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plete assimilation of that group. And it is quite possible that, even in other cases, this pressure may be the ultimate reason why the cultural "melting pot" of the United

States so often has failed to "reach the melting point." Under a too heavy pressure, the process has turned out to be a hardening rather than a melting process.

SOME SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF IGNORANCE*

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IGNORANCE is commonly viewed today as the natural enemy of stability and orderly progress in social life. It is equally commonly believed, as a corollary, that any increase in knowledge automatically brings with it an increase in benefits to mankind. As a result education, as the formal technique of imparting this knowledge to the uninformed, has become elevated in many lay and professional circles to the status of a panacea for all of man's ills.

This enthusiasm for education, and for the "rational" approach which is considered its handmaiden, is found throughout the social sciences. That sociologists share this enthusiasm is indicated by the readiness with which, as applied scientists, they advocate such things as enhanced knowledge on the part of prospective marriage partners; improved lines of communication in industry; increased awareness of community and national affairs; greater knowledge about the "real" meaning of such terms as race and nationality; increased sensitivity to personal differences and the nuances of interpersonal relations; and therapeutic treatment of neuroses through giving the patient a knowledge of the sources of his anxieties.¹

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¹ It should not be overlooked here that there is an essential ambivalence concerning the role of knowledge. For, despite the institutionally sanctioned emphasis on education and on "facing the

The rationalistic bias, which finds its way into many sociological writings of the last half century, may, however, be contrasted with several developments in social science that have served to diminish the importance ascribed to rational, scientific knowledge. Two of these may be singled out for special mention. The first has been the careful study and analysis of the functions of magic, ritual, and superstition in social organization. This culminates, perhaps, in the findings of Malinowski concerning the role of magic as a means for providing a subjective and socially sanctioned security with regard to anxiety-producing features of the physical and social environment.²

The second development has been the distinction between irrational and nonrational orientations, and the recognition of the high importance in society of ultimate values and attitudes toward them. This development is exemplified especially in the works of Pareto and Parsons.³

facts," there is considerable "folk" acceptance of the contrary idea that "where ignorance is bliss, it is folly to be wise," or, in a more popular formulation, "what I don't know can't hurt me."

² See especially Bronislaw Malinowski, "Culture," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 4:621-645; Malinowski, "Magic, Science and Religion," in Joseph Needham, ed., *Science, Religion and Reality*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925, pp. 19-84. The latter paper has been reprinted in the volume of Malinowski's essays, *Magic Science, and Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1948).

³ See Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1935, 4 vols.); Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1937).

The first of these developments calls attention to a widespread type of social action that functions as a "satisfactory" alternative to complete knowledge and perfect control. And, since resort to magic is so generally distributed throughout human society, there is at least some doubt that it is likely to be eliminated by any predictable expansion of knowledge and technique.

The second development emphasizes the fact that empirical knowledge and ignorance do not in combination exhaust the socially significant orientations of the individual to his environment. It thus helps to distinguish clearly between ignorance, on the one hand, and ultimate, including superempirical, values, on the other.

Neither of these developments, however, has included an explicit examination of the role of ignorance as such. Both have served to narrow and redefine its relation to other types of orientations. But in both there is some implication that genuine ignorance, as distinct from knowledge on the one hand and nonrational beliefs and values on the other, is only a disturbing element in social action and relations, and is accordingly subject to successive constrictions in importance.

It is the central purpose of this paper to examine explicitly some of the contexts in which ignorance, rather than complete knowledge,⁴ performs specifiable functions in social structure and action. Some of the observations that will be made have already been recognized in the literature. It is suggested, however, that their significance has ordinarily been missed, since they provide uncomfortable exceptions to the prevailing

⁴Ignorance is to be taken here as simply referring to "not knowing," that is, the absence of empirically valid knowledge. "Perfect knowledge" is considered as the totality of all knowledge ideally available to man in general, and not simply that which is believed available within any context of social action. Ignorance may refer to past, present, or future conditions or events, as long as valid knowledge is conceivably available. For the purposes of this paper, ignorance is to be kept distinct from "error," whether of fact or of logic, and from the act of *ignoring* what is known.

rationalistic emphasis in sociological writing.

The central theorem of this paper holds that, quite apart from the role of ultimate values and the attitudes relative to them, perfect knowledge is itself impossible, and an inherently impossible basis of social action and social relations. Put conversely, ignorance is both inescapable and an intrinsic element in social organization generally, although there are marked differences in the specific forms, degrees, and functions of ignorance in known social organizations.

The following attempt to classify the sociological functions of ignorance is necessarily rudimentary and primitive. There is unquestionably some, and perhaps considerable, overlapping among the various categories. It is to be hoped that the greatest portion of this overlapping is due to the fact that attention will be focussed on primary functions in specific action contexts, ignoring, for purposes of classification, the secondary and derivative functions. It is also possible that further investigation and analysis would reduce the variety of specific functions to more general principles.

THE STRUCTURAL FUNCTIONS OF IGNORANCE

1. *As Preservative of Privileged Position*

The function of ignorance that is most obvious, particularly to the cynical, is its role in preserving social differentials. However, a purely cynical view is likely to overlook the extent to which the continuity of any social structure depends upon differential access to knowledge in general, and, *a fortiori*, to specialized knowledge of various kinds. In many instances, of course, the counterpart of ignorance on the part of the outsider is *secrecy* on the part of the possessor of knowledge. Some of the outstanding examples of this general function of ignorance are summarized in the following paragraphs.

a. *The Specialist and the Consumer.* Ignorance on the part of a consumer of specialized services (for example, medical or legal advice) helps to preserve the privileged

position of a specialized dispenser of these services. This is in some measure a by-product of the division of labor, and theoretically the same persons may occupy super-ordinate or subordinate positions as one or another service or skill is demanded. However, there are both theoretical and empirical bases for concluding that some persons whose skills are both scarce and functionally important will occupy a generalized superior status.⁵ Although that status is not solely the product of the ignorance of others, in concrete instances it is partially maintained by such ignorance.

One evidence of the function of ignorance as a preservative of privileged position lies in the situation where the consumer acquires, through continuous exposure to the services of the specialist, a sense of his own ability to deal with his problems, and thus to dispense with the services of the specialist (e.g., where we learn how to treat common colds, simple fevers, and bruises, and where we learn how to send stern notes concerning contractual obligations). Thus the range of situations in which the special services are believed to be required is altered from the original position.

On the other hand, the specialist commonly develops devices to protect himself against this sort of attrition. A common device is that of specialized and possibly esoteric vocabulary, or the use of instruments and techniques not intrinsically required for the solution but seemingly so.⁶

⁵ Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore, "Some Principles of Stratification," *American Sociological Review*, 10: 242-249, April, 1945.

⁶ Indeed, in the field of medicine and psychiatry it is not necessary that the alleged technique or treatment be the empirically valid means; health may be restored as a result of the fact of treatment rather than of the specific content. It is not even necessary for the specialist to know the source of his success. The important point is that the consumer must rely upon the superior knowledge of the specialist, whether or not that knowledge is genuine or even understood. For example, it is common among psychoanalysts to operate on the assumption that neuroses may be treated by digging out the sublimated facts, and facing up to them squarely. It seems quite probable that therapeutic success, in at

However, the central point remains that real or presumed differential knowledge and skills are inherently necessary to maintain mutually satisfactory relationships between specialist and consumer.

b. *The Specialist and the Potential Competitor.* Another facet to the preservation of the privileged position of the specialist is perhaps worthy of special mention. It was noted in the preceding paragraphs that the specialist's position may be endangered by "the patient becoming his own physician." A related danger is that the privileged position of the specialist will be so attractive that too many competitors will appear in the market. This is simply another, and more common, way of saying that ignorance operates to protect the specialist from potential competitors. Perhaps the commonest devices for guarding against this danger are "trade secrets" and their protection through the control by the specialists themselves of training and thus of access to the privileged positions. Examples in contemporary society are to be found in the limited access to certain professions and in the restriction of apprenticeship on the part of various craft unions. Although often justified as a means for protecting technical standards, these restrictions appear also to preserve a sharp distinction between the knowledge of specialists and the ignorance of aspirants. For the society as a whole the result may be a restriction in essential services, either directly through limitation of the number of specialists or indirectly through increasing costs so that other goods or services must be sacrificed by the consumer.

c. *Role Differentiation and the Maintenance of Power.* In any society internal social order is in part maintained by allocating statuses and differentiating roles along lines of age, sex, and generation. These differentials serve as hooks on which differences in life-chances are hung, and the

least some cases, may depend upon the ritual efficacy of treatment and not upon complete knowledge; indeed there are factually and rationally impossible situations to which this is the only effective solution.

result is that differentials in knowledge also fall along these lines. In non-literate societies, this tends to result in a monopoly of skills on the part of the elders and the consequent monopoly of power in their hands. It also results in sexual division of special skills, providing females with sources of power that their physique would not otherwise give them, and providing males with a source of power that acts as a balance to the power inherent in the female's control of sexual access.

The universal diffusion of age-respect as an organizing principle of social relations in primitive societies is functionally dependent upon and compatible with differential distribution of skills and knowledge along age lines. Since most primitive societies surround these differentials with traditional sanctions, and since knowledge of alternatives is highly limited, the situation is essentially stable.

The contrasting case in Western civilization serves further to document these contentions. In Western society there is an observable attrition in parental control over children and an equalization of power as between the sexes, in part because of the accessibility of extra-familial sources of knowledge and skill. Where the young can learn skills independently of the instruction of their parents, and where females have an increasing access to economic independence, there tends to be a marked attenuation of the power based on the former parental and male monopolies of knowledge and skills. It should be noted, however, that the extra-familial access to knowledge and skills (and the power derived therefrom) is by no means unlimited. Censorship, whether by State or Church, is one obvious form of limiting access to knowledge as a means of preserving power structures.

d. *Avoidance of Jealousy Over Unequal Rewards.* Ignorance operates to maintain smooth social relations by preventing jealousy and internal dissension where differential rewards to approximate status equals are not based on uniformly known and accepted criteria. It is a common administra-

tive rule of formal organizations that salaries are confidential. The efficacy of this rule may rest upon the existence of special treatment and individual agreements, which, if known, would give rise to intramural bickering. It may also rest upon the lack of absolutely objective criteria of performance, so that the person not equally rewarded may claim as bias what is in fact a difference of judgment. Whether the confidential differentials are based on favoritism, meeting outside offers, or some commonly acceptable criteria that are debatable in their application, ignorance of the differentials serves a positive function where either the public statement of the criteria or their open application to particular cases would create difficulties.

This principle also applies outside of formal organizations. Even invitations to dinner or other "social" events are commonly confidential if the criteria of inclusion and exclusion are not both self-evident and defensible. Within the family, younger children, who are likely to regard themselves as the equals of their older brothers and sisters, may be kept in ignorance of the privileges of the latter as a device less fraught with potential conflict than the principle of age differentials.

e. *Secrecy and Security.* As a general principle, ignorance serves to maintain the security of the individual or of the social system as a whole wherever knowledge would aid an actual or potential enemy. This principle is commonly understood, although in somewhat different terms, with reference to national security. However, the principle operates in other contexts also. The success of a military or law-enforcement undertaking, and the security of its participants, may depend upon the element of *surprise*. Indeed, any power structure may depend in part upon ignorance not only of its specific activities, but also of its basic intentions. Even the security of the individual may depend upon ignorance by others of personal attributes or past experiences that have no intrinsic bearing on his present status but which would be regarded unfavorably if

known: for example, the technical Negro who is passing for white, the reformed ex-convict, the person below or above the required age for his position, the illegitimate child subsequently adopted.

2. *As Reinforcement of Traditional Values*

a. *Isolation and Traditionalism.* Traditional behavior depends in part upon ignorance of alternatives. The classical case of ignorance reinforcing traditional behavior is the significance of isolation from new stimuli in the maintenance of the round of customary practices in primitive and peasant societies. It is likely, however, that isolation alone does not account for the failure to explore alternatives; having achieved some kind of working equilibrium, such a system is not likely to foster inquiry. There is no "good" reason why it should do so, and ample reason, in terms of continued stability, why it should not. However, no social system is without internal strains and dissident elements; it is here especially that ignorance of alternatives helps preserve the existing order of things. It is also possible that knowledge and acceptance of alternatives would result in a more stable set of relations.

The same generic phenomenon is found in any society in the isolation of the individual from new ideas. Where the individual's notions of right and wrong are rigidified, susceptibility to new knowledge and influences is minimized. The "conservative" is a short-hand term for this phenomenon. As this equilibrium may also have its weak points, ignorance may be necessary to preserve whatever balance has been achieved.

b. *Ignorance of Normative Violations.* Another way in which ignorance serves to protect the traditional normative structure is through reinforcing the assumption that deviation from the rules is statistically insignificant. This is especially crucial in those situations where there is a strong tendency to deviate which is repressed but which would be expressed if it were known that deviation was statistically popular rather

than limited. This is perhaps particularly true of sexual conduct,⁷ but may occur with respect to any system of norms that is subject to considerable pressure or internal strain. In a sense, therefore, the normative system as such may suffer more from knowledge of violations than from the violations themselves.⁸

A similar conclusion may derive from a somewhat different functional context. There is the possibility that various activities are contrary to particular normative prescriptions, yet perform a function in the maintenance of the approved structure as a whole. Ignorance of violations would thus serve to prevent outraged suppression of these functionally significant practices, of which perhaps the most common examples are prostitution and gambling.⁹

c. *Reinforcement of Group Mandates.* Ignorance also serves to reinforce ultimate values and heighten the sense of community through induction of subservience of individual to group interests. This is made possible in part by active or passive barriers to knowledge of the consequences of following individual as against group mandates. All socialization processes in all human societies operate to reduce curiosity and knowledge

⁷ It is not unlikely that one by-product of the public reaction to the Kinsey report may be that the knowledge of the widespread practice of some hitherto tabooed sexual acts will materially stimulate further participation with less guilt in these acts. This in turn raises questions as to the implications of such knowledge of the divergence of ideal and actual behavior for the socialization of future generations.

⁸ On the other hand, knowledge of violations of strongly-supported norms may lead precisely to a reassertion of convictions that might otherwise suffer the attritional effect of indifference. This is the famous principle elaborated by Emile Durkheim. See his *On the Division of Labor in Society*, trans. by George Simpson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1933), pp. 80-105. This possibility does not remove the significance of ignorance as a component of various situations, but does emphasize the importance of other conditions.

⁹ See Kingsley Davis, "The Sociology of Prostitution," *American Sociological Review*, 2: 744-755, October, 1937. The functional role of gambling is well analyzed in a forthcoming study by Edward C. Devereux, Jr.

about the presumed socially dysfunctional alternative of pursuing individual tendencies. These processes act so effectively in most cases that the matter rarely appears as a matter of choice, much less as a conflict. All social groups thus require some quotient of ignorance to preserve "esprit de corps."

3. *As Preservative of Fair Competition*

Most competitive systems, whether in economic production and exchange or in games of chance and skill, assume not only a uniform range of knowledge and rational skill but also an explicit or implicit ignorance. Thus the idea of the "free competitive market" assumes equal initial access on the part of all concerned, and an impersonal limitation on advantage of all participants. In such a situation, differential access to knowledge gives inequitable advantages and destroys the freedom and fairness of competition. Similarly, the rationale of an open-class system of stratification assumes equality of opportunity, which includes as a major element equal access to knowledge and technical training requisite for class mobility. The normative justification of the system is thus endangered by notable inequalities of access to knowledge, *unless there is an effective range of ignorance about this also.*

There is, however, in the impersonal market system a more fundamental role of ignorance, rather than of equally limited knowledge that might in principle be extended to equally perfect knowledge. To keep the system genuinely and impersonally competitive, each competitor must *not* know all the policies and decisions of his competitors. Such knowledge would unavoidably destroy the bases of competition either through the creation of overwhelming power combinations or, in other circumstances, making the outcome so certain that no further action would be required.¹⁰ Indeed,

¹⁰ Although not formulated exactly in this way, this point emerges from the application of the theory of games to economic behavior in John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947). See also Morgenstern,

the inability to predict results, whether from simply inadequate or from structurally barred knowledge, is a prerequisite to many situations of competition and conflict. Illustrations of this principle range all the way from poker games and athletic events to armed warfare.

4. *As Preservative of Stereotypes*

Viewed from the standpoint of the individual actor, all social behavior is directed toward stereotypes of other social units, representing greater or lesser degrees of abstraction or misconception of the precise and complete characteristics of the other units. So-called primary and informal groups tend to reduce the role of stereotypes to a minimum by great emphasis on wide ranges of personal knowledge and involvement, whereas formally structured relations in their nature emphasize the stringently limited role of the actor. Even in the former case, however, ignorance of the *full* range of individual characteristics and motivations is not only factually present, but also intrinsically necessary. The most intimate of friends are happily ignorant of some of each other's habits and thoughts. In fact, an important element of socialization involves acquisition of the habit of appearing to conform to the expected stereotypes demanded in standard situations.

a. *Bureaucratic Organization.* The general principles discussed in the preceding paragraph have a special relevance in formal bureaucratic structures, which by their nature depend upon narrowly and precisely defined roles and, therefore, personalities. The nature of the established relations among individuals in such organizations is such as to foster ignorance of "irrelevant" personal characteristics, and indeed to re-

"The Theory of Games," *Scientific American*, 180 (5): 22-25, May, 1949. The function of ignorance in the market is explicitly treated in Morgenstern, "Perfect Foresight and Economic Equilibrium," a mimeographed translation of "Vollkommene Voraussicht und wirtschaftliches Gleichgewicht," *Zeitschrift für Nationalökonomie*, 6: 337-357, August, 1935.

quire such ignorance whenever knowledge would impair impersonal fulfillment of duties. The rules that define authority and function are such as to make possible the cooperative interdependence of actual or potential personal enemies, just as in the military services the subordinate is required to "salute the uniform and not the man." Similarly, in state-entertaining a strict protocol makes it unnecessary and probably inadvisable to inquire into the personal merits of attending officials.

It is also well known, of course, that in strictly bureaucratic organizations, where membership constitutes an occupation and frequent face-to-face contact is the rule, the expected ignorance is subject to attrition by greater familiarity and the establishment of "informal" procedures and relations. These are likely to be based upon characteristics and attitudes irrelevant and possibly inimical to the formal expectations, although they may be more effective components of the operating organization than are the official and limited expectations. The continuity of the organization thus depends upon an effective balance between the ignorance required for orderly procedure and the knowledge acquired by participants.

b. *Ethnic and Class Stereotypes.* Among the more commonly recognized stereotypes that at least partially thrive on ignorance, are those relating to ethnic groups and other minorities that may be the object of scapegoat reactions. It is true that "education in the facts" often does little to remove the prejudice that supports, and the discrimination that expresses, the stereotype. It may nevertheless be asserted that knowledge that the facts do not support one's stereotype may significantly affect the quantity and quality of intensity with which these stereotypes are held and acted upon. Maintenance of the stereotype in the face of superior knowledge then at least involves the cost and strain of additional rationalization.¹¹

¹¹ Where the affective component of the stereotype is weaker, knowledge may serve to reduce the

The element of ignorance in stereotypical behavior is also illustrated in reference to class. It appears that the notion of "typical class behavior" is a most significant basis of social action precisely at those points where there is least knowledge of the actual heterogeneity internal to "classes." This may be stated in a more general way. The idea that there are characteristics and attributes common to a social class is likely to be most firmly believed precisely by those farthest removed, in the class structure, from the class in question. In a highly complex open-class system, most relationships between status unequals take place not in the general context of inter-class relations, but in specific contexts of bureaucratic superior and inferior, landlord and tenant, professional and client. Many of these relationships may specifically rule out questions of general inequality (as in market relations), and in others the ranks of the actors may vary with the context of the action. It is only where the specific attributes of individuals and the specific contexts of action are unknown, ignored, or irrelevant that the more general category of class is likely to have any significance. Yet for certain limited purposes social action may be structured along class lines as long as the stereotype with its component of ignorance is maintained.

5. *As Incentive Appropriate to the System*

a. *Anxiety and Work.* There are a variety of situations in which ignorance of present rating or future chances is used as a device to create anxieties and spur activity in a competitive system. Thus, in a bureaucratic organization rules are ordinarily thought of as giving predictability. However, they may be so constructed and applied as they relate to persons in the lower strata that prediction is difficult and the worker is expected to

effectiveness of the stereotype or actually remove it as one of the action premises of the individual. In this connection, see the interesting study by Gordon Allport and Bernard M. Kramer, "Some Roots of Prejudice," *Journal of Psychology*, 22: 9-39, July, 1946.

be motivated by his insecurity.¹² With slight modification, the principle would appear to fit the situation of students, but more especially of their teachers. Indeed, to the extent that risk, uncertainty, and insecurity have ignorance as a common component and anxiety as a common incentive, the principle is a general feature of the rationale of competition.

It is easy to see that the principle, so generalized, has a point of diminishing or negative returns, varying with the circumstances. There is unquestionably an attrition of motive when anxiety is prolonged, owing to the way anxiety typically produces personal disorganization and is thus disruptive of the organization required for efficient performance.¹³

b. *The Aleatory Principle.* Ignorance also operates as an incentive in a quite different context from that just discussed. Here attention is directed to the role of "new experience" in human life, where the attractiveness of the new experience depends in part upon the uncertainty of the outcome. Certainly the attractiveness of many games of chance, as well as of those games and sports where chance may equalize or offset known differences in skill and performance, rests in large measure on their unpredictable outcome. In fact, there is some rough evidence that ignorance of the future in recreational activities assumes an especially significant role where routine (read: perfect predictability) and boredom are characteristic of work assignments and where there is a sharp break between working time and leisure time.

THE INTERPLAY OF IGNORANCE AND KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge and ignorance may for some purposes be viewed as polar antipodes on a

continuum. Seen this way, there is an objective relationship between them that is at least analytically independent of any actor's definition of the situation.¹⁴ That relationship may be described in the following terms: For every increase in what is known about a given phenomenon there is a corresponding decrease in what is unknown. In any actual situation of social action, however, this analytical relationship between the known and the unknown is conditioned by the fact that social actors always know at least somewhat less than the totality of what is theoretically knowable. At least in some contexts, therefore, recognition of ignorance by the actor is prerequisite to the acquisition of knowledge, and may itself be regarded as a gain in knowledge.

Where there is a felt need, by an individual or group, for a solution to a problem, ignorance can operate as a factor dynamic to social change. There is, of course, no intrinsic directionality in ignorance or its recognition which determines that empirically valid rather than invalid solutions will result. But each of these alternative possibilities has differential consequences for the later interplay of ignorance and knowledge. For, by and large, those "solutions" which are psychologically reassuring but empirically invalid or superempirical may simply postpone the crisis or problem situation. And since in doing so they may distract attention from and possibly hide the source of the problem, it can also be said that they tend tacitly to institutionalize those crises or problems where psychological reassurance is not by itself sufficient.

On the other hand, it may also be said that while empirically valid solutions do eliminate the specific problems to which they are relevant, they by no means reduce the inherently problematic character of social life and are not therefore more *generally* final in the reassurance they provide. For, there is *no* exception to the rule that

¹² See Alvin W. Gouldner, "Discussion" of Wilbert E. Moore, "Industrial Sociology: Status and Prospects," *American Sociological Review*, 13: 382-400, August, 1948, at p. 398.

¹³ See Allison Davis, "The Motivation of the Underprivileged Worker," in William F. Whyte, ed., *Industry and Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1946), pp. 84-106.

¹⁴ This continuous distribution of knowledge and ignorance makes many of the observations in this paper reversibly viewable as functions of limited knowledge rather than of ignorance.

every time a culture works out an empirically valid answer to a problem, it thereby generates a host of derivative problems, if only in terms of the social reorganization required to incorporate the new solution.¹⁵ In one sense, then, the difference reduces to one where the maintenance of ignorance institutionalizes old problems and the acquisition of knowledge makes continuous the introduction of new problems. The dynamic role of ignorance in social change is thus played in the recognition of its existence and the subsequent formulation of answers, whether empirically valid or not.

SUMMARY NOTE

Ignorance is not a simple analytical element, but rather a more or less hidden component of situations usually discussed in other terms. It follows that the categories of function treated here are not entirely homogeneous. Thus, in some instances such

as market competition ignorance may be viewed as an element or condition within a circumscribed system. In other instances such as the maintenance of national security, ignorance may be a necessary condition for outsiders. In all these instances, however, the problem is one of shifting perspective, since maintenance of position or the existing relationships may be viewed within a narrower or broader frame of reference.

Functional analysis must distinguish elements necessary for *any* social structure and those necessary within particular, given configurations. If a single society is taken as the unit of reference, then it may be necessary to distinguish the whole and the part. Known societies are not so neatly intermeshed as to assure that a particular function of ignorance within a segment of society (for example, the privileged position of the specialist with regard to potential competitors) is favorable to other segments, or to the society as a whole.

If the foregoing observations are sound, it follows that ignorance must be viewed not simply as a passive or dysfunctional condition, but as an active and often positive element in operating structures and relations.

¹⁵ See Robert K. Merton, "The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action," *American Sociological Review*, 1: 894-904, December, 1936. This holds as well in the structure of scientific theory as it does in the structure of social relations. For an expansion of this notion see Merton, "The Bearing of Empirical Research upon the Development of Social Theory," *American Sociological Review*, 13: 505-515, October, 1948.