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Q1(d)

Is reference group theory a universally applicable model? Elucidate

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2023 · Sociology GS 1 · 10 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Is reference group theory a universally applicable model? Elucidate
- Keep the elucidation within a 10-mark length

Revision summary

Merton's reference group is the standard of comparison, not always the group of membership.

Stouffer's soldiers showed that satisfaction follows **relative deprivation**.

Sanskritisation and career copying are Indian and occupational uses of the same idea.

The model is widely applicable. It is not universal where groups are closed or comparisons are punished.

Multiple conflicting reference groups limit any single-group version of the theory.

Introduction

Robert K. Merton developed reference group theory to show that people judge their own rewards by groups they use as standards, not only by groups they belong to. The model is widely useful. It is not universal if universal means that one group, one comparison, and one outcome fit every society.

Body

What the theory states

- A membership group is the group to which a person belongs. A reference group is the group used for comparison, imitation, or rejection.
- **Anticipatory socialisation** is the learning of a non-membership group's norms in the hope of entry, as in a recruit copying officers.
- **Relative deprivation**, already visible in Samuel Stouffer's *The American Soldier*, showed that satisfaction tracks comparison, not absolute pay.
- **Merton linked this to anomie**: when culturally approved goals are seen through a reference group that one cannot join, innovation and retreatism become likely.

Where it applies

- Career mobility, caste **Sanskritisation** as described by M. N. Srinivas, consumer status, and party identification all use reference groups.

- **Positive and negative reference groups both work:** a youth may copy a city professional and reject a stigmatised neighbourhood.
- The model travels because comparison is a general feature of stratified life, not a United States-only habit.

Limits on universality

- It assumes a relatively open field of visible groups and media images. In a tightly closed estate, comparison may be forbidden or fatal.
- **It underplays material constraint:** a landless labourer may know the landlord's life and still lack any path of anticipatory entry.
- Multiple reference groups conflict. Gender, caste, and class pull in different directions, which Merton noted but did not fully theorise as intersection.
- Cross-cultural work must not treat the American enlisted man as the template for every comparison.

Flow diagram

Membership group -> Self judgement
Reference group -> Self judgement
Self judgement -> Relative deprivation or conformity
Stouffer American Soldier -> Relative deprivation or conformity
Anticipatory socialisation -> Reference group

Conclusion

Reference group theory is a powerful and widely applicable model of comparison, **relative deprivation**, and **anticipatory socialisation**. It is not a universal law that one group explains every judgement. It works where people can see other groups and can imagine movement. It weakens where closure, coercion, or conflicting standards block that imagination.

Facts & figures

Robert K. Merton

Systematised reference group theory, anticipatory socialisation, and the link to anomie.

The American Soldier

Stouffer's wartime study that showed satisfaction tracked comparison, not absolute conditions.

Anticipatory socialisation

Learning the norms of a group one hopes to join before membership is granted.

Sanskritisation

Srinivas's account of lower castes adopting the practices of a locally dominant higher caste as a reference.

Relative deprivation

The gap between what a person has and what a reference group leads that person to expect.

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