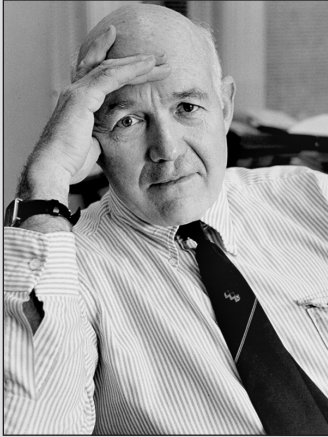


JAMES S. COLEMAN

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Photograph courtesy of the American Sociological Association



James S. Coleman had a remarkably varied career in sociology; the label “theorist” is only one of several that can be applied to him. He received his PhD from Columbia University in 1955 (on the importance of the Columbia “school” to his work, see Swedberg, 1996), and a year later he began his academic career as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago (to which he returned in 1973, after a 14-year stay at Johns Hopkins University, and where he remained until his death). In the same year that he began teaching at Chicago, Coleman was the junior author (with Seymour Martin Lipset and Martin A. Trow) of one of the landmark studies in the history of industrial sociology, if not sociology as a whole, *Union Democracy* (1956). (Coleman’s doctoral dissertation at Columbia, directed by Lipset, dealt with some of

the issues examined in *Union Democracy*.) Coleman then turned his attention to research on youth and education, the culmination of which was a landmark federal government report (it came to be widely known as the “Coleman Report”) that helped lead to the highly controversial policy of busing as a method for achieving racial equality in American schools. It is through this work that Coleman has had a greater practical impact than any other American sociologist. Next, Coleman turned his attention from the practical world to the rarefied atmosphere of mathematical sociology (especially *Introduction to Mathematical Sociology* [1964] and *The Mathematics of Collective Action* [1973]; see Jasso, 2011 for a review of the theoretical relevance of this work). In later years, Coleman turned to sociological theory, especially rational choice theory, in the publication of the book *Foundations of Social Theory* (1990) and the founding in 1989 of the journal *Rationality and Society*. The body of work mentioned here reflects almost unbelievable diversity, and it does not even begin to scratch the surface of the 28 books and 301 articles listed on Coleman’s résumé.

Coleman received a BS from Purdue University in 1949 and worked as a chemist for Eastman Kodak before he entered the famous department of sociology at Columbia University in 1951. One key influence on Coleman was the theorist Robert Merton (see Chapter 7), especially his lectures on Durkheim and the social determinants of individual behavior. Another influence was the famous methodologist Paul Lazarsfeld, from whom Coleman derived his lifelong interest in quantitative methods and mathematical sociology. The third important influence was Seymour Martin Lipset, whose research team Coleman joined, thereby ultimately participating in the production of the landmark study *Union Democracy*. Thus, Coleman’s graduate training gave him a powerful introduction to theory, methods, and their linkage in empirical research. This was, and is, the model for all aspiring sociologists.

On the basis of these experiences, Coleman described his “vision” for sociology when he left graduate school and embarked on his professional career:

Sociology . . . should have the social system (whether a small system or a large one) as its unit of analysis, rather than the individual; but it should use quantitative methods, leaving behind the unsystematic techniques which lend themselves to investigator