

RICHARD EMERSON

A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH*

Richard Emerson was born in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 1925. Raised near mountains, he never seemed to stray too far from rivers, mountain peaks, and glaciers. One of his most prized personal accomplishments was his participation in the successful ascent of Mt. Everest in 1963. Aspects of this experience are captured in his publication "Everest Traverse" in the December 1963 edition of the *Sierra Club Annual Bulletin* and in an article published in *Sociometry* in 1966. He received a grant from the National Science Foundation to study group performance under prolonged stress on this climb. That project earned him the Hubbard Medal, presented to him by President Kennedy on behalf of the National Geographic Society in July 1963 [K. Cook, 2005].

His love of mountains and the rural social life of the mountain villages of Pakistan became a constant source of sociological inspiration for Richard Emerson during his career. His studies of interpersonal behavior, group performance, power, and social influence were often driven by his close personal encounters with expedition teams for which the intensity of cooperation and competition were exacerbated by environmental stress.

After World War II and a tour of duty with the Army in Western Europe, he completed his BA in 1950 at the University of Utah and then went on to earn an MA (1952) and a PhD (1955) from the University of Minnesota, where his major field was sociology and his minor field was psychology. His doctoral dissertation was titled "The Determinants of Influence in Face to Face Groups."

Emerson's first academic post was at the University of Cincinnati (1955–1964). Upon leaving Cincinnati, Emerson wrote, "A recurring theme in my work was crystallized in the article on power-dependence relations. However, this theory is clearly a springboard for the future rather than a summary of the past. I have rather specific plans for both theoretical and empirical extensions into stratification and community power structure." He was still engaged in this work when he died unexpectedly in December 1982. His work on power-dependence relations (1962) is now a citation classic and has influenced much current work on power in American sociology.

Two other pieces have been highly influential. These are his two chapters on social exchange theory which were written in 1967 and subsequently published in 1972. This work was completed at the University of Washington, where he joined the faculty in 1965. He was drawn to the Northwest, I am sure, by the lure of the Olympics and Cascades.

Emerson's influence on sociological theory crystallized while he was at the University of Washington, where he collaborated with Karen Cook for a 10-year period (1972–1982) on the empirical development of social exchange theory. They carried out a program of research in the first computerized laboratory for conducting research of this type in the United States. This work was funded by three successive grants from the National Science Foundation.

Emerson is remembered by former colleagues and students as a "thinker." This aspect of his personality is best captured in a quote from an article he wrote in 1960 in Robert Bowen's

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