

# Current Comments®

Robert K. Merton—  
Author and Editor *Extraordinaire*. Part 2

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Last week we reprinted the first part of a *festschrift* article on Robert K. Merton's influence on disciplines other than sociology.<sup>1</sup> The second part follows here. It reports on the extent to which this influence derives from his theoretical work.

Merton is, of course, best known as one of the preeminent sociologists of the twentieth century. Our citation analysis of his work, reprinted here, reinforces that well-deserved reputation.<sup>2</sup> However, there is another aspect of his career that is rarely discussed—his contributions as an editor.

Merton is known as an *editor extraordinaire* to hundreds of students and colleagues, including yours truly. *Current Contents®* (CC®) readers may not realize that I rely upon many referees in preparing these essays. Some are directly acknowledged, but many are not. Among this latter group is Bob Merton. Indeed, many of my essays and other publications have benefited from his editorial intervention. And sometimes our conversations lead to essay topics as well. The essay on graffiti is the most recent example.<sup>3</sup>

One person who has described Merton's role as an editor is David Caplovitz, City University of New York.<sup>4</sup> I am going to quote him here extensively because it would be impossible for me to more adequately or eloquently do the job. But before deferring to Caplovitz, let me make an observation about editing that may or may not be original. I have a theory about the editing game

which is not to be confused with the game theory of editing.

I myself enjoy the editing game as do many CC readers. On occasion, this game may take the form of editing a manuscript written in English by a foreign colleague. Apart from the benefits of editing or refereeing in one's own field, where you can learn something new, it is just plain fun to edit. Call it editing for editing's sake. Call it scholarly *Scrabble* or what you will, the editing game is a great challenge. I don't know how one can otherwise explain the amount of time scholars devote to this activity. But while many can enjoy a game of chess, only a few are masters. The extensive quotation from the Caplovitz article can help me convey to you why Merton is one of the grand masters of editing:

Robert Merton's love for the world of books, publishing and editing is manifested in many ways. He is a fond collector of rare books that he uncovers in out of the way second-hand bookstores. He has been, for the past 25 years, the sociological editor of the prestigious publishing house of Harcourt Brace and World (now Harcourt Brace Jovanovich). No sociology book has been published by this firm without extensive editorial input from Bob Merton. Further evidence of his true love is that he is one of the few non-fiction or popular writers who serves on the board of the Authors Guild....

Editors operate on at least two levels: copy editing and rough editing. The *copy* editor changes your words into words that express your thoughts more clearly while the *rough* editor tells you how to organize your thoughts to tell your story. The

rough editor helps you evolve the table of contents for your book; the copy editor helps you write the paragraphs that express your thoughts. Bob Merton is superb as both types of editors. He did copy editing by blue pencilling the texts of the manuscripts presented to him, crossing out weak words and replacing them with strong words, wiping out ambiguous language and substituting crystal clear language. The record of Bob Merton the copy editor is spread out among the hundreds of people for whom he performed this role, and unfortunately the only evidence I have is the brilliant work he did for me. But for the past thirty-five years Merton, the rough editor, has written hundreds of lengthy and detailed memos to would-be authors explaining the flaws of their manuscripts, and suggesting means of correcting them....

As a copy editor, Merton performs at least three distinct functions. First, he has a knack for sharpening or highlighting the prose by finding a more expressive word or phrase than the word that you chose. Second, he is a firm believer in Strunk's commandment, "Omit needless words." Third, Merton performs a creative function as a copy editor. The author's arguments or problems trigger his own thought processes and he offers to his client, free of charge, brilliant reformulations of and additions to the arguments that reflect falsely on the brilliance of the author.

One often hears speculation as to why Merton has published so little [a mere 20 or so authored or edited books and some 150 articles], given the vast expectations of productivity from this man. Morton Hunt, who profiled Merton for *The New Yorker* in January of 1961, noted that Merton had a number of (still) unpublished books, and when he confronted Merton with this, he replied, "Some people publish much too much." The myth has evolved that Merton has not published more because he is a perfectionist and the manuscripts did not live up to his expectations. I have a simpler explanation. He has not published much of his own work because he has devoted so much of his time to the work of others. I submit that Merton has spent from a third to a half of his professional life reading and commenting on the work of others. I offer in support of this proposition a memo to himself that I found among the

papers he turned over to me, documenting the manuscripts he edited over a two or three month period in the winter of 1959-60.

[There follows a list of 56 manuscripts read, including many by notables in the social sciences and humanities.]

...The subject matter of these manuscripts includes sampling, nursing research, housing, migration, French bureaucracy, role-strain, and graduate education. It is conceivable that Merton is an expert in all these areas, but a simpler explanation is that the skills of a rough editor cut across specific areas. Regardless of the subject, there is a right way and a wrong way to tell the story, and the talented rough editor can help make this distinction. As for the authors, they include not only eminent sociologists, but obscure graduate students, and notables of other disciplines, e.g., social psychology, history, and anthropology. What greater testimony to RKM the rough editor...?

Space limitations do not permit me to extend this quotation. I urge readers to consult the full text of the Caplovitz article. In it he also talks about Merton the teacher and his brilliance as a lecturer. But perhaps Caplovitz's most telling observation about the Mertonian character is this: "Only Merton can write half a page before he begins a letter." From my experience, this leads to the ultimate condensation—the terse conclusion.

It is easy, if naive, to believe that the "mere" publication of many books and articles alone accounts for the influence of scholars like Merton. But when one probes deeply, it is rare that one encounters a scholar who works in splendid isolation. The charisma of geniuses is perhaps as important as their published works. And in the case of a Robert K. Merton, that is part and parcel of the energy he has expended in lecturing to groups, talking to individuals, and editing on hundreds of occasions. That is the way scholars reach out to their publics and we, their students, are the beneficiaries.

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#### REFERENCES

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3. ...., Striking back at graffiti. *Current Contents* (32):5-10, 8 August 1983.
4. Caplovitz D. Review of "The idea of social structure: papers in honor of Robert K. Merton" edited by L.A. Coser. *Contemp. Sociol.* 6:142-50, 1977.