

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

Sociology Optional Sociological Thinkers (d to f) — Parsons, Merton, Mead

Paper 1 · Unit 4

Functionalism at its most ambitious (Parsons), its most disciplined and self-critical (Merton), and the interactionist account of how a self gets made at all (Mead).

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(d) Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables. (e) Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups. (f) Mead - Self and identity.

Talcott Parsons — From the Unit Act to the Social System

Parsons begins as an action theorist and ends as a systems theorist, and the shift is what most of the criticism is about. The Structure of Social Action (1937) puts a choosing actor at the centre; The Social System (1951) puts the system there and lets the actor become the occupant of a role.

- The convergence thesis (1937): Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber, working independently, converged on a voluntaristic theory of action. Note who is missing. Marx is absent from the book, and that absence is the standing Marxist charge against Parsons's whole enterprise.
- The unit act, Parsons's basic building block, has four elements: an actor; an end or goal; a situation, which divides into conditions (which the actor cannot alter) and means (which he can); and a normative orientation, the norms and values that govern which means he may select. The actor chooses, but he chooses within conditions and under norms. That is what 'voluntaristic' means, and it is narrower than free will.
- Why he needed voluntarism: to escape the two dead ends. Positivistic utilitarianism made ends random and reduced action to efficient means, which cannot generate order. Idealism made action the unfolding of ideas, with no place for conditions. Parsons wanted the normative element inside the theory of action.
- The Hobbesian problem of order: if everyone rationally pursues his own interest, why is there not a war of all against all? Contract cannot be the answer, because contracts presuppose a non-contractual element of prior trust, which is Durkheim's point. Parsons's answer is a common value system, internalised through socialisation. Value consensus is not an assumption he sneaks in; it is his solution to the founding problem.
- Double contingency: my action depends on what you do, yours on what I do, so interaction should be indeterminate. It is not, because shared symbols and common value orientations give each of us stable expectations of the other. This is the micro-foundation of the whole system.
- Four systems of action, arranged in a cybernetic hierarchy of control: the cultural system, the social system, the personality system, and the behavioural organism. Higher levels are high in information and low in energy and so control; lower levels are high in energy and low in information and so condition. Culture controls, the organism energises. Get the direction right, it is a common slip.
- The social system is 'a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation', whose relations are mediated by 'a system of culturally structured and shared symbols'. Its unit is not the person but the status-role: status is the position in the structure, role is the behaviour expected of the occupant. One person occupies many status-roles, so the person is not the unit of analysis.
- How the individual is fitted to the system: through the internalisation of values into the personality, so that the actor wants to do what the system needs him to do. Where socialisation fails, mechanisms of social control operate. Motivation and structure are thereby locked together.
- The sick role, from The Social System, is the best short illustration and it is worth carrying into any Parsons answer. Illness is deviance, not merely a biological state, because it withdraws the person from role obligations. It carries two rights (exemption from normal role duties and non-responsibility for the condition) and two duties (the obligation to want to get well and the obligation to seek competent technical help and cooperate with it). Sickness is thereby institutionalised so that it does not destabilise the system.

- Parsons on the family (his answer to the 2024 question): the modern nuclear family retains two 'basic and irreducible' functions after industrialisation has stripped away the rest, the primary socialisation of children and the stabilisation of the adult personalities of the population. The second is the 'warm bath' function. He also divides family roles into instrumental (male, breadwinning, task-focused) and expressive (female, emotional, integrative), a division feminists have demolished as ideology dressed as function.

KEY TERMS

Unit act — Parsons's basic analytical unit: an actor, an end, a situation of conditions and means, and a normative orientation.

Double contingency — The mutual dependence of each actor's action on the other's, resolved by shared symbols and common value orientations.

Status-role — The unit of the social system: a position plus its expected behaviour, not the individual person.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Critically analyse Parsons views on society as a social system. [2022, 20 marks]
- What are the 'basic and irreducible' functions of the family as proposed by Talcott Parsons? Explain. [2024, 10 marks]

Talcott Parsons — AGIL and the Functional Prerequisites

AGIL is Parsons's claim that any system of action whatsoever, from a two-person conversation to a whole society, must solve four problems if it is to survive. The scheme's ambition is also its vulnerability: a framework that fits everything explains nothing in particular.

- A, Adaptation: securing resources from the environment and distributing them through the system. At the level of society, the economy.
- G, Goal attainment: defining collective goals and mobilising resources to reach them. At the level of society, the polity.
- I, Integration: regulating the relations among the parts, coordinating them and maintaining solidarity. At the level of society, the societal community, working through law, norms and institutions such as courts and religion.
- L, Latency, meaning pattern maintenance and tension management: storing, renewing and transmitting the motivation and cultural patterns that make the rest possible. At the level of society, the fiduciary system, chiefly the family, school and religion.
- The two cross-cutting axes that turn the list into a scheme: external versus internal (A and G face the environment, I and L face inside), and instrumental versus consummatory (A and G are means-oriented, I and L are ends-oriented). Draw the two-by-two, it earns marks a list will not.
- Generalised media of interchange between subsystems: money for adaptation, power for goal attainment, influence for integration, and value-commitments for latency. Subsystems trade through these media rather than directly, which is how Parsons gets an interlocking system rather than four separate boxes.
- AGIL is recursive. Each subsystem has its own internal AGIL. The economy has its own adaptation, goal attainment, integration and latency problems. This is what lets the scheme scale from a family to a civilisation, and it is also why critics call it a filing cabinet.
- How to use it on a real problem, which is what the 2018 question asks. Take any social problem and locate it as a failure at one point that transmits to the others. Agrarian distress is an adaptation failure that becomes

a goal-attainment failure when the polity cannot respond and an integration failure when it produces protest. Communal conflict is an integration failure. A collapse in trust in institutions is a latency failure, because the fiduciary system has stopped renewing commitment. The framework's payoff is that it forces you to ask which function is failing and which subsystem should have discharged it. Its limit is that it describes the failure without explaining who benefits from it, which is where you bring in the conflict critique.

- Functional prerequisites of a social system: it must have enough actors adequately motivated to act in accordance with role expectations, and it must avoid cultural patterns that either fail to define a minimum of order or place impossible demands on people, thereby generating deviance and conflict. Add the standard requirements of provision for physical needs, socialisation, role allocation and the control of deviance.
- The link to equilibrium (the 2015 question): equilibrium in Parsons is not stasis. It is maintained by two mechanisms working together, socialisation, which internalises values so that motivation matches structural requirement, and social control, which manages the deviance socialisation fails to prevent. Parsons calls the result a moving equilibrium, homeostatic rather than frozen, adjusting to disturbance and returning to a patterned state.

AGIL: the four functional imperatives and their societal subsystems

Function	Problem it solves	Societal subsystem	Axis	Interchange medium
Adaptation	Securing and distributing resources from the environment	Economy	External, instrumental	Money
Goal attainment	Setting and pursuing collective goals	Polity	External, consummatory	Power
Integration	Coordinating the parts and maintaining solidarity	Societal community (law, norms)	Internal, consummatory	Influence
Latency (pattern maintenance)	Renewing motivation and cultural patterns	Fiduciary system (family, school, religion)	Internal, instrumental	Value-commitments

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- How can Parsons' AGIL framework be used to analyse key problems in a society? Discuss. [2018, 20 marks]
- How is social equilibrium maintained in Parsonian framework? [2015, 20 marks]

Talcott Parsons — Pattern Variables

Pattern variables are Parsons's set of dilemmas that every actor must resolve, explicitly or not, before he can act at all. They work at three levels at once, describing an individual's orientation, a role relationship, and the value pattern of a whole society, and that is exactly why they became a theory of modernisation.

- Affectivity versus affective neutrality: does the actor seek immediate gratification in the relationship, or discipline his impulse and defer? A mother with her child sits at the first pole, a doctor with a patient at the second.
- Self-orientation versus collectivity-orientation: does the actor pursue his private interest, or subordinate it to the collectivity's? The businessman against the priest or civil servant.

- Universalism versus particularism: does the actor judge and treat others by general standards applying to everyone, or by their particular relationship to him? The examination hall and the court against the family and the caste panchayat.
- Ascription versus achievement, which Parsons also renders as quality versus performance: does the actor respond to what the other is (birth, sex, age, caste), or to what the other does?
- Diffuseness versus specificity: does the relationship cover a broad and open-ended range of the other's life, or a narrow, contractually defined segment? Kin and friends against the shop assistant and the ticket clerk.
- The modernisation payoff, and the reason this topic survives on the syllabus: traditional societies cluster at affectivity, particularism, ascription, diffuseness and collectivity-orientation. Modern societies cluster at affective neutrality, universalism, achievement, specificity and self-orientation. Parsons has restated Tonnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity, as a set of variables rather than a pair of ideal types. That is the real advance: it lets you describe mixtures instead of forcing a binary.
- A precision point almost nobody makes. Parsons later reworked the scheme and mapped four of the variables onto AGIL, downgrading self-orientation versus collectivity-orientation. Some formulations therefore list four pairs, not five. Learn the standard five and note that the number is not stable across his own work.
- The professional role, Parsons's showcase application: the doctor is affectively neutral, universalistic, functionally specific, achievement-oriented and collectivity-oriented. That combination is what distinguishes a profession from a business, and it is what makes it safe to let a stranger touch your body.
- India application, which is where the marks are. Caste is the classic ascriptive, particularistic, diffuse ordering; the modern occupational and legal order is achievement-based, universalistic and specific. But Indian modernity does not cleanly migrate from one cluster to the other. Ascription persists inside universalistic institutions, and family firms, caste networks in recruitment and political mobilisation on ascriptive lines show a modern form filled with particularistic content. This is the concrete evidence that the pattern variables describe coexisting alternatives, not an escalator, and it doubles as a criticism of the modernisation theory Parsons's scheme underwrites.
- Criticisms: the pairs are presented as exhaustive dichotomies when real orientations lie on continua and are often mixed within a single act; the modern cluster is a description of the mid-century United States presented as a universal endpoint; and the scheme classifies without explaining, telling you where a society sits but not why it moved or who moved it.

The five pattern variables

Dilemma	Traditional pole	Modern pole	Illustration
Gratification	Affectivity	Affective neutrality	Mother and child versus doctor and patient
Interest served	Collectivity-orientation	Self-orientation	Priest or civil servant versus businessman
Standard of judgement	Particularism	Universalism	Family or panchayat versus court or examination
Basis of evaluation	Ascription (quality)	Achievement (performance)	Caste at birth versus professional attainment
Scope of relationship	Diffuseness	Specificity	Kinsman versus ticket clerk

KEY TERMS

Pattern variables — Five dichotomous choices an actor must resolve before acting, which also characterise role relationships and whole value systems.

Particularism — Judging and treating others by their specific relation to oneself rather than by standards applied to all.

Talcott Parsons — Change, and the Charge of Conservatism

The stock line is that Parsons cannot explain change and defends the status quo. Half of that is unfair and half is deserved. An answer that just repeats the charge is a weak answer; an answer that states his defence and then says why it is insufficient is a strong one.

- Parsons did have a theory of change, developed in *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (1966) and *The System of Modern Societies* (1971), and citing it is how you show you have read past the textbook. Change proceeds through four processes: differentiation, as one structure splits into several more specialised ones, as when the family lost production to the factory; adaptive upgrading, as the specialised units perform better than the undifferentiated one did; inclusion, as previously excluded groups are brought into the enlarged system, which is how he read the American civil rights movement; and value generalisation, as values become more abstract to legitimate a more diverse society.
- He also identified evolutionary universals, such as stratification, bureaucracy, money and markets, and democratic association, as innovations that so raise a system's adaptive capacity that they are likely to appear independently in many lines of development.
- So the accurate charge is not that Parsons ignored change. It is that his change is always endogenous, gradual, adaptive and system-serving. Differentiation happens; nobody makes it happen. There are no interests, no winners and losers, no agents. Revolution, conquest, colonialism and class struggle have no place in the scheme, because the model has no mechanism for a change that some people impose on others.
- The conservatism charge, stated properly (the 2025 question puts it as stratification): if a structure persists, functionalism reads its persistence as evidence that it meets a need. Applied to inequality, this becomes the Davis and Moore thesis, that stratification is a functional necessity because differential reward is needed to draw the ablest people into the most important positions. Tumin's reply is the standard one: who decides which positions are 'important'; the argument ignores inherited advantage and the pool of talent that never reaches the starting line; and it cannot explain reward differentials that track power rather than function.
- C. Wright Mills, in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), attacked Parsons as 'grand theory', abstraction for its own sake, and famously translated pages of Parsons into a few plain sentences to show how little was left.
- The conflict critique: Ralf Dahrendorf argued that Parsons offers a utopian integration theory and that sociology also needs a coercion theory, since conflict and constraint are as endemic as consensus. David Lockwood distinguished social integration (relations between actors) from system integration (relations between parts of the system) and argued Parsons ignored the substratum of material interests. John Rex made conflict over scarce resources the starting point instead of value consensus.
- Dennis Wrong (1961) named the deepest problem: the over-socialised conception of man. The actor of 1951 simply internalises and enacts what the culture supplies, so the voluntarism of 1937 has quietly died. The actor became a cultural dope.
- The teleology problem: explaining a structure by the function it performs makes the effect explain the cause. That the family socialises children explains nothing about why the family exists, unless you can show a

mechanism by which the consequence produced the structure. Parsons never supplies one.

- George Homans, in 'Bringing Men Back In' (1964), argued functionalism describes and classifies but does not explain, and that explanation requires propositions about individual behaviour. Alvin Gouldner, in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970), read Parsons's theory as the self-image of the mid-century welfare-state establishment. Merton's critique of the three postulates, in the next section, is the most constructive of them all, because it comes from inside functionalism.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Do you think Talcott Parsons gave an adequate theory of social change? Justify your answer. [2021, 10 marks]
- Does the structural-functionalist perspective on social stratification promote a status quo? Give reasons for your answer. [2025, 10 marks]
- Does collapse of functionalism and bankruptcy of Marxism coincide with the rupture of modernity? Discuss. [2018, 20 marks]

Robert K. Merton — Middle-Range Theory and the Critique of the Three Postulates

Merton's whole career is an argument against his own teacher's ambition. *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949, expanded 1957 and 1968) accepts functionalism and then strips out everything in it that cannot be tested. He is a functionalist who took the conservatism charge seriously enough to redesign the machine.

- Theories of the middle range: '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'. They are limited in scope, close enough to data to be tested, and capable of being consolidated into broader networks later.
- The argument for them is historical, not merely tactical. Sociology is young; it has not had its Kepler, so it cannot yet expect its Newton; and demanding a total theory now produces philosophy of history rather than science. Merton was firing at Parsons's grand theory on one side and Lazarsfeld's abstracted empiricism on the other.
- His own middle-range theories are the proof: reference group behaviour, relative deprivation, role-set, anomie and strain, the self-fulfilling prophecy, and the sociology of science. Each is limited, each is testable, each generated research.
- The critique of the three postulates of functional analysis is the most important thing Merton did for this unit, and it is the reason functionalism survived into the 1960s at all.
- Postulate one, the functional unity of society (Radcliffe-Brown): the assumption that every standardised part is functional for the whole and that the parts work together with sufficient internal consistency. Merton: this is an empirical question, not a postulate. It may approximate reality in a small, homogeneous, non-literate society and it plainly does not in a large, differentiated, plural one. Religion may integrate where there is one faith and divide where there are many. From this he derives the requirement to specify the unit served, since one must always ask 'functional for whom', and the idea of a net balance of consequences rather than a verdict of functional or not.
- Postulate two, universal functionalism: the assumption that every standardised social or cultural item performs a positive function. Merton: some items are dysfunctional, reducing the system's adaptation, and some are non-functional, mere survivals that persist without doing anything. This yields the concept of

dysfunction, which is what finally lets functionalism talk about strain, tension and change instead of only about equilibrium.

- Postulate three, indispensability: the assumption that each item is indispensable and that the function it serves is itself indispensable, that is, that no substitute exists. Merton: → functional alternatives, equivalents or substitutes. Religion integrates, but so can nationalism, or a political ideology, or sport. Once you admit substitutes, no existing institution can be defended on the ground that it is the only thing that could do the job. This is the single move that removes functionalism's built-in conservatism, and it is the point to make when a question asks whether functionalism defends the status quo.
- Merton's paradigm for functional analysis makes the discipline explicit: state the item, the meanings it has for participants, its motives, its objective consequences (manifest, latent, dysfunctional), the units subserved, the requirements it fulfils, the mechanisms involved, the alternatives available, the structural constraints on those alternatives, and the ideological implications of the analysis itself. He was aware that a functional analysis carries a politics, and he asked analysts to declare it.
- The result: functionalism becomes an empirical method rather than a doctrine. Every claim that used to be assumed now has to be demonstrated for a specified unit and weighed against alternatives.

Merton against the three postulates of functional analysis

Postulate	What it assumes	Merton's objection	Concept he supplies
Functional unity of society	All parts are functional for the whole system	An empirical question; plural, differentiated societies are not unified	Specify the unit served; net balance of consequences
Universal functionalism	Every standardised item has a positive function	Some items are dysfunctional, some merely non-functional survivals	Dysfunction; non-function
Indispensability	Every item, and the function it serves, is irreplaceable	Other structures can discharge the same function	Functional alternatives, equivalents, substitutes

KEY TERMS

Theories of the middle range — Limited, testable theories between working hypotheses and all-encompassing systems, consolidated progressively rather than deduced from a master scheme.

Dysfunction — Observed consequences that lessen the adaptation or adjustment of a designated unit of a system.

Functional alternatives — Different structures capable of performing the same function, which is why no institution is indispensable.

Robert K. Merton — Manifest and Latent Functions

This is the distinction functionalism is remembered for, and the one questions probe most precisely. Merton's own definitions are short enough to memorise, and the marks are in the boundaries, not in the examples.

- Manifest functions: 'those objective consequences contributing to the adjustment or adaptation of the system which are intended and recognised by participants in the system'.
- Latent functions: 'those which are neither intended nor recognised'.
- Dysfunctions: 'those observed consequences which lessen the adaptation or adjustment of the system'. Note that a latent consequence can be dysfunctional, so latent and functional are not the same word.

- Why the distinction earns its keep, in Merton's own reasoning. It clarifies apparently irrational practices: the Hopi rain dance does not produce rain, so its manifest function fails, but it latently reassembles a dispersed group and reaffirms its identity, which is why it persists. It directs enquiry beyond the obvious, because manifest functions are what participants already know and sociology has nothing to add if it stops there. And it precludes naive moral judgement, since a practice that looks merely foolish or merely corrupt may be doing structural work.
- Veblen's conspicuous consumption, Merton's example: the manifest function of buying the expensive good is its utility; the latent function is the display of status, which is why the higher price can increase demand.
- The political machine, Merton's set-piece: manifestly it is corrupt and dysfunctional for the polity, and reformers keep abolishing it, and it keeps coming back. Latently it humanises and personalises assistance to deprived groups who find official agencies cold and procedural, it provides political privileges to business seeking predictable outcomes, and it offers an alternative mobility channel to those the legitimate opportunity structure excludes. It persists because it meets needs the official structure does not. Merton's rule follows: you cannot abolish a structure by attacking its manifest dysfunctions while leaving the needs its latent functions serve unmet, which is a serious point about policy and worth making in any question on reform.
- The precision that the 2019 question is built on, and the commonest error in this unit. Latent functions are not the same as unanticipated consequences. Unanticipated consequences (Merton's 1936 paper, 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action') is the wider class: every outcome not foreseen by the actor. Latent functions are a subset of it, those unintended outcomes that are also unrecognised by participants and functional, that is, adaptive for a designated unit. So: every latent function is an unanticipated consequence; not every unanticipated consequence is a latent function, because some are dysfunctional and some are simply irrelevant to the system. There is a second difference: 'latent' requires that participants do not recognise it, whereas an unanticipated consequence may be plainly visible after the event.
- Related Merton concept worth carrying in: the self-fulfilling prophecy, 'a false definition of the situation evoking a new behaviour which makes the originally false conception come true'. His illustration is a run on the solvent Last National Bank: the rumour of insolvency is false, depositors act on it, and the bank fails, retrospectively validating the rumour. This extends W.I. Thomas's theorem, that if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.
- India applications: the manifest function of a dowry prohibition is to end dowry, while the latent consequence has been to drive transactions underground and make them harder to prosecute. The manifest function of reservation is representation and redress, and one latent consequence has been the political consolidation of caste as a category of public life, which is a real finding and not a criticism of the policy. Choose examples where the latent consequence genuinely surprises.

Merton's classification of consequences

	Intended and recognised	Neither intended nor recognised
Aids adaptation of the unit	Manifest function	Latent function
Lessens adaptation of the unit	Manifest dysfunction	Latent dysfunction
Irrelevant to the unit	Non-functional consequence	Non-functional consequence

KEY TERMS

Manifest function — An objective consequence aiding adaptation that participants both intend and recognise.

Latent function — An objective consequence aiding adaptation that participants neither intend nor recognise.

Self-fulfilling prophecy — A false definition of a situation that evokes behaviour making the original false conception come true.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- What, according to Merton, is the difference between 'unanticipated consequences' and 'latent functions'? Give examples to elaborate. [2019, 10 marks]

Robert K. Merton — Anomie, Strain and the Five Modes of Adaptation

'Social Structure and Anomie' (1938) takes Durkheim's word and gives it a different location. For Durkheim anomie is deregulation in a moment of crisis. For Merton it is a chronic, structural condition of a society that preaches a success goal to everyone while distributing the means to reach it unequally. That is what the phrase 'anomie is rooted in social structure' means.

- The mechanism: every society has culturally prescribed goals and institutionally legitimate means of reaching them. Where the two are integrated, conformity is stable. Where the culture places overwhelming emphasis on the goal and the social structure denies large numbers any legitimate route to it, strain results, and deviance is the normal response of normal people to an abnormal structure.
- The American Dream is Merton's case: everyone is told wealth is available to anyone who tries, and the class structure ensures it is not. Deviance is therefore not a defect of the deviant. It is manufactured by the disjunction. That is the sentence to write.
- Conformity: accepts the goals, accepts the means. The most common adaptation by far, and Merton insists on saying so, because without it the society could not persist. Conformity and deviance coexist because both are responses to the same structure, and it is the same cultural pressure that produces the conformist and the innovator. That is the 2021 question in one line.
- Innovation: accepts the goals, rejects or bypasses the legitimate means. Theft, fraud, racketeering, and equally the robber baron and the white-collar criminal. Merton's key move: the strain is greatest at the bottom, where the goal is preached and the means withheld, but innovation is not a lower-class monopoly, and saying so protects you from the obvious criticism.
- Ritualism: rejects or scales down the goals, clings compulsively to the means. The clerk who worships procedure, the official for whom the rule has replaced the purpose. It looks like conformity and is a deviation from the cultural mandate to succeed: he has abandoned the goal to escape the anxiety of failure. Merton associates it with the lower middle class, where the fear of falling is sharpest. This is the same phenomenon as goal displacement in his account of bureaucracy.
- Retreatism: rejects the goals, rejects the means. Merton's phrase is that such people are 'in the society but not of it'. Vagrants, outcasts, chronic drunkards, drug addicts. He is precise about how it arises: both the goal and the means have been thoroughly internalised, access to legitimate means is blocked, and conscience blocks the illegitimate ones too. Double failure with no exit produces escape. It is the least common adaptation.
- Rebellion: rejects both, and substitutes a new set of goals and means. The revolutionary, the social movement. Merton separates rebellion from resentment or ressentiment, because the rebel genuinely

repudiates the values, while the resentful person still wants what he denounces.

- The precision point candidates miss: these are five adaptations to a role situation, not five types of people. The same person may innovate at work, conform at home and retreat elsewhere. Presenting them as personality types is a straightforward error.
- Durkheim against Merton, which two separate questions have already asked and will ask again. Durkheim: anomie is deregulation, the collapse of moral limits on naturally boundless desire, produced by rapid change, whether slump or boom; it is a crisis condition of the whole society; the remedy is more effective moral regulation, through occupational groups. Merton: anomie is a structural disjunction between goals and means; it is chronic and normal in an unequal achievement society, not a crisis; and human aspirations are not naturally boundless, they are culturally installed. So Durkheim locates the problem in the absence of norms and Merton in the presence of a norm that the structure cannot honour. Merton's remedy is implicitly redistributive: widen access to legitimate means.
- Criticisms: it assumes a value consensus on the success goal, which is oddly Parsonian for Merton, and it may not hold in a plural society; it explains utilitarian, acquisitive crime and struggles with expressive and violent crime, which yields no money; it ignores the power to define what counts as deviance, which is the labelling critique from Becker's Outsiders; and it is individualistic, treating each actor as adapting alone.
- The subcultural extension, and be careful with attribution here, since the 2019 question invites an error. Merton's own theory is about individual adaptation. He acknowledged in the 1957 'Continuities' essay that deviant adaptations become structured, because similarly placed people interact, validate each other's response, and turn a private adaptation into a shared normative expectation, which is how a deviant subculture is generated. The systematic development is by others: A.K. Cohen's Delinquent Boys (1955) argues working-class boys judged by middle-class standards suffer status frustration and collectively invert those values; Cloward and Ohlin's Delinquency and Opportunity (1960) add the illegitimate opportunity structure, arguing that blocked legitimate access is not enough, because you also need access to illegitimate means, and depending on what is available you get criminal, conflict or retreatist subcultures. Give Merton his part, and name Cohen and Cloward-Ohlin for theirs.

Merton's five modes of individual adaptation (+ accept, - reject, ± reject and substitute)

Mode	Cultural goals	Institutionalised means	Illustration
Conformity	+	+	The modal adaptation; without it society could not persist
Innovation	+	-	Theft, fraud, racketeering, white-collar crime, the robber baron
Ritualism	-	+	The bureaucrat who worships the rule and forgets its purpose
Retreatism	-	-	Vagrants, outcasts, addicts: in the society but not of it
Rebellion	±	±	The revolutionary who substitutes new goals and new means

KEY TERMS

Strain — The pressure produced by a disjunction between culturally prescribed goals and the legitimate means the structure makes available.

Ritualism — Abandoning the success goal while compulsively over-conforming to the means; outwardly conformist, culturally deviant.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- 'Anomie is rooted in social structure.' Explain with reference to R.K. Merton's contribution. [2015, 10 marks]
- Critically examine how Durkheim and Merton explicate Anomie. [2022, 20 marks]
- What is the difference between anomie in Merton and Durkheim? Explain. [2018, 10 marks]
- With suitable examples, explain how conformity and deviance coexist in a society as propounded by R.K. Merton. [2021, 10 marks]
- How, according to Merton, are deviant subcultures generated? [2019, 20 marks]

Robert K. Merton — Reference Groups, Relative Deprivation and Role-Set

Reference group theory answers a question that both Durkheim and Parsons leave open: how does the wider social structure actually reach into an individual's judgement of himself? Merton's answer is that it reaches him through the group he measures himself against, which may not be the group he belongs to.

- Attribution first, because it is examinable. Herbert Hyman coined 'reference group' in *The Psychology of Status* (1942). Merton and Alice Kitt Rossi built it into a systematic theory in 'Contributions to the Theory of Reference Group Behaviour', reanalysing the survey data in Stouffer and colleagues' *The American Soldier* (1949).
- Definition: a reference group is any group, individual or category that a person takes as a frame of reference for evaluating himself and forming his attitudes, whether or not he belongs to it.
- Types: membership groups (he belongs) and non-membership groups (he does not); positive reference groups (whose standards he adopts) and negative reference groups (whose standards he defines himself against, as with the renegade or the ex-believer). The negative reference group is the one candidates forget, and it does real work: identity is built by repudiation as much as by emulation.
- Two functions, following Kelley and adopted by Merton: the normative function, where the group sets and enforces the standards the individual holds; and the comparative function, where the group supplies the yardstick against which he appraises himself. One shapes what he ought to want, the other tells him how he is doing.
- Relative deprivation is the mechanism that makes the theory bite. Satisfaction is not a function of your absolute condition but of the comparison you make. The *American Soldier* findings are the classic evidence, and they are counter-intuitive, which is why they are worth reciting: military policemen, in a branch with slow promotion, were more satisfied with their promotion chances than air corps men, in a branch with fast promotion, because each compared himself to his own peers, and rapid promotion around you means your own non-promotion stings. Similarly, married draftees resented conscription more than the unmarried, because they compared themselves to married civilians.
- Why it matters beyond the survey: it explains why rising prosperity can produce more discontent, not less, and why groups revolt after conditions improve rather than at their worst. This links directly to Davies's J-curve and to Ted Gurr's *Why Men Rebel*, and it is the standard sociological account of relative, as against absolute, grievance.
- Anticipatory socialisation: adopting the values and style of a group one aspires to but has not yet joined. Merton's assessment is conditional, which is the sophisticated point. In an open, mobile system it is functional for the individual, easing his eventual entry, and functional for the system, which needs mobility. In a closed system it is dysfunctional for him, because he is rejected by the group he has abandoned and never admitted by the one he emulates, and he ends as a marginal man.

- The India link that examiners reward: M.N. Srinivas's Sanskritisation is reference group behaviour and anticipatory socialisation in Indian dress. A lower caste takes a higher, usually twice-born or locally dominant, caste as its positive reference group and emulates its ritual, diet, dress and lifestyle to claim a higher rank. Srinivas's own qualification is essential: it produces positional change for the group without structural change to the hierarchy, since the ladder is not dismantled, only climbed. Westernisation works as reference group behaviour with a different reference group.
- Role-set, a separate Merton concept regularly confused with two others. Role-set: the complement of role relationships a person has by virtue of occupying a single status. A teacher's role-set comprises pupils, colleagues, the principal, parents and the school board. Distinguish it from Linton's status-set, which is all the statuses one person occupies (teacher, mother, voter, neighbour), and from multiple roles. Role-set conflict is normal, and Merton describes the mechanisms that articulate it: differing intensity of involvement across the set, insulation of role activities from observation, and the mutual support of those in similar positions.
- Criticisms, which the 2023 and 2025 questions both invite. It is more a conceptual scheme or orientation than a theory, since it names a mechanism but does not predict. Merton himself flagged, and left largely open, the central question of which reference group a person selects and why. It presumes an open, mobile, individualistic society in which comparison across groups is possible and imaginable, so its universality is doubtful: where ascription is rigid and horizons are enclosed, the range of available reference groups is structurally narrowed, though Sanskritisation shows that even a closed hierarchy generates reference group behaviour within itself. And measurement is hard, since the reference group is inferred from the attitude it is invoked to explain, which risks circularity.
- The 2025 angle, on identity in the digital world: the theory becomes more relevant rather than less, because online life detaches the comparative function from physical membership entirely and makes distant, curated, aspirational groups continuously visible. That multiplies reference groups, makes relative deprivation chronic rather than episodic, and gives anticipatory socialisation a permanent stage. The caution is the one above: Merton offers no account of which of the thousands of available groups a person will select, and that gap is more conspicuous online than off.

KEY TERMS

Reference group — Any group, person or category taken as a frame of reference for self-evaluation and attitude formation, membership being irrelevant.

Relative deprivation — Dissatisfaction arising from comparison with a reference group rather than from absolute conditions.

Anticipatory socialisation — Adopting the values of a group one aspires to join; functional in an open system, dysfunctional in a closed one.

Role-set — The complement of role relationships flowing from a single status, as distinct from Linton's status-set.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Is reference group theory a universally applicable model? Elucidate. [2023, 10 marks]
- Can Merton's reference group theory be relevant in understanding 'identity making' in digital world? Explain. [2025, 10 marks]

G.H. Mead — Society, the Significant Symbol and the Genesis of the Self

Mead reverses the order everyone assumes. We think individuals come together and make a society. Mead argues society comes first, and the self is manufactured inside it out of language. *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) was assembled posthumously from his students' lecture notes, which matters, because textual disputes about Mead are real.

- Mead called his own approach social behaviourism, not symbolic interactionism. He accepted behaviourism's starting point, the observable act, and rejected Watson's refusal to admit the inner phase. For Mead the covert conversation inside the person is part of the act and must be theorised, not ignored.
- The act has four stages: impulse, perception, manipulation, consummation. The pause at manipulation, where the human being handles the object before consuming it, is where thinking becomes possible, and it is the biological opening Mead uses to get mind into a behaviourist frame.
- The conversation of gestures: two dogs circling and snarling adjust to each other mechanically. Each gesture calls out a response without meaning anything to either. This is interaction without mind, and it is what most animal life is.
- The significant symbol is the hinge of the entire system, and any answer that omits it has missed Mead. A gesture becomes a significant symbol when it arouses in the one making it the same response it arouses in the one to whom it is addressed. When I say 'fire' I hear it as you hear it, and I am therefore already responding to myself as another would. Only that self-response makes it possible to take the other's attitude, and so language is not the expression of mind, it is the mechanism that produces mind.
- Why the vocal gesture is privileged: you hear your own voice exactly as others hear it, whereas you cannot see your own face. The auditory channel is uniquely reflexive, which is why language and not gesture becomes the vehicle of the self.
- Mind is therefore the internalised conversation of gestures. Thinking is an inner conversation carried on with significant symbols. Mind does not precede society; it is precipitated by it. Mead's sequence is society, then self, then mind, and reversing it is the standard error.
- The self is not present at birth. It arises in social experience. Its defining property is reflexivity: the self can be an object to itself, which no other object in the world can be. Mead: 'The self is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience.'
- The mechanism by which it arises is role-taking: taking the attitude of the other towards oneself. You come to see yourself by borrowing the other's standpoint on you.
- Stage one, the preparatory or imitative stage: the infant meaninglessly imitates the gestures of those around it. There is no self yet, because there is no significant symbol and so no role-taking. A note on fidelity: Mead's own text theorises play and game as the two stages, and the 'preparatory stage' is a later systematisation of his scattered remarks on imitation. Present the three stages, since that is what the syllabus expects, but knowing which one is textually Mead's own is the kind of thing that separates answers.
- Stage two, the play stage: the child takes the role of one particular other at a time, sequentially. He plays at being mother, then doctor, then policeman, and talks to an imaginary companion in both voices. The roles are discrete and unorganised, so the self at this stage is fragmentary, a series of separate others with nothing holding them together. He is taking the roles of significant others.
- Stage three, the game stage: the game has organised rules, so the child must take the roles of all the others simultaneously and grasp how they relate to one another. Mead's example is baseball: the boy at shortstop must know what the pitcher, the catcher and every other player will do, and how each relates to the others,

before he can make his own play. Because the attitudes of the others are organised, the self that internalises them becomes organised and unified. This is where a self, rather than a bundle of roles, is achieved.

- The generalised other: 'the organised community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self'. It is the attitude of the whole group, and in the game stage the organised attitudes of all the participants become the attitude of the team, and beyond it of the community. Mead: 'It is in the form of the generalised other that the social process influences the behaviour of the individuals involved in it.' Taking its attitude is what makes abstract thought, morality and self-criticism possible, because it lets you judge yourself from the standpoint of everyone rather than of one person.
- Distinguish the significant other, a particular individual who matters to the person and whose role is taken in the play stage, from the generalised other, the organised attitude of the whole community internalised in the game stage. The term 'significant other' is Harry Stack Sullivan's, though it is used freely of Mead's play stage.

KEY TERMS

Significant symbol — A gesture that arouses in the one making it the same response it arouses in the other, making role-taking and therefore mind possible.

Role-taking — Taking the attitude of the other towards oneself, the mechanism by which the self arises.

Generalised other — The organised attitude of the whole community, internalised in the game stage, which gives the self its unity.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- Explain G.H. Mead's idea of development of 'self' through the 'generalised other'. [2024, 10 marks]
- According to Mead the idea of self develops when the individual becomes self-conscious. Explain. [2022, 20 marks]

G.H. Mead — The 'I' and the 'Me', and the Roots of Symbolic Interactionism

Having made the self entirely social, Mead has a problem: where does novelty come from, and how is the person not simply a puppet of the community? His answer is to split the self into two phases in continuous conversation, and it is the most elegant move in the unit.

- The Me: 'the organised set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes'. It is the self as object, the internalised community, the conventional and socialised phase, the censor. The Me is where the generalised other lives inside the person, and it is available to consciousness.
- The I: 'the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others'. It is the self as subject, spontaneous, impulsive, creative and unpredictable. It is the source of novelty, initiative and freedom, and Mead lodges human agency precisely here.
- The point most answers miss: the I is never available in immediate experience. You know it only after it has acted, through memory. Mead: 'The I of this moment is present in the me of the next moment.' Nobody, including the actor, can know in advance what the I will do, and that unpredictability is not a gap in the theory, it is the theory's account of freedom.
- The self is the ongoing conversation between the I and the Me. It is a process, not a thing, and it has no location and no substance. This is why Mead is not a determinist despite making the self wholly social: society constitutes the self and still leaves a genuine locus of initiative inside it.
- The exam-ready formulation: social control operates through the Me; social change enters through the I. Say that sentence and then unpack it.

- How this answers the questions actually set. 'We play a key role in our own socialisation' (2019): because role-taking is an active interpretive achievement, not a stamping, and because the I responds to the community rather than merely absorbing it, the person is a participant in his own making, not a recipient. 'Self and society are twin-born' (2015): neither precedes the other; the self is social all the way down, but society exists only in the ongoing interactions of selves, so they emerge together and neither can be reduced to the other. 'Are I and Me central terms' (2018): yes, and argue it, because without the Me the self would not be social and without the I it would not be an agent, so the pair is what allows Mead to be a social determinist about the self's origin and a voluntarist about its conduct.
- Attribution, and this is examinable. Herbert Blumer coined the term 'symbolic interactionism' in 1937, six years after Mead's death, and codified its three premises in 1969: human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings those things have for them; those meanings arise out of social interaction; and meanings are handled and modified through an interpretative process. Mead never used the label. Do not attribute Blumer's premises to Mead.
- The neighbours, kept distinct. C.H. Cooley's looking-glass self (1902) has three elements: our imagination of how we appear to the other, our imagination of his judgement of that appearance, and a resulting self-feeling of pride or mortification. The difference from Mead is real: Cooley's process runs on what we imagine the other thinks, which is subjective and may be wrong, while Mead's role-taking is the taking of the actual organised attitudes of the community. Erving Goffman's dramaturgy (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959) descends from this tradition but is not Mead: front stage and back stage, impression management, and the self as a dramatic effect produced by a scene rather than a possession the actor brings to it. If a question asks about the dramaturgical perspective, it is asking about Goffman.
- Criticisms of Mead and symbolic interactionism. It has no account of macro structure: power, class, the state, history and inequality are absent, and if meanings are negotiated, the tradition cannot say who has the power to make their meanings stick. Gouldner read it as an ideology of the underdog that avoids institutional analysis. Its concepts resist operationalisation, and the I is unobservable by definition, which is why Manfred Kuhn's Iowa school tried to measure the self with the Twenty Statements Test against Blumer's Chicago-school insistence on sympathetic introspection, a genuine split within the tradition. *Mind, Self and Society* is a posthumous reconstruction from lecture notes, so its textual authority is contested. And the deepest gap: Mead explains how the community's attitudes enter the person but never why the community holds those attitudes, which would require exactly the structure and history he does not supply.
- The comparison worth making unprompted: Mead's Me and Freud's superego are often paired, and the difference matters. Freud's superego is unconscious and formed through repression and conflict; Mead's Me is conscious and formed through communication. Similarly, contrast Mead with Parsons: both make the individual social, but Parsons's actor internalises values and enacts them, which is Wrong's over-socialised man, while Mead's actor has an I that can refuse. Mead is the answer to the problem Parsons created.

The two phases of the Mead's self

Aspect	The 'I'	The 'Me'
Position	The self as subject, the actor	The self as object, the acted-upon
Content	The organism's response to others' attitudes	The organised attitudes of others that one assumes
Character	Spontaneous, impulsive, creative, unpredictable	Conventional, habitual, socialised, censoring
Availability	Never in immediate experience; known only in memory	Present to consciousness
Function	Source of novelty, agency and social change	Vehicle of social control and the generalised other

KEY TERMS

The 'Me' — The self as object: the organised attitudes of others which the person assumes towards himself.

The 'I' — The self as subject: the spontaneous, unpredictable response of the organism to the attitudes of others, and the locus of agency.

Looking-glass self — Cooley's concept, distinct from Mead's: our self-feeling built from imagining our appearance to others and their judgement of it.

PREVIOUS YEAR QUESTIONS

- 'Self and Society are twin-born.' Examine the statement of Mead. [2015, 10 marks]
- According to Mead, 'We play a key role in our own socialisation.' Explain. [2019, 20 marks]
- Do you think 'I' and 'Me' are central terms in Mead's work? [2018, 10 marks]
- How does the dramaturgical perspective enable our understanding of everyday life? [2023, 10 marks]

Last-mile revision

- Parsons's unit act: actor, end, situation (conditions plus means), normative orientation. Voluntarism means constrained choice, not free will.
- The Hobbesian problem of order is answered by a common value system internalised through socialisation, not by contract. Value consensus is Parsons's solution, not his assumption.
- Cybernetic hierarchy: culture controls (high information, low energy), the organism energises (high energy, low information).
- AGIL: Adaptation is the economy, Goal attainment the polity, Integration the societal community, Latency the fiduciary system. A and G external, I and L internal; A and G instrumental, I and L consummatory.
- Equilibrium is maintained by socialisation plus social control, and Parsons calls it moving, not static.
- Five pattern variables: affectivity or neutrality, self or collectivity, particularism or universalism, ascription or achievement, diffuseness or specificity. Traditional clusters on the first pole of each, modern on the second.
- Parsons did theorise change: differentiation, adaptive upgrading, inclusion, value generalisation. The valid charge is that his change has no agents and no losers.
- Merton's middle range sits between working hypotheses and grand theory, aimed at Parsons on one side and abstracted empiricism on the other.
- The three postulates and their antidotes: functional unity, answered by specifying the unit served; universal functionalism, answered by dysfunction; indispensability, answered by functional alternatives.
- Manifest: intended and recognised. Latent: neither intended nor recognised. Dysfunction: lessens adaptation. Latent function is a subset of unanticipated consequences, never a synonym.
- Merton's anomie is a goals-means disjunction that is chronic and structural. Durkheim's is deregulation in a crisis. Merton's remedy is access; Durkheim's is regulation.
- The five adaptations: conformity (++), innovation (+-), ritualism (-+), retreatism (--), rebellion ($\pm\pm$). They are adaptations to a situation, not personality types.
- Reference groups: membership or non-membership, positive or negative; normative and comparative functions; relative deprivation is the mechanism; anticipatory socialisation is functional in an open system only. Sanskritisation is the India case.
- Mead's order is society, then self, then mind. The significant symbol is the hinge: it arouses in me the response it arouses in you.
- Three stages: preparatory (imitation, no self), play (one role at a time, fragmentary self), game (all roles at once, organised self and the generalised other).
- Social control works through the Me; social change enters through the I. The I is knowable only in retrospect.
- 'Symbolic interactionism' is Blumer's term, 1937, not Mead's. Mead called it social behaviourism.

Common errors to avoid

- Saying Parsons had no theory of change. He had one: differentiation, adaptive upgrading, inclusion, value generalisation. Say that first, then say why it is inadequate, that his change has no agents, no interests and no losers.
- Getting the cybernetic hierarchy backwards. Culture is high information and low energy and therefore controls; the organism is high energy and low information and therefore conditions.
- Treating value consensus as an assumption Parsons smuggles in. It is his proposed solution to the Hobbesian problem of order, and criticising it means showing the solution fails, not that it was assumed.
- Listing four pattern variables or six. The standard set is five, and note that Parsons himself later downgraded self-orientation versus collectivity-orientation when he mapped the rest onto AGIL.
- Making the pattern variables a one-way escalator from tradition to modernity. Indian evidence shows ascriptive content persisting inside universalistic institutions, and Parsons's own scheme allows mixtures.
- Equating latent functions with unanticipated consequences. Latent functions are the subset that is unrecognised and functional. This is the exact wording of a past question, and the wrong answer is a guaranteed loss.
- Forgetting that latent consequences can be dysfunctional. 'Latent' describes recognition, not benefit.
- Attributing the three postulates to Merton. They are the postulates he attacked, mainly Radcliffe-Brown's and Malinowski's; his contribution is the antidotes: net balance, dysfunction and functional alternatives.
- Saying Merton simply borrowed Durkheim's anomie. He relocated it, from an absence of regulation in a crisis to a chronic disjunction of goals and means, and he denies Durkheim's premise that desires are naturally boundless.
- Presenting the five modes of adaptation as five types of people. They are adaptations to a role situation, and one person can adopt different ones in different spheres.
- Calling ritualism conformity. The ritualist has abandoned the cultural goal, which is a deviation, even though his outward behaviour looks compliant.
- Crediting Merton with the theory of deviant subcultures. His core theory is individual adaptation; the systematic subcultural development is A.K. Cohen's status frustration and Cloward and Ohlin's illegitimate opportunity structure.
- Confusing role-set (the roles attached to one status) with Linton's status-set (all the statuses one person holds).
- Saying a reference group must be a group you belong to. The whole point is that it need not be, and negative reference groups shape identity by repudiation.
- Attributing 'symbolic interactionism' to Mead. Blumer coined it in 1937; Mead's own label was social behaviourism.
- Merging Cooley's looking-glass self with Mead's role-taking. Cooley runs on what we imagine others think, which can be mistaken; Mead runs on taking the community's actual organised attitudes.
- Answering a dramaturgy question with Mead. Front stage, back stage and impression management are Goffman's.

- Making the I a hidden inner essence. It is a phase of a process, knowable only after it acts, and it has no content of its own.