

Ronald K. Hambleton: A Legacy Beyond Quantitative Scientific Indicators

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Abstract

Professor Ronald K. Hambleton (1943-2022) shaped the development of psychometrics in the United States and had a far-reaching impact on professionals interested in psychological and educational measurement worldwide. All three authors were at different times visiting researchers in the Research, Educational Measurement & Psychometrics (REMP) Program at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (USA). We would like to develop these brief notes according to three main arguments of how Ron impacted our lives: Hambleton as a "professional model," Hambleton as an "educator," and the indelible imprint that Ron has left on our professional practice.

Keywords

Ronald K. Hambleton, obituary

For those of us who knew and met him, the last week of April 2022 will remain etched in memory for the passing of Ronald K. Hambleton (1943-2022). Official releases from associations in which he was a recognized leader, such as the National Council of Measurement in Education (NCME), have issued notes of condolence. Similarly, colleagues, along with professional and personal companions, have all provided written testimonials of his career, professional achievements, and human qualities (Muñiz, *in press*), while social media networks have been inundated with the most immediate and heartfelt tributes and reactions. Working since the beginning of the 1970s at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (USA), Professor Hambleton wrote hundreds of articles, communications,



and conference papers throughout an inimitable professional career that shaped the development of psychometrics in the United States and had a far-reaching impact on professionals interested in psychological and educational measurement worldwide.

While a certain element of "redundancy" might be expected in an article that commemorates Professor Hambleton by speaking of his enduring contributions to various topics in psychometrics and psychological and educational assessment, our intention is that this article be somewhat different. Instead, we would like to share "life lessons" learned during our relationship with Professor Hambleton (it is difficult not to write "Ron") at various points in our professional careers. All three of us were at different times visiting researchers in the Research, Educational Measurement & Psychometrics Program (REMP) at the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (US), forming a relationship that undoubtedly influenced our understanding of research, teaching, and our own professional development. Hence, we are grateful to the editors of *Methodology* (the editorial board of which Ron had also been a member since 2005) for allowing us to "celebrate" having known Professor Hambleton with members of the European Association of Methodology (EAM). We would like to develop these brief notes according to three main arguments of how Ron impacted our lives: Hambleton as a "professional model," Hambleton as an "educator," and the indelible imprint that Ron has left on our professional practice.

The earliest evidence that we can cite in favor of viewing Ron as a "professional model" may appear somewhat anecdotal. Professor Hambleton was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Oviedo in 2002. Luis M. Lozano, a doctoral student at the time, attended the ceremony with pride to witness the ceremony. After receiving the award and while a large group of "authorities" waited to talk to him, Professor Hambleton "lingered" for ten minutes talking to the (then) junior researcher about his doctoral thesis, the problems he was encountering, and suggesting possible solutions. Ron, always with a smile, tried to help everyone who spoke to him.

Thanks to an invitation made by Professor Juana Gómez (University of Barcelona, Spain) to Professor Stephen Sireci to participate in the conference of the Spanish Association of Methodology of Behavioral Science (Barcelona, Spain) in 2007, José Luis Padilla struck up a professional and friendly relationship with Professor Sireci, and through him, with the world-renowned "UMass family." Professor Hambleton was the center of that family, which consisted of a group of leading professionals (including Stephen Sireci, Craig Wells, Jennifer Randall, Lisa Keller, and April Zenisky) who had the mission of bringing psychometrics into educational decision-making and helping to improve the lives of both individuals and society as a whole.

Two pieces of evidence (among many others) support our case for honoring Professor Hambleton as a "professional model": his sincere dedication and his desire to inspire the work of those he knew. Those who had the good fortune to participate in any of the annual AERA and NCME conferences will undoubtedly remember the meetings organized

by the "UMass family." The room was never big enough to accommodate former Ph.D. program students, colleagues, and, of course, visiting professors to whom Ron would introduce everyone who approached him to say hello. The pure joy that radiated from the faces of those present at these family gatherings was unquestionable proof of the imprint Ron left on their lives. In 2012, he lectured at the EAM meeting in Santiago de Compostela (Spain). Beyond the brilliance and simplicity with which he summarized the state of the art and challenges that psychometrics had to meet to continue to be relevant, he was considerate enough to mention the "promising" work that was being done by European psychometricians — words of acknowledgement and encouragement that were repeated at every opportunity. And who could forget, for example, Professor Hambleton's participation in the International Test Commission conference in 2014 in San Sebastian (Spain), in 2006 in Brussels (Belgium), and others that the authors of this article had the good fortune to attend. In short, aware of the cultural differences and different academic traditions associated with the figure of the "mentor" in the Anglo-Saxon university world, it was easy for us to recognize in Ron the attributes of a "professional model," impossible to reproduce but to which we should at least aspire.

He was a reference not only for his interest but also for how he paved the way for other professionals and, undoubtedly, for his way of understanding and practicing teaching. The three authors of this article, and certainly many other colleagues, were fortunate enough to attend the classes that Ron taught in the UMass program. From these classes, any student will inevitably remember not only what he taught but how he taught it. The passion he put into each of his classes was contagious. Ron conveyed such enthusiasm and managed to explain complex ideas so clearly that they seemed obvious. His dedication encouraged others to get involved at the same level, generating very enriching class dynamics. His ability to provide support and his interest in highlighting the positive aspects of the work of others made the daily work very stimulating. Isabel Benitez has kept the evaluation of one of the reports she handed in as part of her course assignments. Ron wrote on the first page of the report: "*Isabel- This is another terrific piece of work from you. It highlights that you learned a tremendous amount of IRT during the semester! I have made several comments for you that I hope are helpful*". This "qualitative evidence" was followed by a wealth of suggestions and notes that revealed his interest in enriching her work, helping her to grow as a professional, advancing her career, and, no doubt, inspiring her to be a person sensitive to the needs of others.

Similar experiences were repeated no matter what he was explaining. At that moment, it was the most important thing, and he managed to transmit it. Undoubtedly, part of the legacy that Ron leaves us is that way of understanding our teaching and training work. On one of the occasions when Ron visited the University of Granada (Spain), he gave a lecture to the first and second-year students of Psychology. Explaining the basics of IRT, its applications and future developments, our students, who normally approach methodology subjects with suspicion, were attentive from start to finish.

"Out of sight out of mind" ... those who were fortunate enough to attend one of Ron's presentations or lectures on test and questionnaire adaptation will have no difficulty remembering the example he so often used to emphasize the need to pay attention to the translation of items. Something similar happened with his work on the "myths" of translation. Both of these resources are part of our graduate course material. He often recounted, for example, how people who live in cold places have a wide variety of terms to describe snow, while those of us who live in warm places do not need such a diversity of words. However, this very specific example is fundamental to understanding the importance of identifying factors that can generate a lack of equivalence between test adaptations and questionnaires.

Professor Hambleton's contributions to the field of cross-cultural testing may seem, at first reading, to be minor compared to the magnitude of his work on Item Response Theory (IRT). Still, they are solid proof – together with his collaboration with another leading intellectual and human of our profession, Professor Fons van Vijver – of Ron's interest in contributing to improving the quality of cross-cultural evaluations through tests and questionnaires. While his contributions to IRT theory and practice constitutes a permanent reference, his work in the field of test and questionnaire adaptation has been the most influential on our work. It would be impossible to ignore his pioneering work in developing and disseminating the Guidelines for Translating and Adapting Tests ([International Test Commission, 2005](#)). The C.2 guidelines in the first edition: "The amount of overlap in the construct measured by the test or instrument in the populations of interest should be assessed," laid the foundations for an entire line of work aimed at addressing the notion that the adaptation of tests and questionnaires is a problem of validity, and input for qualitative methods to provide evidence of construct overlap. Again, Ron was part of the committee that developed the second edition of the guidelines ([International Test Commission, 2017](#)). The PC-2 guideline already includes methods such as focus groups and interviews to assess overlap in defining the construct of interest in different populations.

Writing about Else Hambleton near the end of this article goes beyond, at least for the authors, a standard reference. It is impossible to understand Ron's character in a broad sense without thinking of Else. Else's unwavering interest in those of us who came in contact with Ron – her interest in our work, the history and culture of where we live or work, along with the many walks in Granada – made us understand how much of Else there was in Ron's vision and life.

Perhaps the focus and tone of this article may seem strange to newcomers to psychometrics. Indeed, there is no reference to metrics, no quantitative indicators. Instead, we have offered an account focused on experiences, small life stories, and the idea of "celebrating" the fact that we were, like, for sure, many others, so lucky to have met and interacted with Ron. Nonetheless, Ronald K. Hambleton's scientific achievements are an enduring and undeniable part of psychometric knowledge. And our intention has

been to provide a life story narrative that embeds these contributions within the broader professional and personal profile of someone who is already, and always will be, part of the history of our discipline.

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