronislaw Malinowski, Znaniecki, Parsons, Sorokin
- Favored *Middle-Range Theory*
 - o Theories that “lie between the minor but necessary working hypotheses that evolve in abundance during day-to-day research and the all-inclusive systematic efforts to develop a unified theory that will explain

all the observed uniformities of social behavior, social organization, and social change" (356).

- Extended Parsons's research → emphasized that the components of the system of society may/may not be "in sync", thus leading unpredictability
- **Manifest Function** = overt/intended purpose of action
- **Latent Function** = implicit/unintended purpose
 - o Both in reference to Freudian psychology
 - o Ex: Hopi Rain dance
 - Manifest = produce rain
 - Latent = reaffirm group identity/solidarity/cohesion
- Emphasized that different parts of a system might be at odds with each other, meaning that even functional institutions/subsystems can also produce *dysfunctions/unintended consequences*.
- **Theory of Deviance**
 - o Explains variances in rates of deviance according to social structural location.
 - o Deviance = modes of action that do not follow dominant norms/values in a social group/society
 - o Predicted that *deviance occurs when there is a disconnect between the cultural and social realms*.
 - When values of a society are out of sync with the means available for achieving them.
- **Dysfunction**
 - o Elaborated on Durkheim's point that positive social institutions could have unintended negative consequences (such as economic boom leading to increase in suicides).
 - Also believed that negative social institutions could have unanticipated positive consequences.
 - o Ex → Body fighting off infection with fever
 - High fevers are dangerous – *dysfunctional*

- Therefore, social policies/norms/values/religions produce unintended consequences and dysfunctions.
- **Social Status & Role-Sets** = organized complex way within social structure
 - **Social Status** = position in a social system, with its distinctive array of designated rights and obligations.
 - The status of a role is not fixed, but changes in relation with the particular role-set it is compared to.
- Functionalists believe that certain policies/institutions can be dysfunctional for entire groups of people, but maintained because they are functional for the dominant/powerful social group/social system itself.

Merton's Theoretical Orientation

- Collective approach to order, but acknowledges the level of the individual
- Both rational/non-rational
 - Rational = Manifest Function
 - Institutionalized means for achieving goals.
 - Nonrational = Latent Function
 - Values, social status, role expectation, goals

Introduction to “Manifest and Latent Functions”

- Introduces both manifest and latent functions.
 - Focuses on consumer activity.
- Behind the purpose of buying goods to satisfy specific needs (manifest) is the latent function of “reaffirming social status”
 - Therefore buy goods not because they are superior, but because they are expensive.

“Manifest and Latent Functions” (1949) - Robert K. Merton

- Motive and function vary independently