UNIT 30 THEORY OF REFERENCE GROUP — MERTON

Structure

30.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to

- understand the concept of reference group

- explain why human beings, in order to evaluate their role-performance and achievements, choose different reference groups: membership groups as well as, non-membership groups

- appreciate the continual possibility of an experience of relative deprivation and human restlessness because of human beings' perpetual inclination to different reference groups

- look at your own biography, creatively and critically: how you choose your reference individuals and reference groups and accordingly, shape your life-style, **worldview** and behaviour.

30.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit you learnt about Merton's contribution to functional analysis. This unit intends to make you familiar with the theory of reference group behaviour particularly, the way Robert Merton has elaborated and substantiated it in his famous book (1949) *Social Theory and Social Structure*.

To begin with, an attempt has been made to make you appreciate the concept of reference group, its many varieties in Section 30.2.

Then, you would come to know the determinants, structural, institutional, cultural and psychological factors that continue to stimulate human beings to choose different reference groups, membership as well as non-membership groups. This is elaborated in Section 30.3

And, finally, you would learn the structural elements of reference group behaviour the possibility of observability and visibility of the norms, values and role-performance of group members, the impact of non-conformity and the dynamics of role-sets and status-sets.

30.2 CONCEPT OF REFERENCE GROUP

Not much need to be said about the fact that you live in groups. You are a social being and to live in a society is to live amidst relationships. What else is a group? It is a network of relationships.

As a student, for example, you belong to a group of other students with whom you continually interact. You know what kind of relationship you expect from your group members; you also know what others expect from you. In other words, the way you conduct yourself, the way you behave and relate is always being guided by the group you belong to. As a student you cannot conduct yourself unless your behaviour is being shaped by the patterned expectations of the group of students. This is what stabilises your identity as a student.

Likewise, you belong to a family. The family, as you already know, is an important primary group that shapes your behaviour and expectations. Unless you are absolutely rootless, you cannot think of your being without imagining yourself in series of relationships with your parents, brothers, sisters, cousins and colleagues.

You must, therefore, realise that to lead a normal existence is not to live in isolation. You live amidst relationships and you give your consent to the expectations of the groups to which you belong. Now we are close to an understanding of reference groups.

What is a reference group all about? A reference group is one to which you always refer in order to evaluate your achievements, your role-performance, your aspirations and ambitions. It is only a reference group that tells you whether you are right or wrong, whether whatever you are doing, you are doing badly or well. So one might say that the membership groups to which you belong are your reference groups.

The problem does not, however, end here. Life is more complex. Even non-membership groups, the groups to which you do not belong, may act like reference groups. This is not really very surprising. Because life is mobile and time and again you come to know of the lives and ways of those who do not belong to your group. At times, this makes you wonder and ask why it is that there are others who are more powerful, more prestigious than you.

It if, because of this comparison that you often tend to feel deprived. You aspire to become a member of a group to which you do not belong but which is more powerful, or more prestigious. As a result, this time in order to evaluate your achievements, performance, you refer to a non-membership group.

Take an example. You are a student. You remain burdened with your course materials and examinations. You are really working hard and you have no time to relax. Then you come to know an altogether different group, say, a group of cricketers who are as young as you are. Yet, you see that cricketers play cricket, go abroad, enjoy life, earn money, and newspapers write about them. The 'success story' of the group of cricketers fascinates you. While comparing yourself with them you feel that as a student you are deprived. The cricketers, then, begin to act like your reference group. As a result, you begin to give more time to cricket than to your course materials with a hope that one day you too would become a cricketer and lead that kind of life.

The fact, therefore, is that not solely membership groups, even non-membership groups act like reference groups. Human beings look at themselves not solely through the eyes of their group members, but also through the eyes of those who belong to other groups.

With these clarifications it would not be difficult for you to understand how Robert Merton evolves his theory of reference groups in his famous book *Social Theory and Social Structure* (1949).

30.2.0 Concept of Relative Deprivation

Merton's understanding of relative deprivation is closely tied to his treatment of reference group and reference group behaviour. Essentially, Merton speaks of relative deprivation while examining the findings of *The American Soldier*, a work published in 1949. In this work an attempt was made to examine how the American soldiers looked at themselves and evaluated their role-performance, career achievements, etc.

Now reflect on the simple, yet meaningful finding of The American Soldier from which the meaning of relative deprivation will become clear:

"Comparing himself with his unmarried associates in the Army, the married man could feel that induction demanded greater sacrifice from him than from them; and comparing himself with the married Soldiers, he could feel that he had been called on for sacrifices which they were escaping altogether". Herein we find the kernel of what Merton called relative deprivation. This is not surprising. Happiness or deprivation are not absolutes, they depend on the scale of measure as well as on the frame of reference. The married soldier is not asking, what he gets and what other married soldiers like him get. Instead, he is asking what he is deprived of. Now his unmarried associates in the army are relatively free. They don't have wives and children, so they are free from the responsibility from which married soldiers cannot escape. In other words, married soldiers are deprived of the kind of freedom that their unmarried associates are enjoying. Likewise, the married soldier feels deprived when he compares himself with his civilian married friend. Because the civilian friend can live with his wife and children and fulfil his responsibility. The married soldier therefore, feels deprived that by virtue of being a soldier he cannot afford to enjoy the normal, day to day family life of a civilian.

It is precisely because of the kind of reference group with which the married soldier compares his lot that he feels deprived. Likewise, as another finding shows, "The overseas soldier, relative to soldiers still at home, suffered a greater break with home ties and with many of the amenities of life in the United States to which he was accustomed".

Figure 30.1: Concept of Relative Deprivation

An Indian student in a prestigious university in the United States may have sufficient reasons to feel happy. He has access to a better academic atmosphere - more books, more research materials, more seminars, and so on. But if he refuses to remain contented with this academic world and thinks of an alternative scale of evaluation which values above all else a home life with his parents, brothers and sisters then his 'happiness' would begin to disappear. So while comparing himself with his Indian friends enjoying the intimate company of their family members, he may feel deprived. This is what makes the study of reference group pretty interesting. Men and women always compare their lot with others. This explains their restlessness and continual search for change and mobility.

30.2.1 Concept of Group and Group Membership

Perhaps a study of reference group requires an elementary understanding of what a group is all about. Merton speaks of three characteristics of a group and group memberships.

i) First, there is an objective criterion, viz., the frequency of interaction. In other words, the sociological concept of a group refers to a number of people frequently interact with one another.

ii) A second criterion is that the interacting persons define themselves as members. In other words, they feel that they have patterned expectations or forms of interaction, which are morally binding on them and on other members.

iii) The third criterion is that the persons in interaction are defined by others as 'belonging to the group'. These others include fellow members as well as non-members.

It is in this context that you should know how groups differ from collectivities and social categories. There is no doubt that all groups are collectivities, but all collectivities are not groups. The collectivities that lack the criterion of frequent interaction among members are not groups. Nation, for example, is a collectivity, not a group, because all those who belong to a nation do not interact with one another. Nation as a collectivity contains groups and sub-groups within it.

Again social categories are aggregates of social statuses, the occupants of which are not necessarily in social interaction. For instance, all those who have got the same sex or age or marital condition or income form social categories but not groups.

In other words, unlike collectivities or social categories, membership groups shape human beings' day-to-day behaviour more clearly and more concretely. Group members are conscious of their identities, they are aware of what to do and what not to do. As a result, for them, group norms are morally binding.

30.2.2 Concept of Non-Membership

As Merton says, there is nothing new in the fact that men and women conform to their own group. But what makes the study of reference group particularly interesting is that "they frequently orient themselves to groups other than their own in shaping their behaviour and evaluations".

It is at this juncture that Merton wants you to appreciate the dynamics of non-membership. It is true that non-members are those who do not meet the interactional and definitional criteria of membership. But, at the same time, as Merton says, all non-members are not of the same kind. Broadly speaking. non-members can be divided into three categories.

i) Some may aspire to membership in the group

ii) Others may be indifferent toward such affiliation

iii) Still others may be motivated to remain unaffiliated with the group.

Think of an example. Suppose your father is an industrialist owning a factory. Naturally, as far as the workers in the factory are concerned, you are a non-member. You do not belong to their group. There are, however, three possibilities. Suppose you are deeply sensitive, you have read Marx and you tend to believe seriously that it is the working class that alone can create a new world free from injustice and exploitation. In other words, despite being a non-member, you want to belong to the workers, share their experiences and, accordingly, alter your life-style. Then, as Merton would say, a non-membership group becomes a positive reference group for you.

Then, there is another possibility. You do not bother. You are contented with your contemporary existence and as a result the workers do not have any impact on your life. In other words, you remain a non-member and never do you want to belong to the group of the workers.

Now think of the third possibility. You remain a non-member, but instead of remaining indifferent you hate the workers, you feel that the workers are neither intelligent nor educated, and that there is nothing to admire in their culture. In order to retain your status and separate yourself from the workers, you evolve counter-norms. Then, the workers, Merton would say, constitute a negative reference group.

Check Your Progress 1

i)   What is 'relative deprivation'? Give an example. Write in about six lines.

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ii) Give an example of a non-membership reference group. Use about three lines.

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30.2.3 Anticipatory Socialisation

Merton speaks of anticipatory socialisation in the context of non-membership reference groups. It is simple. It is like preparing oneself for the group to which an individual aspires but does not belong. It is like adopting the values, life-styles of a non-membership reference group. For an individual, says Merton, anticipatory socialisation 'may serve the twin functions of aiding his rise into that group and of easing his adjustment after he has become part of it'.

Think of a living example and then what Merton says would become clearer to you. Suppose a village boy born in a lower middle class household accepts Doon School boys as his reference group. As a process of anticipatory socialisation he begins to emulate the 'smartness' of Doon School boys. Now if this village boy really succeeds in getting an entry into Doon School, his anticipatory socialisation would indeed be functional, it would be easier for him to adjust himself to his new role.

While Merton speaks of the possibility of functional consequences of anticipatory socialisation, he however, does not fail to see its dysfunctional consequences. If the system is very closed (and it is for you to see whether it is really so) then this lower middle class village boy would never get an entry into Doon School. In that case anticipatory socialisation would be dysfunctional for him. There are two reasons. First, he would not be able to become a member of the group to which he aspires. And secondly, because of anticipatory socialisation, imitation of the values of a non-membership group, he would be disliked by the members of his own group. As Merton says, he would be reduced to being a 'marginal man'! That is why, says Merton, anticipatory socialisation is functional for the individual only 'within a relatively open social structure providing for mobility'. By the same token it would be dysfunctional, in a 'relatively closed social structure'.

Merton makes another interesting point. In a closed system the individual is unlikely to choose a non-membership group as a reference group. That is why, in a closed system where the rights, prerequisites and obligations of each stratum are generally held to be morally right, an individual even if his objective conditions are not good, would feel less deprived. But in an open system in which the individual always compares his lot with relatively better off and the more privileged non-membership reference groups he remains perpetually unhappy and discontented.

Activity 1

Look at your friends. And try to examine what kind of non-membership reference groups they choose. Write a note of about one page. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students at your Study Centre.

30.2.4 Positive and Negative Reference Groups

Reference groups, says Merton, are of two kinds. First, a positive reference group is one, which one likes and takes seriously in order to shape one's behaviour and evaluate one's achievements and performance. Secondly, there is also a negative reference group which one dislikes and rejects and which, instead of providing norms to follow, provokes one to create counter-norms. As Merton says, "the positive type involves motivated assimilation of the norms of the group or the standards of the group as a basis for self-appraisal; the negative type involves motivated rejection, i.e., not merely non-acceptance of norms but the formation of counter-norms".

It is not difficult to think of an example. Imagine reaction of the colonised to their **colonial masters**. Now you would always find some "natives"

who get hypnotised by the success story of the colonisers, they follow their life-style, speak their language, emulate their food habit. In other words, for them, the colonisers act like a positive reference group.

But then again you would find some natives who hate the colonisers for their exploitation, arrogance, and brutality. Instead of emulating their norms, they create counter-norms in order to separate themselves from the colonisers. In other words, for them, the colonisers act like a negative reference group.

Check Your Progress 2

i)   Which of the following statement is true?

    a)   Under all circumstances, anticipatory socialisation is functional for the individual.

    b)   Anticipatory socialisation is functional in a closed social structure.

    c)   Anticipatory socialisation is functional only within a relatively open social structure providing for mobility.

ii)   What is the difference between positive and negative reference groups? Write in about four lines.

30.3   DETERMINANTS OF REFERENCE GROUP

It is necessary to know the factors that determine one's choice of reference groups. That is why, Merton speaks of innumerable possibilities, the way men choose reference individuals, select among different membership groups and finally even their choice of non-membership group. Merton goes on to elaborate on the determinants that stimulate the same individual to choose different reference groups for different purposes. An understanding of all these determinants would definitely help you to comprehend the dynamics of reference group behaviour.

30.3.0 Reference Individuals

It is necessary to remember that men select not only reference groups, they select reference individuals also. This is because individuals with their charisma, status, glamour often attract people. For instance, cricketers as a group may not have much appeal to you, but Sachin Tendulkar as an individual does. Thus, in spite of the fact that cricketers as such do not constitute your reference group. Sachin Tendulkar may, however, become a reference individual.

The reference individual has often been described as a role-model. Yet, says Merton, there is a difference. The concept of role-model can be thought of as more restricted in scope, denoting a more limited identification with an individual in only one or a few selected roles. But the person who identifies himself with a reference individual will seek to "approximate the behaviour and values of that individual in his several roles".

Figure 30.2: Concept of Role Model

In other words, when you accept Sachin Tendulkar as a reference individual, you tend to identify yourself with the innumerable roles and habits of Sachin Tendulkar, the way he speaks and smiles, the kind of clothes he wears, the way he deals with women, the way he acts like a model! As Merton says, biographers, editors of 'fan magazines' and gossip columnists' further encourage people to choose their reference individuals.

Take up a glossy magazine at random. You will see that the columnists do not write solely about the professional activity of a film star, a cricketer, or a musician but they also write about their "affairs", their "private lives". The assumption is obvious. When a celebrity is chosen as a reference individual, one tends to accept everything he or she does, from their hair style to their food habit.

30.3.1 Selection of Reference Groups among Membership Groups

You belong to innumerable groups, right from your own family to a neighbourhood club, to a caste group, to a political party, to a religious organisation. The question is do you take all groups seriously while shaping your behaviour or evaluating your achievements and role-performance? As you know, not all membership groups are equally important, only some of them are selected as reference groups by you.

How do you select? A question of this kind cannot be answered unless you know that there are different kinds of membership groups. As Merton says, a "suitable classification" of groups is therefore necessary. Merton evolves a provisional list of twenty six group properties.

For instance, Merton says, groups differ widely in the degree of distinctness with which membership can be defined, ranging from some informal groups with indistinct boundaries to those with clear-cut and formalised processes of "admission" to membership.

Again group may differ on the degree of engagement that the group encourages or promotes among its members. There are many other properties on the basis of which groups can differ; expected duration of the group, its open or closed character, degree of social differentiation, and degree of expected conformity to the norms of the group.

Now once you understand the nature of non-membership groups, it is for you to decide how and why you select some of these as reference groups. You need examples. Your engagement with your family members is much more than, say, with the members of a film club and so it is quite likely that, as far as the major decisions of life are concerned, not the film club, but your family is likely to serve as a reference group.

Likewise, a membership group which is not going to last for long (for instance, a class of undergraduate students which is not going to last for more than three years) is unlikely to be chosen as a reference group. But, instead, a group, which is, really going to last, a kinship, or a caste group, or a professional group, does indeed serve as a reference group. This is perhaps the reason why there are many for whom not their college friends (college is, after all, a temporary affair) but their caste or kinship groups play a decisive role in shaping their lives. A Brahmin boy, despite being a student of a modern institution, prefers to marry a Brahmin girl!

30.3.2 Selection of Non-membership Groups

You must understand why and under what circumstances men choose non-membership groups as their reference groups. According to Merton, there are primarily three factors. First, the selection of reference groups is largely governed by the capacity of certain groups to 'confer some prestige in terms of the institutional structure of that society'. This is simple. Not all groups are equally powerful or prestigious in the society. For instance, it has often been found that the university teachers in India often compare their lot with the IAS Officers. In other words, for the university teachers, the IAS officers become a reference group. The reason is simple. In terms of the institutional structure of modern Indian society, the IAS officers enjoy more power, more prestige than the university teachers do. The non-membership group that does not have much power or prestige hardly becomes a reference group.

Secondly, it has to be examined, what kind of people generally accept non-membership groups as their reference groups. As Merton says, it is generally the "isolates" in a group who may be particularly motivated to adopt the values of non-membership group as 'normative frames of reference'. The reason is obvious. The 'isolates', because of their sensitivity or rebelliousness or because of their intense urge for mobility, do not remain contented with the groups to which they belong. As a result, it is more likely that they would be stimulated to adopt the values of non-membership groups. For example, Merton speaks of 'the disenchanted member of the elite' who adopts the political orientation of a class less powerful than his own.

Thirdly, as has already been discussed, a 'social system with relatively high rate of social mobility' will tend to make far widespread orientation to non-membership groups as reference groups. This is naturally so for

only in an open system people come to know of groups other than their own and feel tempted to alter their positions continually.

Activity 2

Draw a list of possible reference individuals you may like to choose in order to give a new meaning to your life. For example, a film star, a politician, a cricketer, etc. Write a note of one page. Compare, if possible, your answer with those of other students at your Study Centre.

30.3.3 Variation in Reference Groups for Differing Values and Norms

Why do you choose a reference group? There may be many reasons. For instance, you choose the Gandhians as your reference group because you feel that the Gandhians are a dedicated lot and you accept their politico-economic ideals. But that does not mean that you give your consent to everything that the Gandhians do. You may not agree with their 'conservative' attitude towards life - brahmacharya, vegetarianism etc. Regarding your life-style, food habit or sexual morals, you may take the liberals as your reference group.

That is why, says Merton, "it should not be assumed that the same groups uniformly serve as reference groups for the same individuals in every phase of their behaviour"

So, ultimately, the choice of reference groups depends on the nature and quality of norms and values one is interested in. The group that serves as a reference group for one's political ideal may not have any meaning as far as one's religious ideals are concerned. It is, therefore, not difficult to see that the same individuals who vote for the Communist Party may have positive inclination towards a religious institution like the Ramakrishna Mission!

30.3.4 Selection of Reference Groups among Status-categories or Sub-groups involving Sustained Interaction

Think of a student's dilemma, having two identities. First, she is a member of a status category of students. Secondly, she is also a member of a sub-group along with her parents, husband, brothers, sisters and friends as co-members.

Now is it always reasonable to assume that the student's union may provoke her to boycott classes in defiance of her sub-group's opinions. Because of her direct and sustained interaction with the members of her sub-group - parents, husband, brothers, sisters and friends - she may eventually be convinced that it is not correct to boycott classes no matter what the provocation. In other words, not her status-category (student as a different group), but her sub-group becomes a reference group, as far as the question of student politics is concerned.

In other words, the selection of reference groups is complex. That is why, while speaking of voting behaviour, Merton says that a formal organisation

like a trade union as a whole serves as a potential reference group for only some members of the union, while for others immediate associates in the union serve as the reference function.

This, however, does not mean that a sub-group (a primary group such as, the family for instance) always serves as a reference group. Merton says when conflicting value orientations obtain in the primary group, its mediating role becomes lessened or even negligible and the influence of the larger society becomes much more binding.

You can perhaps experience the truth of this statement from your own life. There may be divergent opinions on love marriage in your own family. Your parents perhaps dislike it, your elder brother is ambivalent, and your sister gives her consent to it. Under these circumstances, it is quite likely that instead of relying on your own family, you tend to give your consent to what your generation thinks, the way young boys and girls like you think of marriage. This explains a phenomenon called '**generation gap**'.

Check Your Progress 3

i) What are the factors behind the selection of non-membership reference groups? Write in about five lines.

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ii) Is it true that a 'status-category' always serves as a reference group? State your reasons. Write in about five lines.

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30.4   STRUCTURAL ELEMENTS OF REFERENCE GROUPS

Not to know the structural elements of reference groups is to miss a great deal. Without this awareness you would not be able to appreciate the fullness of Robert Merton's contribution to the study of reference groups. He questions how, for example, the structure of a group allows its authorities and members to have knowledge, partial or complete of the norms, values and role-performance. Merton demonstrates how non-conformity to the in-group (which is not the same as deviant behaviour) shows the possibility

of non-membership groups serving as reference groups. Moreover, Merton clarifies how one minimises the degree of conflict resulting from the structural consequences of role-sets and status-sets.

30.4.0 Observability and Visibility: Patterned Avenues of Information about Norms, Values and Role-performance

It is quite obvious that while comparing one's lot with that of others one must have some knowledge of the situation in which those others find themselves. In other words, as Merton says, the theory of reference group behaviour must include some treatment of channels of communication through which this knowledge is gained.

Before you go further, think of a concrete situation. Suppose as a student you belong to an institution having its own norms and values. Naturally, you would like to behave and orient yourself according to the norms and values of that institution. The question you can no longer escape is whether your role-performance can be compared to that of others in the same institution.

But how do you really know how other group members are performing? How do you really know what sort of norms and values others have accepted? It is really difficult to have complete knowledge of these norms and of actual role-performances. Your own friends, other students or co-workers in the same institution may not always be willing to tell you what they are really doing and how seriously they take the norms and values of that institution. So it all depends on the structure of the group. Perhaps in a democratic or egalitarian group in which members are free and open, uninhibited communication is possible and it is easier to have knowledge of the actual happenings of the group. But does it always happen this way?

It is at this juncture that Merton raises an important point. Not everyone can have equal knowledge. Generally those in authority have substantial knowledge of these norms, far greater than those held by other individual members of the group. Merton believes this happens because both norms and role-performance have to be visible if the structure of authority is to operate effectively. The head of your institution and other authorities have access to a series of mechanisms through which they observe the students and have better knowledge of their actual role-performance.

Yet, Merton says, there is a limit to the degree of visibility and observability. There is also the "need for privacy". For example, the student members are likely to resist if the university authorities exceed their limits and try to keep themselves informed about every detail of student life. What is, therefore, needed is a "functionally optimum degree of visibility".

So, as you can see it is very difficult to have complete knowledge of the norms and values of a group as well as of the actual role-performance of its members. The impossibility of complete visibility is likely to make you somewhat skeptical or uncertain about the norms and values of the membership group.

Perhaps one tends to feel that there is a gap between the ideal and the real. But this uncertainty or disillusionment about one's own membership group does not prevail while one looks at non-membership groups. This is what is meant by the saying that the grass appears greener on the other side of the fence. Generally, the outsiders tend to develop unrealistic images of non-membership groups.

Think of a simple example. As non-members, there are many Indians who believe that the Americans have resolved all their problems, and that there is no scarcity, or corruption in America. But this is not true since we can tell from a closer look that American society too has its own problems. There is a high crime rate there with a rising rate of divorce, delinquency, etc.

30.4.1 Non-Conformity as Type of Reference Group Behaviour

The study of reference group is going to make you aware of another structural consequence, the impact of non-conformity.

First, you should understand what non-conformity is all about. Non-conformity to the norms of an in-group is equivalent to conformity to the norms of an out-group. But, as Merton says, non-conformity should not be equated with deviant behaviour. There are many differences between the two.

First, unlike the criminal, the non-conformist announces his dissent. Secondly, the non-conformist is not an opportunist. They challenge the legitimacy of the norms and expectations and reject them. But the criminal does not have the courage to reject their legitimacy. He does not agree that theft is right and murder virtuous, he or she simply finds it expedient to violate the norms and evade them. Thirdly, the non-conformists believe that they are gifted with a 'higher morality' and want to alter the norms of the group accordingly. The criminal does not have, however, any such vision of morality.

The experiences of the non-conformists in the context of non-membership reference groups are likely to have structural implications for the membership group. In Merton's view, the non-conformists are often considered to be 'masters'. They are felt to have courage and have demonstrated the capacity to run large risks.

The fact that the non-conformist "tends to elicit some measure of respect" implies that the membership group begins to become uncertain about itself, about its norms, and values. The non-conformists conformity to the non-membership group is the beginning of conflict and tension in the membership group. It is in this regard that one can say that the non-conformists with their conformity to the non-membership reference group begin to initiate the possibility of change and conflict in their own membership group.

30.4.2 Role-sets, Status-sets and Status Sequences

The study of reference group behaviour needs an understanding of the dynamics of role-sets, status-sets and status-sequences. Suppose, for

example, the teachers as a reference group attracts you, and you intend to become a teacher. Not surprisingly then, you should try to understand what the status of a teacher implies, the kind of people he or she has to continually interact with, the difficulties involved in the process of fulfilling his or her responsibility.

It is in this context that Merton speaks of role-sets. Merton says that a particular social status involves not a single associated role, but an array of associated roles. This is called role-set. For example, the single status of a teacher entails not only the role of a teacher in relation to the students, but also an array of other roles relating the occupant of that status to other teachers, the authorities, the parents of the students, etc.

An understanding of role-sets is important. It makes you realise how difficult it is to satisfy everyone in the role-set. It is in this context that Merton speaks of, 'structural sources of instability in the role-set'. The basic source of disturbance in the role-set is the structural circumstance that anyone occupying a particular status has role-partners who are 'differently located in the social structure'. A teacher's role-set, for example includes not solely his or her professional colleagues, but also the influential members of the school board. Now what the influential members of the school board expect from the teacher need not coincide with what the professional colleagues expect from the teacher. And this is the source of conflict.

But Merton says that there are ways to minimise the degree of conflict. First, not all role-partners are equally concerned with the behaviour of those in a particular social status, so the occupant of a particular status need not bother much about the expectations of those who are not directly involved.

Secondly, the occupant of a status does not engage in continuous interaction with all those in his or her role-set. For instance, while teaching in the classroom the teacher is engaged only with the students, not with other members of the role-set. This 'exemption from observability', as Merton would argue, helps the teacher to avoid a conflict that may emerge because of divergent expectations from role-partners.

Thirdly, the occupant of a social status is not alone, there are many like him or her. And as Merton says, occupational and professional associates constitute a structural response to the problems of coping with the power structure and with the conflicting demands made by those in the role-set of the status.

Not solely role-sets, even status-sets constitute a problem that needs to be understood in- the context of reference group theory. But what is a status-set?

The same individual may find himself or herself in different statuses: teacher, husband, mother, father, brother, sister, political worker etc. This complement of social statuses of an individual may be designated as his or her status-set. Each of the statuses in turn has its distinctive role-set.

The fact that one occupies not a single status, but a status-set makes one's task difficult. It is not always possible to reconcile the demands of all the statuses one is occupying. For instance, a politician, because of his commitment to a larger public cause may not do Justice to his other statuses, the status of a husband or the status of a father. Therefore if for instance, the politicians become your reference group, then you must know of the conflict inherent in the status-set of a politician and the possible ways by which such conflict could be resolved.

Merton suggests that there are many ways of avoiding the tension in the status-set. First, people are not perceived by others as occupying only one status. Even an employer, Merton would argue understands that an employee is not just an employee, he is a father, a husband, and a son. That is why, an employee who is known to have experienced a death in his immediate family is held to "less demanding occupational requirements".

Secondly, there is something called empathy, which helps you to sympathetically understand the lot of others. Empathy serves to reduce the pressures exerted upon people caught up in conflicts of status obligations. Because everyone faces the same problem as they all have a status-set, there is a sense of shared destiny, which facilitates the development of empathy.

Thirdly, the components of status-set are not combined at random. This form of combination reduces the possibility of conflict. According to Merton, "Values internalised by people in prior dominant statuses are such as to make it less likely that they will be motivated to enter statuses with values incompatible with their own".

This is an interesting point to note in the context of reference group theory. An example would make it clear. Suppose you are born and brought up in a family with a culture of learning. Let us understand that because of this family socialisation you become a scholar. Now it is unlikely that with such a background, you would choose to become an army officer because you realise how difficult it would be to reconcile your two statuses, the status of an army officer and the status of a scholar. Perhaps you would like to become a professor and then it would not be difficult for you to reconcile your two statuses, the status of a professor and the status of a scholar! In other words, behind the choice of a reference individual or the desire to occupy a status lies a design, a symmetry. So all statuses in the status-set need not necessarily be in conflict with one another.

Check Your Progress 4

i) Why does Merton say that a 'non-conformist' is not a criminal? Write in about six lines.

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ii) Which of the following statements are true?

a) All role-partners remain equally concerned with the behaviour of those in a particular social status.

b) It is empathy that, to a large extent, reduces the pressures exerted upon people caught up in conflicts of status obligations.

c) The components of a status-set are necessarily combined at random.

30.5   LET US SUM UP

To conclude we can safely say that the study of the reference group behaviour is important chiefly because

i) it helps you to understand when and why men compare their lot with that of others and, how this helps to shape their behaviour, life-styles, and role-performances.

ii) it helps you to understand when and how membership and non-membership groups serve the function of reference groups.

iii) it helps you to examine the structural consequences and implications of reference group behaviour, how a relatively open social system stimulates men and women to choose non-membership groups as their reference groups and, as a result, how non-conformity to the in-group causes the possibility of change, conflict and further mobility.

30.6   KEYWORDS

Colonial Masters   The colonisers often think that they are great masters, great educators; it is their duty to 'civilise' the world! That is 'the white man's burden'

Generation Gap   Sociologically speaking, it means the conflict between the young and the old, how their values, morals, ideals differ.

Worldview   Generally, it is assumed that each social group, be it a gender group or a caste or a class or an ethnic group or a nationality, has its own distinctive ways of looking at the world. As a result, one's worldview implies one's political attitude, religious belief, cultural ideal - in short a set of ideas about the world and the society. Worldviews differ from group to group and helps in distinguishing one group from the other.

30.7 FURTHER READING

Merton, Robert K., 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure.* Free Press: New York

Turner, J.H., 1987. *Structure of Sociological Theory.* Rawat Publications: Jaipur

30.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) If a human being compares his or her destiny with others - as they often do it is quite likely that, at times, they may feel relatively deprived because others may look happier, more powerful, more prestigious than they may. An example is the experience of a bright Indian scientist who, while comparing his lot with another Indian scientist settled in the United States, begins to feel deprived of many infrastructural facilities conducive to research.

ii) When a college teacher in order to evaluate his status, power or prestige in the society compares himself with the IAS officers, he, as Merton would argue, is choosing a non-membership group as his reference group.

Check Your Progress 2

i) C

ii) A positive reference group is one that a person accepts with admiration and, accordingly, internalises its values and norms. But a negative reference group is one that a person hates and rejects and, instead of accepting its norms, evolves counter-norms to distinguish his or her separate identity.

Check Your Progress 3

i) When a non-membership group appears to acquire more power and prestige in terms of the institutional structure of the society, it is selected as a reference group. Moreover, the isolates, i.e., those who feel discontented and marginalised within their membership groups are provoked on account of this alienation to select non-membership groups as their reference groups.

ii) No, it is not true that a 'status-category' always serves as a reference group. As Merton demonstrates, a status-category, being too large and too impersonal may not always have a direct impact on its members. Instead, a sub-group, which is characterised by sustained interaction among its member is likely to be accepted as a reference group.

Check Your Progress 4

i) A non-conformist is not a criminal because, unlike a criminal, a non-conformist does not hide his or her dissent or disagreement. While a criminal is weak and is an opportunist, a non-conformist is courageous enough to challenge the norms and values he/she rejects and questions their legitimacy. Moreover, unlike a criminal, a non-conformist is gifted with a 'higher morality' out of which he/she intends to create a new value system.

ii) b