

Transformations in Educational Research and the Functionalist Framework

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Functionalism was described by J. H. Turner as one of the most general and at the same time most significant perspectives of contemporary sociology. It is founded on organicist ideas which define the essence of social life in terms of analogous to biological life. Functionalism was fundamentally formed by the notion that social reality needed to be studied as a system, that the processes unfolding in this system could be understood only in the context of relationships among the elements of this system and, finally, that the social organism, as any other organism, exhibited internal integration tendencies. The early functionalist beliefs grounded on these assumptions were crucially re-worked by Robert Merton, becoming an attractive research perspective in social sciences which is particularly useful in the study of educational phenomena and processes.

Key words: *functionalism; educational research; social research*

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As the authors who write on functionalism overwhelmingly concur, the term itself continues to be ambiguous enough to serve as a moniker for an array of theoretical constructs and to be located in several different disciplines.¹ Consequently, functionalism can be applied in various fields of interest or rather to various aspects of reality. Suffice it to say that functionalism first emerged as a movement within 19th-century psychology, where it meant, generally speaking, the focus on the study of functions of consciousness as opposed to attempts at carrying out introspective analyses.² Subsequently, functionalist tendencies were on the rise in legal theory, where they involved a shift from analysing written legal documents to exploring “law in action.”³ Finally, functionalism most permanently

¹ Szacki, J. (1997). *History of Sociological Thought*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, p. 502pass; Sztompka, P. (1971). *Metoda funkcjonalna w socjologii i antropologii społecznej. Studium analityczne*. Wrocław-Warszawa, pp. 16–17.

² Jaroszewski, M. G. (1985). *Psychologia XX wieku*. Warszawa, p. 86.

³ Sztompka, P. (1971). *Metoda*, p.17.

and meaningfully came to the fore in social anthropology and sociology.⁴ In the latter, what is usually described as “sociological functionalism” has been portrayed by P. Sztompka in the following way: “No other movement in bourgeois sociology has mobilised so many minds in its defence.”⁵ Notably, as functionalism itself has vigorously evolved since it arose and consequently extended its sway over multiple academic disciplines, so the positions of sociologists who subscribe to functionalism have developed in such different directions that they now seem to belong to entirely different orientations.

Given this differentiation, to talk meaningfully of functionalism, we must first specify what particular iteration of functionalism we mean. Even though the movement is so multifarious that any attempt at framing it as a homogeneous, unified entity “generates glaringly oversimplified accounts of it,”⁶ it seems that it is not entirely impossible to analyse the underlying assumptions of functionalism jointly without running this risk of simplistic reductiveness. Sztompka points at this possibility, identifying three layers within functionalism:

1. the layer of theory,
2. the layer of the conceptual scheme and
3. the layer of methodology.

This division makes it possible to classify particular, more specific assumptions and, in this way, broadens the analytical perspective.

What I will focus on in sociological functionalism as a whole in this paper is only the first layer, that is, its theoretical tenets. In my analysis of R. Merton, however, I will outline selected aspects of the first layer and the related assumptions of the other two. Emphatically, my aim is not to offer a comprehensive analysis of Merton’s thought because what this chapter seeks to do is to highlight how Merton’s work is useful in and relevant to educational research rather to produce a complete and thorough account of his framework.

1. The Genesis of the Functional Theory

J. H. Turner counted functionalism among the most general and significant perspectives within contemporary sociology, alongside conflict theory, exchange theory and interactionism.⁷ The origins of functionalism date back to 19th-century

⁴ Benton, T. – Craib, I. (2003). *Filozofia nauk społecznych. Od pozytywizmu do postmodernizmu [Philosophy and Social Science: The Philosophical Foundations of Social Thought]*, trans. L. Rasiński. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, p. 68.

⁵ Sztompka, P. (1971). *Metoda*, p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ Turner, J. H. (1974). *The Structure of Sociological Theory*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, p. VII.

organicism as developed by A. Comte and H. Spencer, whose ideas about the essence of social life and in particular about its analogousness to biological life gave a thrust to the dissemination of three major premises towards the end of the 19th century. Namely:

- a/ Social reality should be examined as a system;
- b/ The processes that unfold in this system can be understood only in the context of relations among the elements of this system; and
- c/ Similarly to biological organisms, the social organism is partially isolated, which is borne out by its internal integration processes.

These three organicist presuppositions triggered and affected the rise of the first, early and most extreme notions productive of functionalist theory, i.e.:

- a/ Society is an isolated system and as such it has self-regulatory processes of its own, the objective of which is to achieve homeostasis.
- b/ For society to sustain itself, its basic needs and demands must be met.
- c/ Thus-conceived society can be adequately analysed in sociological terms by investigating the functions that its elements perform to satisfy the needs of entire society.
- d/ To meet the needs of the system, every society develops appropriate structures.

These notions were developed into anthropological functionalism in the work of A. R. Radcliff-Brown and B. Malinowski.

Because we rarely deal with situations (which are so convenient to the historian of ideas) where the most eminent representative of a given movement turns out to be its most typical representative as well,⁸ in my analysis of sociological functionalism below, I will limit myself only to those notions which are shared by most of its practitioners (in particular by T. Parsons and R. K. Merton).

- 1/ The fundamental and the most general pursuit of the functionalist school is “to interpret respective elements of social life in terms of their functions⁹ in maintaining the stability and equilibrium of the entire system.”¹⁰ Such a holistic take on the problems of social life paved the way for the novel application of the term “system” to describing societies. Specifically, the term was “generalised and relativised.”¹¹ The generalisation resulted in identifying a set of structural features or properties characteristic of any and all systems,

⁸ Szacki, J. (2002). *Historia myśli socjologicznej. Wydanie nowe*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 808.

⁹ Notably, modern functionalism holds that every system also contains dysfunctional elements whose influence on the system is harmful and whose existence cannot be explained by the needs of this system.

¹⁰ Bauman, Z. (1961). *Z zagadnień współczesnej socjologii amerykańskiej*. Warszawa, p. 143.

¹¹ Sztompka, P. (1971). Logika analizy funkcjonalnej w socjologii i antropologii społecznej. In *Metodologiczne problemy teorii socjologicznych*, ed. S. Nowak. Warszawa, p. 219.

a set which can be relied on as the basis for depicting social reality. The relativisation involved expanding the scope of problems or objects defined as the “system.” This extension happens on two planes. Firstly, besides society as a previously identified complete entity, other, smaller structures – such as a group or a collective – are taken into account and subsumed under the term. Secondly, the term “system” has also come to be used in conjunction with lower levels of organisation than society, such as culture, politics, economy, etc.

- 2/ Another general notion of sociological functionalism is referred to as “methodological sociology” by J. Szacki.¹² It involves the belief that the object of functionalist research is not to be found in individuals as such but in certain social facts to which the study of individuals’ behaviours is subordinated.
- 3/ The third premise says that there are functional demands of society which are defined broadly as everything that must be done and taken care of in every society if the society is to be maintained as a working, operational whole.¹³ In other words, for a society to go on existing, its particular elements must necessarily perform certain defined, inalienable functions which are a necessary condition for sustaining the preferred states within the system. Although the concept of functional requirements spawns considerable difficulties, as evinced by a plethora of catalogues of functional requirements marshalled by various authors, one of its best-known applications is the functional theory of stratification. It presupposes that (1) social differentiation is a regular and common condition of any society; and (2) social differentiation is necessary for every social system.
- 4/ These tenets produce another one: The natural state of any society is order, equilibrium or homeostasis. Individual elements of the social system are geared to achieving and maintaining this state – this is where their fundamental function lies. Even if dysfunctional elements appear and sometimes become sources of prolonged tensions or deviations, they all tend to disappear and fade out exactly because the system’s natural tendency is always to seek balance.

To sum up, for functionalists, social life is a constant process of mutual adjustment of individual elements of the system, which results in that the mutual influences of these elements either complement each other or cancel each other out. All this aims to keep the system in a tolerable equilibrium and, in this way, to ensure optimal conditions for the effective functioning of this dynamic whole.

¹² Szacki, J. (2002). *History*, p. 506.

¹³ Aberle, D. F. – Cohen, A. K. – Davis, A. K. – Levy, M. J. – Sutton, M. X. (1950). “The Functional Prerequisites of Society,” *Ethics* 60, pp. 100-111, qtd. In Sztompka, P. (1971), p. 91.

The adoption of such a vision of social reality logically results in methodological ideas shared by functionalists, among which the most important one is the call to study not individuals as such but rather certain social facts relevant to the system and to subordinate the study to these facts.

2. Merton's Correction of Functional Theory

Before discussing Merton's contribution to the development of functional theory, we should recognise that "if in American sociology (...) functionalism is the most influential and acknowledged movement, it is to a large degree due to Merton and his ordering, systematising and verifying work."¹⁴

In Merton's work, his interrogation and, ultimately, rejection of the notion that each of the system's elements must always and necessarily be functional in and to the system itself seem to have most decisively impacted the further course of functionalism.¹⁵ In other words, earlier functionalists claimed that each of the components of a system had a specific function to fulfil in it. This belief generated extreme conclusions about the universal functionality of everything that is on the one hand, and stirred numerous criticisms targeting functionalist theory on the other. Realising where the weakness of this theory lay, Merton repudiated the assumption of functionality and, instead, inquired *whether* an element had a function in a system and if so, *what* function it was. By framing his investigations in this way, he made it possible to remove the inopportune and widely contested notion of universal functionality of everything that is and, at the same time, to introduce the distinction into functional, dysfunctional and non-functional objects. Merton explained: "*Functions* are those observed consequences which make for the adaptation or adjustment of a given system; and *dysfunctions* are those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system. There is also the empirical possibility of non-functional consequences, which are simply irrelevant to the system under considerations."¹⁶ He also observed that "in any given instance, an item may have both functional and dysfunctional consequences."¹⁷ In this way, he freed functionalism from apologetic tendencies in describing reality.

Having redefined functionality along these lines, Merton developed it by offering a division into manifest and latent functions, with the former defined as intended and recognised and the latter as unintended and unrecognised by

¹⁴ Merton, R. (1968). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press, Introduction to the Polish edition. /J.J. Wiatr/, p. XVII.

¹⁵ Sztompka, P. (2002). *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*. Kraków, p. 438.

¹⁶ Merton, R. (1968). *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: The Free Press, p. 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

members of a given system. He also noticed that potential functionality of an element was directly affected by the current state of the system as a whole. For what was functional in a certain state of the system was not necessarily functional in another state of the system.

Finally, Merton challenged the previous functionalist assumption which claimed that every element of the system had one and only one function ascribed to it, whereby he formulated the concept of functional alternatives (functional equivalents or substitutes), insisting that one and the same element could perform various functions and one and the same function could be fulfilled by various elements. In this way, he discarded the “gratuitous assumption of the functional indispensability of particular social structures.”¹⁸

Merton’s examination of middle-range theories significantly contributed not only to functionalism but also to sociology in general. He was prompted to explore them as he was deeply convinced that it was too early for sociology to undertake serious and success-promising efforts to construct all-embracing systems or theoretical schemes. Merton pointed out that, in the early stages of its development, sociology had been intimately intertwined with philosophy, with every thinker seeking at the turn of the 18th century to leave behind a complete philosophical system of his own. Each of those systems aspired to herald “the definitive overview of the universe of matter, nature and man.”¹⁹ Several sociologists looked up to the endeavours to produce comprehensive systems organising the entire existing philosophical reflection as models for their own pursuits. Consequently, they abandoned the study of particular narrower issues and exerted themselves to construct general frameworks of philosophical thought, in this way fostering separate systems which they claimed were mutually contradictory. They explained the need for and justified such systems by recourse to natural sciences, especially to physics. In Merton’s view, this preoccupation with sociological reflection was caused by three factors. Firstly, it was quite commonly assumed that systems could be constructed before a large number of elementary observations were compiled and developed into a generalisation. Secondly, it was a widespread notion that “all cultural products existing at the same moment in history have the same degree of maturity.”²⁰ Several sociologists wrongly judged their own work by the standards of physicists and their achievements. However, as Merton noticed, if the differences in the advancement of respective disciplines had been noticed, it would have helped adopt more adequately proportioned criteria for the assessment of each of them. Thirdly, according to Merton, the actual condition of theoretical systems in physics, in which proliferating theories were in

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

fact by no means tolerably consistent with one another, was mistakenly perceived and interpreted by sociologists.²¹ The only reasonable response to such a situation of sociology and sociologists themselves should be, according to Merton, to develop middle-range theories of deliberately circumscribed applicability. These theories should be abstract enough to surmount the constraints of regular descriptions or empirical generalisations and thus effectively fathom and explain various spheres of life and social structures. In this way, they could overcome the distinction into macro- and micro-social problems and, without functioning as systems, be consistent with many systems.

3. Types of Response to the Social Structure

In his works, Merton repeatedly stressed that, unlike other social theories, which attempted to explain human behaviours by focusing on individuals, functionalism sought to establish “how the social and cultural structure generates pressure [...] upon people variously located in that structure.”²² This general formulation of the research orientation entails two more specific elements. One of them is the belief that human behaviours can be affected by the social structure, which breeds two questions: how is such influence exerted and what effects can it bring? The other element concerns the ways in which the different locatedness in the social structure differentiates the impact of this structure on individuals and, consequently, the behaviours of these individuals as well.

To answer these queries, Merton introduced the notion of *tension* or *strain*, defined as a contradiction or a divergence among components of the social structure. These tensions are controlled by social mechanisms, which try to contain them within reasonable bounds accepted by the members of the society. However, if the tensions escalate beyond these acceptable limits, they become relevant motives prompting a range of various types of individual behaviours.

Developing his theory, Merton identified two major (though not sole) elements of the social structure: “The first consists of culturally defined goals, purposes and interests, held out as legitimate objectives for all (...) members of the society.”²³ These *goals* serve thus as a framework of reference for popular and

²¹ That this judgment was apt back then and is still valid can be seen in S. W. Hawking’s assertion: “Today scientists describe the universe in terms of two basic partial theories (...). Unfortunately, however, these two theories are known to be inconsistent with each other (...). One of the major endeavors in physics today (...) is the search for a new theory that will incorporate them both.” Hawking, S. W. (1988). *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes*. New York: Bantam Books, p. 11.

²² Merton, R. (1968), p. 176.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

commonly accepted aspirations which function as cultural models and engage people emotionally in their pursuit. Admittedly, the goals are associated with human biological drives but, as Merton emphasised, they are not influenced by these drives. The other element of the social structure is comprised of institutionalised *norms*, which define, regulate and control the commonly endorsed modes of goal-achievement. As such, norms are regulative models of conduct which are specific to a given social structure. Neither goals nor norms are ever isolated, which means that they never operate separately and it is only their mutual co-occurrence that generates an actual set of impacts to which every individual is exposed in a given society. At the same time, goals and norms are by no means always reciprocally interdependent. On the contrary, a change of the cultural pressure on some goals does not necessarily entail a concomitant change of pressure on the norms, and the other way round. When we talk about the influence of the social structure on human behaviours, we should think of the composite impact of both its components, or, more precisely speaking, of the relationship between cultural goals and institutionalised norms. For it is only the degree of their compatibility or, alternately, the magnitude of tensions between them, as anticipated by society, that causes particular behaviours which are comprehended as responses to the social structure. Ultimately, people's behaviours are responses not to particular goals or norms but to the degree of congruity between the goals and the norms and to the proportion between the cultural pressure on goal-achievement and the cultural pressure on norm-observance.

Merton's functionalist theory basically involves three stages of reasoning which produced three different accounts of responses to the social structure. Still, these accounts are not contradictory but, rather, they make up a logically interconnected whole.²⁴ In each of these stages, the typology of adjustment or adaptive reactions was the major focus of Merton's inquiry, which finally yielded five types of behaviour.

Conformity "is the most common and widely diffused" response.²⁵ It occurs when the individual feels equally pressured by society to pursue the cultural goal and to abide by the norm. This type of behaviour is displayed "as long as satisfactions accrue to individuals conforming to both cultural constraints, viz., satisfactions from the achievement of goals and satisfactions emerging directly from the institutionally canalized modes of striving to attain them. It is reckoned in terms of the product and in terms of the process, in terms of the outcome and in terms of activities. Thus continuing satisfactions must derive from sheer

²⁴ Szafraniec, K. (1986). *Anomia – przesilenie tożsamości. Jednostka i społeczeństwo wobec zmiany*. Toruń: Wyd. Uniwersytetu im. Mikołaja Kopernika, p. 46.

²⁵ Merton, R. (1968). p. 195.

participation in a competitive order as well as from eclipsing one's competitors if the order itself is to be sustained.²⁶ Thus the basic feature of the conformist is a strongly felt satisfaction from the successful participation in rivalry on his/her path to the realisation of the cultural goal while respecting the norms.

Innovation appears when an individual has deeply internalised the cultural goal and, consequently, developed a strong motivation to achieve it, but has not internalised the institutional norms in an equal degree. As a result, "the technically most effective procedure, whether culturally legitimate or not, becomes typically preferred to institutionally prescribed conduct."²⁷ Merton emphatically observes here that "a mounting frequency of deviant but 'successful' behavior tends to lessen and, as an extreme potentiality, to eliminate the legitimacy of the institutional norms for others in the system."²⁸ The discrepancy between the goal and the available means of attaining it is most acutely felt by the members of the lower social strata. Summing up, the innovator is a person who is typically strongly motivated to attain the cultural goal and, at the same time, disproportionately weakly motivated to observe the norm while the social structure radically constrains access to the means towards the goal.

Ritualism is another type of response to the social structure which Merton distinguishes, calling it sometimes over-conformity. In ritualistic behaviour, the cultural goal is abandoned or, at least, reduced to the level the individual deems to be realistic whereas the norms are unconditionally and minutely respected. The philosophy embraced by the ritualist is expressed in commonly known cultural stock-phrases such as "Better stay low," "Just be grateful for small blessings," "Gamblers never prosper" or "Don't dream big and you won't be disappointed." Such thinking is informed by the idea that soaring ambitions cause frustration and risk while prudent ones afford satisfaction and security. Ultimately, the individual is driven either by the anxiety to retain his/her current status or by the fear of failure, with such anxieties and fears remaining largely unrecognised. Such a person "is rather self-satisfied and proud because he considers himself endowed with greater foresight than other human beings."²⁹ Importantly, some ritualists abide by the rules in place so accurately and are so engrossed with them that they slump into extremely excessive conformity because, as Merton explains, former instances of rule-breaching, i.e. "previous nonconformity," have triggered acute guilt feelings in them.

Retreatism is another type on Merton's list of responses to the social structure, one which he claims is the rarest of all. Retreatism involves "the substantial

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁹ Mira y López, E. (1943). *Psychiatry in War*. New York, qtd. In R. Merton, *Social Theory*, p. 240.

abandoning both of the once-esteemed cultural goals and of institutionalized practices directed towards these goals.³⁰ Such behaviours are most likely to occur when the individual has deeply internalised both cultural goals and institutionalised norms, attaching a great value to them, but his/her social situation is such that the available means do not lead to success. This engenders a double conflict: “the interiorized moral obligation for adopting institutional means conflicts with pressures to resort to illicit means (which may attain the goal) and the individual is shut off from means which are both legitimate and effective. The competitive order is maintained but the frustrated and handicapped individual who cannot cope with this order drops out.”³¹ This implies that the retreatist response is spawned by prior failures to attain the goal through socially accepted means, when the individual’s firmly internalised norms prevent him/her from resorting to forbidden means. Retreatism solves the conflict, but the individual becomes “asocialized.” According to Merton, such behaviours mostly occur in response to the collapse of a familiar and deeply internalised normative structure and the entrenched social relationships, especially if such a change is perceived as ultimate and irreversible. Retreatism is accompanied by a nostalgia for the past and reluctance to engage in new social contacts. In such circumstances, “individuals are pulled this way and that by numerous conflicting norms and goals, until the person is literally dis-oriented and de-moralized, unable to secure a firm commitment to a set of norms that he can feel as self-consistent.”³² Interestingly, Merton cites research findings, which report that watching TV shows “is well established as one instrument by which people can withdraw from conflicts and stresses...”³³

The last type of response to the social structure identified by Merton is **rebellion**. In rebellion, the person both abandons the cultural goals and rejects the institutionalised norms, to replace which he/she strives to construct a new social structure, that is, new goals and new norms. This response is underpinned by strong frustration whose sources are attributed by rebels precisely to the old social structure as a whole. Hence they negate both of its elements: “This adaptation leads men outside the environing social structure to envisage and seek to bring into being new, that is to say, a greatly modified social structure. It presupposes alienation from reigning goals and standards.”³⁴ Since rebels view the constitutive patterns of social structure as arbitrary and thus invalid, they feel exempt from the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 244.

³³ Pearlin, L. I. (1957). The Social and Psychological Setting of Communications Behavior, Columbia University, qtd. in R. Merton, *Social Theory*, p. 235.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

duty of respecting these patterns. Rebellion differs from resentment in that while the latter involves condemning what one secretly desires, the latter entails condemning the desire itself.

The types of behaviour outlined above occur as a rule “when the cultural and the social structure are mal-integrated, the first calling for behavior and attitudes which the second precludes.”³⁵ In such circumstances, the norms tend to break down and disintegrate. This collapse, which takes place “in the cultural structure [...] particularly when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural norms and goals and the socially structured capacities for members of the group to act in accord with them,”³⁶ is referred to by Merton as anomie. In his further analysis of anomie, Merton identifies five indicators of subjectively experience anomie:

1. the belief that the authorities are indifferent to the needs of the individual;
2. the perception of society’s functioning as unpredictable and chaotic;
3. the conviction that one’s goals in life cannot possibly be achieved;
4. the feeling of pointlessness; and
5. the belief that psychological and social support from friends is lacking.

Concluding, as Merton underscores, even though there are people whom their deprived social position and/or specific character traits make more vulnerable to anomie than others, the above considerations concern “*types of role-performance* in response to socially structured situations” and not “*types of personality*.”³⁷ By the same token, the universality of this typology is enhanced and its close connection to the social structure promotes valuable interpretations of human behaviours, irrespective of character types. Consequently, the typology can be particularly useful in the study of educational phenomena and processes which unfold at various levels of social life. The functionalist perspective seems to be especially fruitful in the societies of the former Eastern Bloc, which still find themselves in the process of the political and social transition., where it can help register and interpret empirical data hardly accessible in other research frameworks. In this way, the functionalist perspective can augment our knowledge of micro-scale social (educational) developments and thus facilitate macro-scale observations.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 239. Cf. also p. 206.