

## In memoriam Benjamin Wright (1926 – 2015)

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There is substantial documentation on Benjamin Drake Wright and his contribution to social measurement through his varied expositions of the theory and practice of measurement that was developed by the Danish mathematician and statistician, Georg Rasch. Thomas Kuhn, the physicist and philosopher of science, who introduced the idea of scientific revolutions and the concept of a *paradigm* in such revolutions, made the following observation: “Though they often attract only a few scientists to a new theory, it is upon these few that its ultimate triumph may depend. If they had not taken it up for highly individual reasons, the new candidate for paradigm might never have been sufficiently developed to attract the allegiance of the scientific community as a whole” (Kuhn, 1970, p.156).

It can be argued readily that if Ben Wright did not take up the work of Georg Rasch, then it is most likely that it would not be as widely known and applied as it is now. I have indicated elsewhere that perhaps the idiosyncratic reasons that Ben Wright did take up the work of Rasch were that he had advanced schooling in both physics and psychoanalysis, rather than in traditional statistics. The former permitted Wright to appreciate Rasch’s formulation of measurement which was consistent with that found in the physical sciences and different from statistical model fitting, and the latter permitted him to see misfit between the data and a model specified a-priori to meet criteria of measurement as an anomaly which is to be understood substantively.

Wright studied both physics and psychoanalysis at The University of Chicago where he subsequently enjoyed a long career in the Department of Education, beginning as an Instructor in 1957 and rising to full Professor in 1967. In 1947, after obtaining a Bachelor of Science “With Distinction in Physics and Mathematics” from Cornell University, Wright came to the University of Chicago to study physics with John Platt in the famous physics department, a department which was the location of the then relatively recent first nuclear reaction supervised by Enrico Fermi. Following studies in physics, he acted

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as a research assistant and co-authored a paper in the *Physical Review*, however, he then moved away from studies in physics; instead, he studied psychoanalysis with Bruno Bettelheim, a famous Freudian psychoanalyst, became a registered psychologist, and worked with Bettelheim in a school for emotionally disturbed boys. Wright continued to work in Human Development and wrote papers in the field.

When he joined the Department of Education, Wright continued with the two strands of his intellectual background. Because of his quantitative background, he taught traditional statistics and measurement and from his psychoanalytic background he taught in human development. He was editor of a significant educational journal, the *School Review*, from 1969 to 1977. In the early 1970s, till a stroke in 2001 incapacitated him, he devoted his considerable energies to advancing Rasch measurement.

As can be found at <http://www.rasch.org/rmt/rmt0.htm>, Wright came to know Rasch and his work through his acquaintance with L.J. Savage, a famous statistician, who invited Rasch to give lectures at The University of Chicago. Wright came to be engaged with Rasch's work in a roundabout way described on the above website. However, once he appreciated fully the implications of Rasch's work for measurement, he became its most significant advocate. Although Rasch's theory of invariance is compelling on its own terms, is consistent with the measurements found in the physical sciences, and is set in a probabilistic framework suitable for the social sciences, it was at odds, and even incompatible in many ways, with the paradigms of classical test theory and the simultaneously emergent item response theory. To be embraced, Rasch's work needed to be presented in a way that was engaging, theoretically sound, and at the same time could be applied practically. Ben Wright was the person who was able to meet this demand to an outstanding level. He was a superb lecturer, his enthusiasm was infectious, and as a result, he attracted many students and colleagues. Through his own work culminating in a superb exposition (Wright, 1977) of Rasch's theory, which he integrated with other relevant fields of study where invariance is paramount, and through the continuing work of his many students, Ben Wright will always be remembered for his advancement of Rasch measurement in the wide range of areas of social science.

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## References

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