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Q3(c)

What, according to Merton, is the difference between 'unanticipated consequences' and 'latent functions' ? Give examples to elaborate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2019 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx

Sociological Thinkers: Karl Marx - Historical materialism, mode of production, alienation, class struggle; Emile Durkheim - Division of labour, social fact, suicide, religion and society; Max Weber - Social action, ideal types, authority, bureaucracy, protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Talcott Parsons - Social system, pattern variables; Robert K. Merton - Latent and manifest functions, conformity and deviance, reference groups; Mead - Self and identity.

Core demand of the question

- What, according to Merton, is the difference between 'unanticipated consequences' and 'latent functions'? Give examples to elaborate
- Keep the answer within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

- **Unanticipated consequences:** unforeseen results of purposive action (Merton 1936).
- **Latent functions:** unrecognized contributions of a practice to the system.

A surprise is not automatically a function.

Rain dance, conspicuous consumption, and scheme leakage illustrate the cut.

Keep actor aim and system use distinct.

Introduction

Robert K. Merton distinguished the outcome of action from the function of a practice for a system. Unanticipated consequences are unforeseen results of purposive action. Latent functions are unrecognized and unintended contributions to social order. They overlap, but they are not the same cut.

Body

Unanticipated consequences

- In his 1936 essay, purposive action can yield results the actor did not want or see: ignorance, error, imperious values, and self-defeating prediction.
- Example: a ban on liquor that grows a black market. The aim was temperance; the surprise is a new trade.

Latent functions

- In Social Theory and Social Structure, manifest functions are intended and recognized. Latent functions are neither.
- Example: the rain dance may fail as meteorology (manifest claim) yet bind the clan (latent function). Veblen's conspicuous consumption displays status while claiming utility.

The difference

- Unanticipated consequences are about the actor's purpose and surprise. They may be dysfunctional.
- Latent functions are about the system's ongoing uses, which an observer names. A surprise is not yet a function.
- **Hopi ritual and Indian temple festivals can illustrate both:** a missed rain (unanticipated relative to the prayer) and solidarity (latent function).

Elaboration

- **MGNREGA** may intend rural work and also, latently, weaken tied labour. A leak of funds is an unanticipated consequence, not a function unless someone shows a system use.

Flow diagram

Purposive action -> Unanticipated consequences

Ongoing practice -> Latent function

Unanticipated consequences -> May be eufunction or dysfunction

Latent function -> System use unrecognized

Conclusion

For Merton, unanticipated consequences are surprises of action. Latent functions are hidden contributions to a social pattern. The first can harm; the second is a functional claim. Keep the actor's aim and the system's use on separate lines.

Facts & figures

Merton 1936

Essay on unanticipated consequences of purposive social action.

Manifest / latent

Intended-recognized versus unintended-unrecognized functions.

Veblen

Conspicuous consumption as a classic latent-status function behind a utility story.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)

Intended employment; possible latent weakening of tied labour; leakage as unanticipated harm.