

Where is the Individual? Comments on Nesselroade, Gerstorf, Hardy and Ram

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Nesselroade et al. have done a marvelous job in discussing the methodological issues for a meaningful revival of the idiographic vs nomothetic debate that has flared up periodically over the past seven decades (e.g., Allport, 1937; Bem & Allen, 1974; Rosenzweig, 1958; Molenaar, 2004; Zevon & Tellegen, 1982). Nesselroade and his colleagues have previously attempted to resolve the paradox that all behavior occurs at the individual level but that scientific generalizations can only be made for populations of individuals by emphasizing the important role of P-technique factor analysis (e.g. Nesselroade, 2006; Nesselroade & Ford, 1985). In their present article Nesselroade et al. show more explicitly how concepts of intra- and inter-individual variance can be utilized to treat the generalizability of sets of individual factor patterns at the second-order level.

A critical element of their proposal for filtering individual idiosyncratic content from psychological constructs in the study of individual differences is to shift invariance assumptions concentrating on the relationship between the observed and latent constructs to requiring invariance for the correlations among latent constructs that may be defined differently in individual factor patterns. This approach seems reasonable to increase the validity of measurement for the specific set of individuals who are included in a specific study, but see below.

The major Achilles heal of the Nesselroade et al. proposal lies in the limitation of the obtained construct validity to the characteristics of the group of individuals whose P-technique data are included in a specific analysis. Hence, selection of study participants

might be made on particular substantive grounds. In their example this happens to be mood change during pregnancy (Lebo & Nesselroade, 1978). However, we have no assurance that the individual idiosyncracies in mood patterns to be filtered are relevant to the common experience of pregnancy of these women, or whether they are due to other (unspecified or unobserved) idiosyncratic personal characteristics. Perhaps one way of falsifying this proposition might be to use the case control method matching a non-pregnant set of women in terms of socio-economic characteristics.

An alternative theory-guided approach to the problem of generalizability might be to select participants in a particular P-technique study by clustering individuals on socio-economic or other individual characteristics that might be expected to relate to individual differences in the substantive variable of concern. Increasing precision of measurement in this fashion would, of course, markedly increase the number of individuals to be included in a given study, but that price applies to the generalizability of P-technique studies just as it does to traditional studies of individual differences.

My major concern, however, is that while the idiopathic characteristics of the individual may be filtered appropriately with respect to a single psychological domain, other possibly more important individual characteristics are likely to be obscured. Nevertheless, Nesselroade et al. make an important step forward and are likely to revive interest in the idiopathic/nomothetic debate, and I am looking forward to their future development of these issues.

References

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