

**VALUES AND CAREER CHOICE - REVISITING ROBERT MERTON'S  
REFERENCE GROUP THEORY**

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***Abstract***

*Taking into consideration group culture as the default reference framework for all individual options including educational ones, professional values can be defined as group values, more specifically values related to the specific culture of a social group. We intend to re-evaluate the relevance of Merton's group theory in investigating the empirical correlation between students' professional values and the particular study program they chose. Groups of students, formed by choosing and following a particular study program, can legitimately be treated as professional socializing groups. During the whole period of university socialization students start to learn, in their own study groups, about their future professional role, assimilating characteristic values, adopting attitudes and acquiring knowledge and skills specific to the profession they chose to prepare for. That is why the notion of social compliance appears to be particularly fertile. It directly refers to the conformation of the individuals with the current rules and expectations of their groups of belonging, primary as well as secondary ones, with both of them consisting of sufficiently distinct subcultures to be taken into account. Structural Functionalism confers a very much needed sociological coherence to group theory. As a motivational aspect of career orientation, the regulatory influence of the reference groups brings to the forefront educational socialization as a group process, helping us address the issue of variation in values according to elected study programs.*

**Keywords:** *group theory, reference groups, professional values, social compliance, career orientation;*

## **Introduction**

Regarding the sociological aspects of educational socialization, we are mainly interested in the influence of values on career orientation. The group remains the privileged social context and the default reference framework for all individual options, including educational ones. We intend to evaluate group theory capacity to inform the empirical investigation of the correlation between the students' professional values and the study program they chose.

The Functionalist view brings a much-needed sociological coherence to group theory by taking into account the undeniable influence of structural variables like social status, family culture and local market opportunities on individual career choices. Occupational choices can be analyzed starting from the premise that they appear as a result of the relationship between family primary influences, actual scholar or educational achievements and the real opportunities offered by various labor markets (Roberts, 1997).

Theories of structural opportunities point out the fact that social boundaries or barriers are already constituted at a structural level. Social groups differ from one another in their specific values hierarchies. Student values can always be analysed as group values. We intend to demonstrate that such a theoretical and methodological decision can be justified by the existence of the social delimitation processes: various social groups are actually separated by more or less explicit social boundaries.

We are directly interested in the way in which the social structure is culturally internalized in institutionalized frameworks as a structured set of values that are normative in the sense that they govern the common behaviour of the members of a particular social group (Merton, 1957).

## **Objectives**

Empirical research on the reproduction of elites highlights the importance of social origin for the career choice. Without being absolutely deterministic, Roberts's conclusion "the working-class children will always have working class jobs" (Roberts, 1995) draws attention to the preeminent role of the social structures in career orientation. Still, the reality of social mobility processes cannot be challenged. That is why we appealed to a concept used ever since the interwar

period, that of reference group. Reference groups, in our case, professions, as we will see, are communities composed of individuals with which former pupils and current students tend to identify as they aspire to be part of them in the future.

Group theory is struggling to describe the social processes by which individuals relate to group values from the perspective of the specific social structure in which these groups are already incorporated. The following questions may arise:

What are the functional or dysfunctional consequences of positive orientation towards other group values than those of their own group?

What social processes initiate, support or influence this orientation?

We intend to re-evaluate the relevance of Merton's group theory in investigating the empirical correlation between students' professional values and the particular study program they chose.

## **Hypotheses**

Professions are occupations that require long-term intellectual training. As a motivational aspect of career orientation, the regulatory influence of the reference groups brings to the forefront educational socialization as a group process.

Our first hypothesis is: *groups of students formed by choosing and following a particular study program can be treated as professional socializing groups.*

Our second hypothesis is: *some degree of variation in their professional values depending on the study program they follow can be expected.*

## **Analysis**

- **Introducing the notion of reference group**

The theory of reference group is part of the family of social influence theories. It aims to explain the issue of individual options at a medium level, emerging from Mead's classic, but surprisingly current concept (Holdsworth and Morgan, 2007) of Generalized Other. Individuals evaluate their own situations by referring to the culture of the group they belong or are willing to belong to. Here comes the role of professional values as an integral part of the group culture. In

this respect, interpreted in terms of social influence rather than determination, two main functions of the reference group can be identified: the normative function and the comparative function (Williams, 1970).

We are mainly interested in the regulatory influence of the reference group, as theorized by Merton, for its motivational aspect: students want acceptance from the reference group they have chosen, in our case their future professional category, aligning their attitudes and internalizing rules and values specific to that particular occupation (Merton, 1957). As part of the anticipatory socialization process, the normative influence implies, first of all, the exposure to information on the reference group, information which is relevant even before the start of the university curriculum, but all the more so throughout it (Yanovitzky and Rimal, 2006).

The comparative influence of groups is related to the social structure as a whole. It is all about a comprehensive sociological concept: group of belonging. Evaluations on their own situations are influenced by the fact of belonging to a certain social category. Individuals in similar situations assess them very differently, depending on the characteristics of their social category.

Robert K. Merton proposes a functionalist explanation for the link between professional values and social role, an explanation that takes into account the institutional and structural conditions that influence, at an individual level, the selection of a certain social group (Merton, 1957). Starting from the fact that students are potential members of professional categories, educational decisions can be described as social processes of choice between alternative social roles, in our case future professional roles. Taking into account university socialization as a predictive professional socialization, their options can be described as interactions between structural variables, with their associated cultural values and situational pressure felt at the individual level.

The problem that interests us directly is the sociological process of assimilation of specific professional values during the formal education period. In this context, we intend to demonstrate that groups of students constituted by choosing a study program can be considered social groups in which anticipatory professional socialization takes place.

- **Anticipatory socialization and professional values**

The paradigm of anticipatory socialization helps us address both the following issues: the variation of professional values according to the study program chosen and the possible conflict

between the system of values with which students enrol at the university and those that are socialized during the studies period. Changing values through education is an aspect of great interest, given the specificity of care professions for example, that have elements of ethics and professional deontology which are included in their university curricula.

Both rules and values are functionally associated with the social role. In this case, values can be defined as ideas and beliefs about what is desirable or undesirable in relation to role performance. As integral aspects of culture, religion, politics and family are sources of values. Socialization can be described as a process of learning the norms and values of a society, a vital process in maintaining social order. It is only in the conditions under which there is a set of values shared by individuals interacting that ordered social relations may exist (Merton, 1957). We are particularly interested in the consensual significance of the notion of value. The existence of common values leads to the cohesion of social groups. In functionalist thinking, the value consensus appears as a result of a successful socialization.

Merton analyses the values as cultural variables of professional socialization. His vision on professional socialization is useful because it allows us to compare the students' values, measuring the variation in values according to their study programs.

The socialization process refers to how individuals are shaped by the culture of the society they are part of, a society that has some social role expectations as regards all its members. This makes the acquisition, at the individual level, of knowledge, attitudes, abilities, and, last but not least, the assimilation of specific values, necessary in order to be successful in playing that role. The content of the socialization process is learning social roles, in this case professional roles as group roles (Merton, 1957).

In this context, we intend to analyse the educational options, already expressed, in the light of the values that students adhered to when it comes to assisting professions. It brings to the forefront the educational socialization as a group process, helping us address the issue of variation in values according to the elected study program.

Although socialization remains, at the individual level, a selective process, its success is invariably measured according to the extent to which social role expectations are met. In this respect, there is a distinction, which is relevant from the perspective of choosing the professional role, the one between the educational stage and the organizational one of professional socialization.

The first stage, the one we are interested in directly, refers to the acquisition of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge specific to a professional subculture, as reflected in the preparation received during the studies, therefore it refers to the anticipation of the role.

The second stage, related to organizational entry, usually after graduating from studies, refers to the processes of adaptation to real role requirements, requirements that may be different from expectations.

The period of formal education, in our case of university studies, can be described as a process of guidance towards the anticipated professional role, of crystallization of professional aspirations and (re)defining, at the individual level, of the value guidelines. The fact of choosing a study program is triggered by all these considerations.

University socialization can be defined as a process by which students start to learn, in their own study group, about their future professional role, assimilating characteristic values, adopting attitudes and acquiring knowledge and skills specific to the profession they chose to prepare for. The anticipated result, relatively predictable, is the existence of an internalized set of provisions that will influence their way to react throughout the variety of future professional situations, ensuring the successful performance of the future role in the current professional society.

Therefore, we address the fact of being in college as a period of anticipatory professional socialization, which can be described at an individual level, as a process of gradual acquisition of rules and internalization of occupational values, a process of compliance with the rules and values of the reference group. Having its origin in social psychology's concerns to explore how individuals select groups they want to be part of, the concepts of group of belonging and reference group become essential for elucidating how the change of values occurs. Social conformism over the values of a reference group, which always appears to be different from the group of belonging, is one of the factors that triggers the processes of anticipatory socialization at the individual level (Ungureanu, 1990). That is why, considered from a sociological viewpoint, it refers not only to individual psychology of educational decisions, but also to the social conditions in which they are expressed, to the link between the chosen group and the social structure as a whole.

In conclusion, their relevance to our approach consists of describing the group as a complex social environment in which individuals are professionally socialized. This, however, may occur in the conditions in which they perceive differently the duration of their own anticipatory socialization (Merton, 1957). As a time in which a certain social action is carried out, the duration

of the university socialization, objectively comprised between the moment when the educational process begins as such and graduation from studies, does not necessarily coincide with the duration, always perceived at the individual level, of the individuals' effective socialization. This is because the duration measures the physical time elapsed between the moments of a social activity, and it varies, therefore, from one individual to another according to the expectations of each and every one of them (Ungureanu, 1990).

Merton identifies four variables of professional socialization during university studies, as anticipatory professional socialization: students' perceptions related to their future profession, students' aspirations, their professional achievement models, their professional values.

At the risk of repeating ourselves, we must bear in mind that by choosing the study program, students choose to prepare for a particular profession. Starting from the premise that formal education is one of the stages of professional socialization, we intend to treat social groups formed by belonging to a particular university study program (student groups) as anticipatory socialization groups.

- **Group values and individual choices**

We want to explore the role of positive orientation to the specific values of a profession in choosing a study program that prepares for its practice. The individual and cultural sense of the notion of value cannot be separated. Even if they are always considered at the individual level, values can be considered expressions or manifestations of that particular group culture, shared in a living, engaging way, by a certain community.

Merton addresses the concept of values in the functional analysis key. In the context of our research, we are particularly interested in how it attempts to elucidate the social function of the various institutional requirements, of the social division of labour and social role expectations. This is because it is directly related to the concept of professional values.

We will see that, according to Merton, the systemic connotation of the concept of value, the relationship between values and the social structure can only be distinguished by their cultural significance. The structural functionality describes the individual analysis of values in terms of *adaptation-assimilation*, not as a negotiation. The group is the privileged social context of assimilation of values.

Values are found in the social system in its entirety, contributing to the maintenance of social order (Merton, 1957). The micro-social level falls under the structural constraints that act from top to bottom, from a macro-social level, constraints that promote or inhibit the occurrence or change of values in situations as different from a cultural point of view, as specific from a historical point of view (Merton, 1957). In this context, related to the issue of occupations on the social scale of values, Merton notices that financial success remains a priority value even among stigmatized occupations (Merton, 1957). The analysis of American culture in the middle of the 20th century highlights a current contrast to the Romanian society of the beginning of the 21st century, the one between the value of success, at the individual level, defined as an accumulation of material wealth and institutional means at the disposal of social actors (Merton, 1957). One of the sources of the social conflict is the contrast between the values accepted at the individual level and the difficulties that appear, at the level of the social structure, when having to live according to them (Merton, 1957). Therefore, professional values cannot be designed outside the social system, cannot be analysed without considering aspects such as the division of labour or social role differences.

Exploring the relationship between values, culture and social structure, Merton describes the attitudes and values on the background of the organic solidarity of a society with a high degree of differentiation. Values are internalized aspects of culture, the presence of which is indicated by the ability of individuals to act in agreement with common purposes predetermined at the structural level. That is why individual accession to common values confers cohesion to social structures, understood as social relationship systems.

In functionalist thinking, the social structure is the one that pre-establishes the values, favouring the action in agreement with them for those who occupy certain social layers. Although there are prevalence values, which differ according to distinct subgroups, the social “mandate” of values is to maintain social order in its entirety, by perpetuating cultural models operating in this respect.

As we understand through the social structure a set of social relations in which the members of society or group are employed, the cultural structure is a set of normative values governing the common conducts of the members of that society or social group (Merton, 1957).

## **Findings**

Structural variables, such as social status or class, influence cultural values, favouring or actively preventing individual action in accordance with these values and rules. When the values assumed and the goals declared are contradictory to the actual capacity of individuals to act in agreement with them, then values can generate flagrant conflict with what is comprised in their social mandate.

Values and purposes are transmitted culturally within social differentiation processes, processes that make visible the tension created by the conflict between cultural purposes and individual capacity, often structurally restricted, to achieve them using only those legitimate, socially prescribed, means (Merton, 1957).

The individual always remains between the goals, that are socially assumed, and the institutional means at his disposal in achieving these goals. This raises the issue of individual internalization of values, a problem that Structural Functionalism conceives as a process of individual adaptation to the constant pressure of social requirements.

Although Merton does not speak about socialization, in our case of professional socialization, as a process of interaction with socializing elements, expressed in the individual negotiation and renegotiation of roles, this does not mean that the individual remains passive. It must be said that the functionalist view on the nature of the relationship between individuals and the socialization instances, does not automatically circumvent the issue of free will (Becker, 1970). There is a tension inherent to the individual existence as an act of adaptation to society. Individuals are actively adapting to a distinct culture that is always proposed in an existing social structure. The explicit rejection of institutional rules or the repudiation of generally accepted values inevitably generates feelings of fault and qualms of conscience or leads to supporting rationalizations, a more subtle expression of a problem remaining unsolved forever (Merton, 1957).

As a conclusion, culture and social structure are intertwined, they cannot be taken separately. Certain values prevail in a community because they are culturally induced, based on the conditions of the social structure as a whole, as cultural models specific to a social class, in our case of a professional group. In this respect, Merton develops a typology of modes of adaptation to prevailing values in a culture, ways ranging from acceptance to rejection and/or substitution. Socialized individuals are adapting to these cultural values in ways that vary depending on the

position they hold at a certain time in that particular social structure. A discussion about this typology is relevant to our research because we start from the presumption that students adapt differently to the university subculture as well as to a professional group culture, depending on the study program they have chosen and follow.

The adaptation modes are: compliance, ritualism, withdrawal, innovation and rebellion (Merton, 1957).

We are particularly interested in the pair compliance/innovation as complementary ways of adapting to goals, values and norms that make up the professional culture because it is relevant for the career choice.

By compliance at the individual level with the already established cultural models, is kept the social order, as well as the macro-structural continuity. The compliance can be generally defined as a positive conduct, oriented towards the prevalent values of the society. What we are interested in is the fact that the anticipated outcome of compliance is social acceptance within the groups of belonging, the situation of social compliance.

The notion of social compliance is particularly fertile for our research for two reasons.

Firstly, because it refers to the conformation of the individual with the current rules and expectations of groups of belonging, whether primary groups such as family, as well as secondary groups such as high schools (profile class), with both of them consisting of sufficiently distinct subcultures to be taken into account.

Secondly, because the attitude of conformity is described as a positive orientation towards the rules of a group which individuals do not yet belong to and which are adopted as a reference framework (Merton, 1957). In our case, it is a process of acceptance in the group of students formed by choosing and following a study program, a process related to educational socialization that potentiates the trend towards the already existing compliance of former high school students (Merton, 1957).

As we said earlier, there are two research directions with relevance to the issue of professional values. The following questions may arise:

What are the functional or dysfunctional consequences of positive orientation towards other group values than those of their own group?

What social processes initiate, support or influence this orientation?

The two theoretical interrogations introduce the theory we are guided by, the theory of assimilation of values in the context of the passage from the group of belonging to the reference group. To explain, we will further analyse the group as a social context of assimilation of values.

Provided that values express what is considered significant from a social viewpoint in a particular socio-historical context, culture, in a broader sense, can be defined as a complex of common values and norms remaining functional in its entirety, with all the diversity that can be potentially contentious, of specific values, to which different social groups adhere.

We start from Merton's observation that values are transmitted from generation to generation, mainly in the primary but also in the secondary social groups. Parents are the "transmission belt" (Merton, 1957) of the values and purposes of groups they are part of, and more specifically of the social class with which they are identified. During primary socialization, the detectable cultural values in parents' daily behaviour are the first ones to be internalized.

As a secondary socializing element, education systems perpetuate the prevalent values in a particular social universe. There are always, between groups, differences in value orientations, in attitudes and ways of thinking that can become incompatible, potential sources of conflict. Competing groups contest each other both the validity and the legitimacy of the discourse universe and, on this basis, an extensive typology of alienation from common values can be developed. For us it is enough to recognize that specific values, internalized during university education, are an integral part of professional culture (Merton, 1957).

## **Conclusions**

Professional values can legitimately be considered group values, more specifically values related to the culture of a particular social group. Professions are occupations that require long-term intellectual training. As an institutionalized process, university education implies not only the existence of distinct universes of discourse, but also the anticipatory socialization of specific professional values. That is why various groups of students, formed by choosing and following a particular study program, can be treated as professional socializing groups. Some degree of variation in students' professional values, depending on the particular study program they follow, is to be expected.

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