

Current Comments®

Robert K. Merton—
Author and Editor *Extraordinaire*. Part 1

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In numerous essays I have bemoaned not only the loss of good friends and colleagues but also the lost opportunity to acclaim their accomplishments while they were alive and could hear my public and open admiration or affection.

Scientists and scholars are often embarrassed by public display of affection. They avoid notoriety and, unlike movie stars, they are uncomfortable with "groupies" or emotional accolades from their fans. But I have made it a policy in my small way to change the tradition. Why make some of our greatest thinkers wait until death before they are adequately recognized?

There are, of course, limits to what we can do even with 52 opportunities each year. When Buckminster Fuller died recently I felt relieved that his accomplishments had not gone unnoticed by *me*.¹ Certainly Bucky did not "need" that added recognition, but it was the minimal respect I could demonstrate toward this little man, an intellectual giant, who had touched my life in small but significant ways.

Every day one reads of friends or teachers no longer with us. Whether it is Sol Spiegelman,² Scott Adams,³ or Adrian Buzzati Traverso,⁴ the event is a poignant reminder that one should not take close and revered friends for granted.

This somewhat lugubrious introduction to a very happy event is in point be-

cause my dear friend Robert K. Merton is very much alive. When I told him that I wanted to reprint an article I had written about him several years ago for a *festschrift* in his honor, he reminded me that I had already done a *Current Contents*® (CC®) essay about him.⁵ In a similar vein, he had asked me why I wanted him to do the preface to my fifth volume of essays⁶ when he had already done a preface to my book *Citation Indexing*. That, of course, only reflects the scientific disinterestedness that he has described in such detail in his work.

In a recent marvelous review of Merton's classic, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, P. Sztompka⁷ says that if there were ever a Nobel prize for sociology it would go to Merton. Apparently, a lot of people agree and celebrated the joyous news that he had received the MacArthur Prize Fellow award. This is, of course, only one of many significant awards presented to Merton. But one has to appreciate the implications of a \$60,000 annual stipend over the next five years for a man of 73. And though we all look forward to many more years of health and productive work, at that age the actuarial tables remind us that the remaining years are even more precious.

Having already related much of Merton's major accomplishments in my earlier essay, I wanted to use the occasion to bring out some aspects of his work and personality not dealt with

before in *CC*.

It was, of course, a special thrill to participate in a *estschrift* for Bob because it permitted me to complete a citation analysis of his work. Among all my valued advisers, he has constantly admonished me to use restraint in the use of citation measures. So it is appropriate that we used a carefully designed version of that technique that most people avoid because it involves a great deal of hard work. I was assisted in this study by many people including one of Bob's former students.

The resulting paper is long and will be reprinted here in two parts. Part 1, which follows, deals with Merton's influence in disciplines beyond sociology. Part 2 will investigate the nature of this influence through a content analysis of papers which cited Merton's work.

A technical commentary on the reprinted paper is necessary. To do full justice to Merton's work we should conduct an up-to-date analysis for two reasons. The original study was based on the

combined *Social Sciences Citation Index*[®] and *Science Citation Index*[®] (*SCI*[®]) data bases for 1970-1977. In a supplemental analysis of *SCI*, we also examined 1961-1969 citations. Now we could analyze *SCI* data not only for 1955-1960 but also from 1978 to the present. We could also include *Arts & Humanities Citation Index*[™] data.

To even scratch the surface of a content analysis for a scholar who has been cited in thousands of articles and books is no mean task. For 1982 alone, 500 citing publications are involved. I have no doubt, however, that my exuberance for the man and his work will eventually lead to such an analysis. As reported recently,⁸ Merton's work continues to have extraordinary influences on modern thinking. But like the other giants with whom he has been compared, that influence is always changing.

In my introduction to Part 2, I will discuss one aspect of Merton's influence that rarely gets wide attention—his work as an *editor extraordinaire*. ©1983 ISI

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