Robert King Merton  
(1910-2003)  
Merton was a distinguished sociologist perhaps best known for having coined the phrase "self-fulfilling prophecy." He also coined many other phrases that have gone into everyday use, such as "role model" and "unintended consequences".

Merton was one of Talcott Parsons' students. He was heavily influenced by Pitirim Sorokin who tried to balance large-scale theorizing with a strong interest in empirical research and statistical studies. This and Paul Lazarsfeld influenced Merton to occupy himself with middle-range theories. Some of Merton’s major contributions to sociology are:

**Theories of the middle range**
Middle-range theories, applicable to limited ranges of data, transcend sheer description of social phenomena and fill in the blanks between raw empiricism and grand or all-inclusive theory. In his plea for this kind of theories Merton stands on the shoulders of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber.

**Clarifying functional analysis**
Merton argues that the central orientation of functionalism is in interpreting data by their consequences for larger structures in which they are implicated. Like Durkheim and Parsons he analyzes society with reference to whether cultural and social structures are well or badly integrated, is interested in the persistence of societies and defines functions that make for the adaptation of a given system. Finally, Merton thinks that shared values are central in explaining how societies and institutions work. However he disagrees with Parsons on some issues which will be brought to attention in the following part.

**Dysfunctions**
Parsons’ work tends to imply that all institutions are inherently good for society. Merton emphasizes the existence of dysfunctions. He thinks that something may have consequences that are generally dysfunctional or which are dysfunctional for some and functional for others. On this point he approaches conflict theory, although he does believe that institutions and values CAN be functional for society as a whole. Merton states that only by recognizing the dysfunctional aspects of institutions, can we explain the development and persistence of alternatives. Merton’s concept of dysfunctions is also central to his argument that functionalism is not essentially conservative.

**Manifest and latent functions**
Manifest functions are the consequences that people observe or expect, latent functions are those that are neither recognized nor intended. While Parsons tends to emphasize the manifest functions of social behavior, Merton sees attention to latent functions as increasing the understanding of society: the distinction between manifest and latent
forces the sociologist to go beyond the reasons individuals give for their actions or for the existence of customs and institutions; it makes them look for other social consequences that allow these practices’ survival and illuminate the way society works.

**Functional alternatives**

Functionalists believe societies must have certain characteristics in order to survive. Merton shares this view but stresses that at the same time particular institutions are not the only ones able to fulfill these functions; a wide range of functional alternatives may be able to perform the same task. This notion of functional alternative is important because it alerts sociologists to the similar functions different institutions may perform and it further reduces the tendency of functionalism to imply approval of the status quo.

**Merton’s theory of deviance**

The term anomie, derived from Emile Durkheim, for Merton means: a discontinuity between cultural goals and the legitimate means available for reaching them. Applied to the United States he sees the American dream as an emphasis on the goal of monetary success but without the corresponding emphasis on the legitimate avenues to march toward this goal. This leads to a considerable amount of (the Parsonian term of) deviance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural goals</th>
<th>Institutionalized means</th>
<th>Modes of adaptation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Conformity</td>
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<tr>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Innovation</td>
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<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>Ritualism</td>
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<td>Retreatism</td>
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<td>±</td>
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<td>Rebellion</td>
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Conformity is the attaining of societal goals by societal accepted means, while innovation is the attaining of those means in unaccepted ways. Ritualism is the acceptance of the means but the forfeit of the goals. Retreatism is the rejection of both the means and the goals and rebellion is a combination of rejection of societal goals and means and a substitution of other goals and means. Innovation and ritualism are the pure cases of anomie as Merton defined it because in both cases there is a discontinuity between goals and means.

**Publications**

* Social Theory and Social Structure (1949)
* The Sociology of Science (1973)
* Sociological Ambivalence (1976)