In the 1950s, the Danish mathematician and statistician Georg Rasch helped the Danish Institute for Educational Research design a study to monitor students’ improvement in reading. From the design, and the mathematical model applied, the same person did not have to respond to the same test for comparisons of proficiencies to be made. In publicising this work, a journalist in a Danish newspaper wrote “This ground-breaking work will be studied and employed, not only in Denmark, but in the whole world.” And so it has come to pass.

Rasch has been studied as a probabilistic, mathematical theory of measurement, one compatible with measurement found in the physical sciences; it has been applied in the social sciences including psychology, health outcomes, and educational assessment, with the OECD’s Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) having a high public profile. However, this measurement theory has met considerable controversy, both in academe and in applied work, including in the PISA program.

This presentation will outline the Rasch measurement theory and its sources of controversy, both in theoretical and applied work. Some controversies can be traced to conflicting epistemologies of two of the most powerful names in statistics, those of Karl Pearson and Ronald Fisher, and some to the kinds of applications and interpretations made at the policy levels.

Professor David Andrich has the Chapple Chair in Education at the University of Western Australia. He is one of the foremost researchers internationally in psychometrics and specifically on Rasch modelling. He applies this technique across disciplines and is interested in the broader effects of measurement, as well as the technical issues. David’s lecture is typical of his work in that it will be well grounded in technical matters, but also speaks to the history, philosophy and modern day applications of measurement. David is a Visiting Professor at the University of Oxford Centre for Educational Assessment. He has previously held visiting research positions at the University of Trento in Italy and at the Danish Institute for Educational Research. His PhD was from the University of Chicago. David was previously Dean of Education at Murdoch University and he has contributed to many national programmes on educational measurement in Australia.

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