

Rasch's Novel Wisdom

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The wisdom of Rasch measurement is the same as what Milan Kundera calls the "wisdom of the novel ... the fascinating imaginative realm where no one owns the truth and everyone has the right to be understood" (quoted by Richard Rorty in the April 1994 University of Chicago Magazine, p. 23). Data are fictions that provide evidence in support of measures, but do not determine or prove them; thus, to the extent that they enable learning about people and ideas, data are fascinating imaginative realms.

In these realms, no one owns the truth about the variable or the measures; neither the test designer nor the person with the highest measure can know all there is to know about the variable. The variable and the measures always remain open to new interpretations; indeed, the notion of scale-free measurement could be taken to follow from the observation that the universe of items embodying a particular construct is potentially infinite. Since it is impractical to consider administering or even conceiving all of the items on a variable, it becomes necessary to recognize each individual instrument as just one interpretation of the variable, and to evaluate it in terms of its targeting and the consistency of the data it produces.

Finally, data consistency is the means by which everyone's right to be understood is realized. Fit statistics (measures of data consistency) inform us about the validity of a measure, and indicate when someone's ability or attitude is likely to be misrepresented by a measure.

So interpretation of a Rasch analysis is a matter of asking what story is told by the data. What's the plot? Who are the characters? What's the setting? Is there a subplot? Is there a single overall theme, or does the story try to go in too many directions at once?



In actual practice, of course, most tests are taken to define the variable in and of themselves, so no imaginative realm is opened up. Test content is considered sacrosanct and of predetermined validity, so the truth of a test is owned by whomever wrote it, published it, or set up the learning objectives. These same people are the only ones who have the right to be understood, since they set the rules, referee, and control the scoreboard.

Rasch analysis in itself does not open up fascinating imaginative realms, unlock the truth, and give everyone the right to be understood. These things can happen in educational and psychological measurement without any help from Rasch. Conversely, Rasch's models can be applied in ways that will never free the imagination, truth, or other people. But Rasch's approach to measurement does offer us just that combination of features and techniques sufficient to the job, and it offers them to us efficiently packaged, making Rasch measurement simple, elegant, and parsimonious. Where Rasch analysis coincides with the wisdom of the novel, contemporary problems become more manageable and hope for the future is born.