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Robert K. Merton and the Research Committee on Sociology of Science and Technology 23 (RC23) of the International Sociological Association (ISA)

Robert K. Merton is best known for founding the sociology of science and for his theoretical work analyzing social structures, particularly the intended and unintended consequences of social action. Merton became the first sociologist to receive the National Medal of Science, the USA highest scientific honor, in 1994.

By concentrating on “middle range” theory — rather than grand scale or abstract speculation- Merton established concepts that reached into everyday life. He coined the phrase “self-fulfilling prophecy,” developed the idea of role models and created, with his colleagues, the “focused interview” that was used in “focus groups” — a distortion of Merton’s intention.

In 1942, Merton gained much attention when he described the “ethos of science,” and the consequences of these values for the behavior of scientists within institutional settings. He portrayed scientists as individuals who had regular motivations, desires and fears, thus offering insight into some of the most elusive and creative minds the world has known.

Merton’s work had consequences beyond the academia, including his study of successfully integrated communities, which helped shape the case of “Brown vs. Board of Education,” and led to the Supreme Court’s ruling to desegregate public schools, in USA.

During Merton’s life, a comment was made that if a Nobel Prize was awarded for sociology, he would have received it without question. Merton changed his name at the age of 14 from Meyer R. Schkolnick to Robert Merlin. However he was convinced by his peers that the name was a bit too unimaginative, and changed it finally to Merton.

The author, co-author and editor of more than 20 books and 200 scholarly articles, Merton is probably best known for his work *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*, and for the *Matthew effect* applied to the world of science and technology. *The Matthew effect* (or accumulated advantage) is the phenomenon where “the rich get richer and the poor get poorer”. Those who possess power and economic or social capital can leverage those resources to gain more power or capital. The term was first coined by

Merton in 1968 and takes its name from a line in the biblical Gospel of Matthew: *For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have in abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.* Matthew 25: 29.

Merton was the co-founder with J. Ben-David, and first President of the International Sociological Association (ISA), Research Committee 23 (RC23): Sociology of Science and Technology, in 1966. By then he had released most of his innovative concepts concerning S&T. Most probably, *the Matthew effect* was the result of his observations while serving as President of RC23. He continued in the presidency of RC23 until 1974, being the pioneer of such fructiferous section of ISA.