



The role of response styles in the assessment of intraindividual personality variability[☆]



Brendan M. Baird^a, Richard E. Lucas^{b,*}, M. Brent Donnellan^c

^aLouisville, KY, United States

^bMichigan State University, United States

^cTexas A & M University, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 October 2015

Revised 4 June 2016

Accepted 10 June 2016

Available online 23 June 2016

Keywords:

Subjective well-being

Measurement

Emotions

Personality

ABSTRACT

Although personality psychologists often focus on between-person differences, understanding intraindividual variability is also a critical focus of the subdiscipline. Despite the fact that non-self-report techniques exist for assessing variability, questionnaire-based measures are still the norm. In two studies ($N = 149$ and $N = 202$) we examine the possibility that intraindividual variability measures derived from repeated self-report assessments are affected by certain response styles. These studies, which use a variety of techniques for assessing within-person variability, show that standard measures are moderately to strongly correlated with theoretically unrelated variability measures, including those based on ratings of satisfaction with neutral objects or the personality of cartoon characters. These results raise questions about the validity and utility of widely used measures for assessing intraindividual variability.

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1. Introduction

Personality psychologists traditionally focus on individual differences in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They typically start with the assumption that there are certain relatively stable characteristics “inside” the person that influence enduring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Therefore, the goal of much personality research is to determine how individuals differ from one another, and this focus has resulted in the widespread use of a between-persons approach when studying personality. For instance, trait researchers may link individual differences in extraversion with individual differences in social behaviors, organizational personality psychologists may examine whether individual differences in conscientiousness are associated with work-related behaviors, and developmentally oriented personality psychologists may focus on the extent to which individual differences in traits are maintained over time as people age.

Despite an emphasis on explaining between-person variance, it has also become clear that to understand how people differ from one another, it is necessary to look within the person to see how a person’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors fluctuate across

short-term intervals such as a day, a week, or a month. In other words, within-person variability is becoming an increasingly important topic for personality psychologists. There are a number of reasons for this additional focus. First, although personality researchers may be interested in the stable manifestations of personality that lead to individual differences, the processes that underlie these trait-like differences are likely to be dynamic. For instance, some have suggested that to explain the between-person association between extraversion and positive affect, it is necessary to understand stable individual differences in the way that people respond to positive stimuli, and this issue can only be examined by assessing people’s responsiveness (i.e., within-person change) to changing affective stimuli (Larsen & Ketelaar, 1991; Lucas & Baird, 2004; Smillie, Cooper, Wilt, & Revelle, 2012). In addition, researchers have noted that there are actually stable individual differences in patterns of within-person variability that can be assessed and incorporated into meaningful personality theories (Fleeson, 2001) and that specific patterns of within-person responses to specific stimuli may be a promising way of conceptualizing individual differences in personality (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Thus, personality psychologists incorporate within-person techniques into their methodological toolkit, and an important component of this focus on within-person effects is the assessment of individual differences in within-person processes.

Indeed, there is a long tradition of theorizing about and actually assessing individual differences in the way that personality traits

[☆] This research was supported by funding from the National Institute on Aging (R01AG040715).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: lucasri@msu.edu (R.E. Lucas).

change across situations. For instance, much research has examined whether there are stable individual differences in the way that people vary and whether these individual differences correlate with outcomes like psychological health and well-being (Baird, Le, & Lucas, 2006; Donahue, Robins, Roberts, & John, 1993). Some theorists believe that variability reflects an ability to adapt to the environment and thus should be positively associated with well-being (e.g. Bem & Lewis, 1975; Paulhus & Martin, 1988; Snyder, 1974). In contrast, other theorists have argued that personality variability is a sign of psychological immaturity, or an inability to resist social pressures that push one to behave in ways that are inconsistent with his or her “true self” (e.g. Jourard, 1963; Maslow, 1968; Rogers, 1961). In other words, intraindividual variability may result from conflicts between one’s dispositional tendencies and external pressures to behave in ways that are socially appropriate, but which may not come naturally to the person. According to this view, intraindividual variability should be associated with lower levels of psychological well-being (Block, 1961; Donahue et al., 1993). A critical test of these competing hypotheses requires reliable and valid measures of individual differences in within-person variability.

Shifting the focus to within-person variance does not eliminate the methodological issues that researchers face when attempting to assess personality constructs. For instance, although self-reports have known limitations, they are often the only feasible way to assess intrapsychic thoughts and feelings. And although behavior is observable, obtaining objective assessments through outside observers or automated procedures is still difficult and resource intensive (though this is becoming easier over time with technological advances; Mehl, Pennebaker, Crow, Dabbs, & Price, 2001). The challenge of obtaining objective measures of behavior is even greater when research moves out of the laboratory, as it often does when within-person variability is the focus. Indeed, issues with self-report might be particularly relevant to within-person investigations.

The focus of this paper is on the possibility that certain response styles affect self-report measures of within-person variability. Specifically, we focus on potential methodological artifacts that may emerge when self-reported personality descriptors are administered repeatedly to obtain estimates of within-person variability. It is important to keep in mind, however, that the issue we address may also emerge when self-report methods are used to assess any construct repeatedly over time.

2. Measuring between-person differences in within-person variability

In the past, self-reports have been used to study variability in one of two ways. First, researchers have simply asked people direct questions about how variable they are. For instance, the Self-Pluralism Scale (McReynolds, Altrocchi, & House, 2000) includes items such as “I act and feel essentially the same whether at home, at work, or with friends” and “My personality is always the same regardless of whom I’m with or the situation I’m in.” Presumably, people who strongly endorse these statements should exhibit little variability in their behavior. Other measures focus explicitly on the underlying processes that might lead to observable variability in behavior. For example, the Self-Concept Clarity Scale (Campbell et al., 1996) includes items such as “My beliefs about myself often conflict with one another” and “Sometimes I feel that I am not really the person that I appear to be.” Similarly, Rosenberg, Schooler, and Schoenbach (1989) used a 5-item scale to capture variability in self-esteem that includes items such as “Does your opinion of yourself tend to change a good deal, or does it always continue to remain the same?” and “Do you ever find that on

one day you have one opinion of yourself and on another day you have a different opinion?” These instruments may provide a way to test competing theories about the mechanisms underlying variability in observable behavior.

Alternatively, researchers have computed variability more directly by examining variation in self-reports across items, scales, contexts, or occasions of assessment. For instance, some researchers have attempted to assess constructs related to within-person variability by looking at the internal consistency of a person’s responses across items that measure the same trait (Lanning, 1988). If a measure contains multiple items that assess extraversion, for example, then each item in the scale can be treated as a separate indicator of the underlying trait. A person who is consistently extraverted should endorse the items “I am talkative” and “I am outgoing” equally (assuming they are equally good indicators of the underlying trait), whereas a person who is variably extraverted might be expected to endorse one item but not the other (Reise & Waller, 1993). In addition, if variability is a global trait, then the person who responds consistently across extraversion items should also respond consistently across items that measure other domains such as conscientiousness or neuroticism.

Although researchers have demonstrated that within-scale response consistency may be linked to some important individual differences (Berg & Collier, 1953; Goldberg, 1978; McFarland & Sparks, 1985; Siegrist, 1996), this approach to measuring personality variability suffers from two important limitations. First, indexes of cross-item variability can be confounded with mean scores across the same items. Specifically, in order for a person to get a high mean score on an extraversion scale, he or she must give responses that are consistently high across all of the items (Paunonen & Jackson, 1985). In contrast, a person can get a moderate score either by giving consistently moderate responses or by giving a combination of high and low responses. Therefore, individual differences in mean levels must be carefully separated from indexes of internal consistency. The second limitation concerns the potential impact of scale reliability and unidimensionality on response consistency. Specifically, a person may be more likely to give variable responses across items from an unreliable measure than from a reliable measure or across items that actually tap distinct constructs despite appearing on the same scale. Thus, there is some ambiguity about what within-scale variability indexes assess, and therefore, researchers have turned to alternative ways of estimating bottom-up consistency from self-reports.

Another approach to assessing within-person variability is by comparing a person’s responses across repeated measurements designed to ask about behaviors in particular situations or roles. In other words, if an individual is asked to answer the same set of questions multiple times, then the extent to which his or her responses change across occasions can be used as an index of personality variability (Baird et al., 2006; Donahue et al., 1993; Eid & Diener, 1999; Fleeson, 2004). For example, researchers interested in the ways someone’s extraversion changes across social roles might ask the person to describe what his or her personality is like around friends and around family members. Someone who is variably extraverted might say that he or she is highly talkative around friends but not at all talkative around family members, whereas someone who is consistently extraverted should report being equally talkative in both kinds of situations. An advantage of this “bottom-up” approach over measures of internal-consistency is that it can be used to capture variability in specific behaviors, as opposed to variability across similar behaviors that are related to one another but are nonetheless distinct.

Furthermore, repeated-measures indexes may also be less sensitive to scale reliability than indexes of internal-consistency because responses are compared within each item, instead of across items. However, repeated-measures indexes still suffer from

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