

Marion Webster Richardson

(1896–1965)

On January 16, 1965, life ended for Marion Webster Richardson, one of the founders of this journal and the Psychometric Society. He was the first managing editor of the journal (1936–1939) and continued as one of its editors until 1955. He served continuously on its editorial board until his death. He was president of the Society in 1944 and of its corporation from 1943 until 1945.

His basic professional concerns were directed to the development of psychology as a quantitative and rational science. He pursued these interests in a wide range of settings and activities. His employers included educational institutions, the Army, industry, and government. His positions included those of professor, researcher, administrator, author, and editor.

His first professional position was psychologist in a secondary school system (1923–1925). He was supervisor of selection research at Procter & Gamble Company for one year (1931–1932). From 1932–1940, he was a member of the psychology faculty and of the Board of Examinations at the University of Chicago. At this time, the faculty included L. L. Thurstone, Karl Holzinger, Dael Wolfe, John M. Stalnaker, Harold O. Gulliksen, G. Frederic Kuder, Dorothy C. Adkins, James T. Russell, and others primarily concerned with the development of more powerful quantitative methods in education and psychology.

As a professor, he was extremely skillful in presenting complex ideas. He made them interesting, easy to comprehend, and challenging to utilize. He seemed to have an unending supply of stories and incidents to illustrate clearly and succinctly the most difficult points. As both professor and administrator, his primary technique for stimulating the professional growth of his associates was by encouraging them to pursue “original” ideas and to evaluate the outcome exclusively on the basis of merit. He welcomed the opportunity to participate in this process and was so skillful that it often was difficult—if not impossible—to determine who should receive the major credit for a contribution. At the same time, nothing irritated him quite so much as to have an associate ask his assistance with poorly thought-through ideas or ones he believed the individual could solve by himself.

In test development, his concerns were not only with advancing theory but also in preparing effective instruments and in improving evaluation

techniques. In this connection, he and his colleague G. Frederic Kuder developed a series of very widely used techniques for estimating test reliability [*Psychometrika*, 1937, 2, 151-160]. He made a number of other significant contributions to test and scaling theory and shared them freely with his students, colleagues, and other interested individuals, but he got around to publishing relatively little. He began a comprehensive text on test theory and prepared several chapters for use in his graduate classes, but unfortunately, he did not complete it. In addition to his editorial activities for *Psychometrika*, he was an associate editor of *Educational and Psychological Measurement* for more than ten years (1941-1952) and continued to serve as a member of its board of cooperating editors until his death; he was on the editorial board of *Personnel Psychology* for more than 15 years (1948-1965).

From 1939 until 1942, he was chief examiner of the U.S. Civil Service Commission where he instituted a number of changes which improved the effectiveness of personnel selection procedures and standards. Shortly after the beginning of World War II, he re-entered active military service, having served as an enlisted man in the U.S. Army during World War I and later having attained officer status in the U.S. Army Reserve Force. He immediately became Chief of the Personnel Research Service of the Office of the Adjutant General, the group responsible for the development of personnel selection and placement procedures for the Army. In this position, as in the preceding one, he saw many possibilities for improving manpower utilization. Although a number of his suggestions were accepted, he seldom retained his enthusiasm and interest once an idea was translated into a program. He held the rank of colonel at the time of his release from active duty. Shortly after hostilities ended, he became the first chairman of the Board of Directors of Richardson, Bellows, and Henry, a psychological consulting firm he confidently expected would offer significant professional leadership.

By the middle 1950's, there was a marked diminution of professional activity which was at least in part dictated by severe and progressive complications resulting from a back injury incurred as a young man. Although he never completely recovered from this accident, he persistently refused to seek medical advice until it was too late to prevent complete loss of his ability to walk as well as many other complications. His health was impaired still further by a condition which necessitated the removal of his larynx and his having to learn to speak with an artificial one. He probably never acknowledged even to himself that earlier and consistent medical care might have enabled him to escape much of his suffering and to extend his period of professional productivity and association.

There is no question, however, that he found the last several years of his life extremely difficult. Most of his time was spent in hospitals, with less and less contact with ideas and individuals important to him. In the end,

the devotion of his wife and his memory of better years were all he had to comfort him and to make this life bearable.

At least three characteristics emerge clearly in considering him as a man. The first is an unusual intellect which he accepted as a matter of course rather than a quality to be nurtured and used constructively. Everything came so easily that hard mental effort was almost unknown to him. A second striking characteristic was his smile which seemed to illuminate his whole being and which appeared only in response to something he genuinely appreciated. A third salient characteristic was the rare ability to inspire others to pursue intellectual inquiry with enthusiasm and determination.

Characteristically, he requested that his death be unnoted. Although he accomplished much more than the average man, he considered his life not very significant. He cannot deny, however, one significant memorial: His impact upon those who knew him. We who studied and worked with him are saddened by his death and gratefully remember and acknowledge his contributions to our development.

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