

Harvard Obituary, w. cx, addition

From Mary Waters, Chair, Sociology Department, 3 October, 2016

### **James A. Davis**

James A. Davis was born in Chicago in 1929 and died on September 29, 2016 in hospice at Saint Anthony Hospital in Michigan City, Indiana, surrounded by his family.

Davis was a distinguished American sociologist, best known as a pioneer in the application of quantitative statistical methods to social science. Among his early-career works were “The Campus as Frog Pond” which asserted that career decisions of college men were shaped by “relative deprivation,” their relative standing vis-à-vis peers, and numerous studies of the social psychology and structure of small groups. Davis’s most enduring impact on social science was his development of the General Social Survey (GSS) project, which has tracked trends in the social and political attitudes and behaviors of U.S. adults since 1972. He was a leader in advocating for wide and timely dissemination of social science data, insisting that the GSS be made available immediately to scholars, policy makers, and students. His own GSS-based studies documented steady trends toward greater tolerance and liberal attitudes, much of this a result of the gradual replacement of more conservative older cohorts by more liberal younger generations. Davis later co-founded the International Social Survey Program, which conducts comparative survey research across dozens of countries. Among his books were *Great Books and Small Groups* (1961), *Elementary Survey Analysis* (1971), *The Logic of Causal Order* (1985), and *Social Differences in Contemporary America* (1987).

After receiving his doctorate from Harvard University in Sociology in 1955, Davis taught at Yale University, the University of Chicago, the Johns Hopkins University, Dartmouth College, and finally Harvard University, where he served as chair of the sociology department in the 1980s and served, with his wife Martha Davis, as Co-Master of Winthrop House. A devoted and witty undergraduate teacher, Davis was quick to recognize the potential classroom uses of computers, and was an early promoter of what is now called “active learning”. He conducted his classes as laboratories in which students developed and then tested hypotheses in real time using data from the GSS and other surveys, and developed software for the in-class analysis of survey data beginning in the 1970s. His course “American Society” was a perennial favorite among Harvard undergraduates.

Davis was associated with the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago beginning in 1957 and continuing throughout his career; he served as its Director from 1971 to

1975. After retiring from Harvard in the 1990s, he lived in Chicago and Lakeside, Michigan; and continued to teach as a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Chicago.

Davis received his B.S. in Journalism from Northwestern University in 1950 and his M.S. from the University of Wisconsin in 1952. He was recognized with many professional honors, including the Warren J. Mitofsky Award for Excellence in Public Opinion Research, from the Roper Center (2010), the Warren E. Miller Award for Meritorious Services to the Social Sciences from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (1997), the Joseph R. Levenson Memorial Teaching Prize from Harvard (1997), the American Association for Public Opinion Research Award for Exceptionally Distinguished Achievement (1992), and the Distinguished Contributions to Teaching Award from the American Sociological Association (1989).

Davis is survived by his wife of 66 years, Martha, his children Mary (Ron Sherman), James (Lisa Waldbaum), Andrew (Cynthia Wheeler), and Martha (Eric Johnson) and grandchildren Tony and Julian Gilbert-Davis, Isabelle, Martin and Lillian Davis, Nathaniel, Julia, Maggie, and Benjamin Davis, Nina Houghton, and Eero Johnson.

Contributions may be made in his honor to the American Civil Liberties Union.