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## Idiography and nomothesis: The quest for integration

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper discusses the question of integration between the nomothetic and the idiographic approaches, using these two terms as conceptualized by Allport (including preference for epistemology, nature of data collected, methods for analysis etc). It is supported that integration efforts face the obstacle of antithetical philosophies, and that this obstacle is not one that we could simply step out of. Examples from the area of scientific inquiry are provided to also support the argument that any attempt to integrate approaches can never constitute a neutral and unbiased endeavor. Integration is differentiated from the notion of epistemological combination and of methodological eclecticism. It is seen as a process of synthesis following two steps: i) adoption of a clearly stated epistemological stance, and ii) broadening of our frame of reference. The notion of generalization of findings is used to illustrate this argument and to touch upon practical implications for researchers.

*Key words: Idiography, Integration, Nomothesis.*

*"Recognition that psychology is a science of persons invented by persons would involve us in making our personal values explicit in relation to professional issues." (Bannister & Fransella, 1986, p. 39)*

The terms 'idiography' and 'nomothesis' became part of psychology's vocabulary when introduced by Allport in 1937. He later also used the terms 'morphogenic' and 'dimensional' much with the same meaning as the original terms

(Allport, 1937, 1962). According to Allport, idiographic psychology is concerned with the unique qualities of the individual, whereas nomothetic psychology is interested in 'discovering' general laws. Gradually, many researchers limited the meaning of the terms to a description of methodology, that is, case studies as opposed to group data (e.g., Bryman, 1988), leaving out preference for epistemology. In recent times, one often comes across the terms "quantitative" and "qualitative paradigm", the

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former describing the combination of epistemological empiricism with a preference for the collection and statistical analysis of numerical data, and the latter describing the combination of epistemological constructivism with a tendency to collect verbal data through open-ended questions (Henwood & Nicolson, 1995). Thus Bryman (1988), in his summary of the features that are usually ascribed to the two paradigms, has used the terms nomothetic and idiographic to contrast only the scope of findings between the two basic models of scientific practice.

In the present paper I will be using the notion of idiography and nomothesis as conceptualized by Allport, and will reserve the terms quantitative and qualitative to describe the preferred type of data used by each approach. In line, therefore, with Allport's conceptualization, the nomothetic approach is defined as focusing on the development of universal behavioral laws; reduction and prediction -based on a well-attested body of rules- are main concerns. Rules and laws, deriving from across-individual regularities, lead to the production of theories, the scope of which is to interpret behavioral phenomena with certainty and objectivism in search of a single 'truth' (see Harré, 1981).

The idiographic approach is defined as focusing on the understanding of individual behavior and on the way individuals make sense of their subjective reality or -as constructivist movements suggest- their constructed reality. Included in this understanding are not only those who appear to follow the rules, but also the exceptions. Value is placed in phenomenology and non-reductionism; engaging in methods that provide 'accurate' predictions is disputed. In general, idiographic researchers are interested in the content of responses, so that their methods specify rather than generalize, encompass 'deviants' instead of ignoring them, and tolerate -even celebrate- ambiguity instead of overlooking it (see Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995).

Efforts to integrate nomothetic and idiographic approaches stemmed from the early

realization that there are assets and liabilities in both (e.g., Marceil, 1977). The term integration, however, means more than the successful and systematic selection of techniques from both sides ("methodological eclecticism" or "methodological pluralism"). For Allport (1964), integration means uniting facts under one theoretical framework. However, reaching consensus on what constitutes a 'fact' presents enormous difficulties, since conflicting philosophical assumptions underlie existing paradigms (see Harré, 1981. Heron, 1981). In the discussion that follows I will attempt to show that the question of integration appears to have no solution if one sees it simply as a combination of epistemologies and as a necessarily objective and unbiased endeavor to unite assets from both traditions. I will continue the discussion by suggesting that integration appears possible if one abandons the 'neutral' perspective and views it as an inevitably subjective and biased quest for a broadened frame of reference, which would allow the construction of methodology-related unifying synthetic concepts. This way, the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods by a particular researcher in one or different studies will not appear incompatible as some researchers strongly claim (e.g., Smith & Heshusius, 1986).

### **The obstacle of antithetical philosophies**

Recently, Hammersley (1996) looked at three respects in which the two approaches are taken to be philosophically opposed: a) "realism versus idealism", b) "naturalism versus anti-naturalism", c) "deductivism versus inductivism" (p. 164). According to Hammersley, realism means to believe that research procedures can ensure accurate representation of reality (nomothesis), whereas idealism stands for the conviction that there are as many realities as persons (idiography). Naturalism means to model the work of psychological inquiry upon the approach of natural sciences (nomothesis),

whereas anti-naturalism implies rejection of the natural science exemplary (idiography). Deductivism means testing specific hypotheses against quantitative data (nomothesis), whereas inductivism means to approach qualitative data with the purpose of making sense out of it, checking perhaps the usefulness of a theory (theoretical inference).

Hammersley expressed the view that the division into two separate homogeneous traditions is most likely a fallacy, since even within each tradition there are several trends and variations of the same ideology, which have already allowed for exchanges of methods and concepts. He admitted, however, that despite the existing variety, there are many important unresolved methodological and theoretical issues to be considered. He explained, for example, that "experimental psychologists insist that research in the human sciences cannot avoid assuming some sort of causality or law-like relationship" (p. 169). The nomothetic belief in the existence of reproducible causal patterns is antithetical to the idiographic emphasis on the "contingent and diverse character of human perceptions and actions and on the role in these of cultural interpretation" (p. 168). Methodological eclecticism was not put forward by Hammersley as the solution to integration efforts. The methodologically eclectic, he pointed out, cannot dismiss differences in views as merely theoretical, because "they have important implications for how we do research and for what conclusions we can draw on the basis of our data" (p. 169).

Despite the above realizations, Hammersley, nevertheless, claimed that selection of methods should be based on situation and purpose and not on "commitment to one or another competing philosophical view of the world and the nature of inquiry" (p. 164) (see also Hammersley, 1992). Therefore, Hammersley's belief is that commitment to ideology is not a vital issue. The question, though, is whether it is in fact possible to view the situation or purpose of

research as unrelated to ideology. As Reason and Rowen (1981) emphasized, "research can never be neutral. It is always supporting or questioning social forces, both by its content and by its method" (p. 489).

It is important to note here that differences between idiographic and nomothetic approaches are not only reflected in the nature of data, in research strategies, in methods or only in the relationship between theory and research. According to Bryman (1988), they are also reflected in: (i) the relationship between researcher and participant (distant versus close), (ii) the researcher's stance in relation to the subject (outsider versus insider), and (iii) the image of social reality (static and external to the actor versus processual and socially constructed by the actor). None of these dimensions can be isolated from each other. They are all inevitably interconnected and interrelated.

Let us give an example of this interrelatedness by further considering the differences in the way in which participants are appreciated and handled by advocates of the two research traditions. The choice of interpretative examination, naturalistic environments and free-response questions of the idiographic approach mirror the persuasion that persons are self-aware, self-determined creatures, and invaluable sources of privileged information. Participants are viewed as "co-researchers" rather than 'subjects' or even mere participants (Reason & Rowan, 1981). Positivist researchers do not normally share these values. In experimental research environments participants are kept naive about the research propositions and do not contribute with feedback concerning assumptions of researchers and research results (Heron, 1981). One could assume that this simply constitutes a matter of preference, of personal conviction or a consequence of specific research goals. However, as Harré and Gillett (1994) have noted, the lack of participants' input "...grew out of the behaviorist program. That program was based

on a philosophical theory about the nature of the mind. The mind was taken to be a private arena not available as a source of data for a science of human action" (p. 16)

Of course, difficulties in implementing integration are not only characteristic of psychological research and methods of knowing. Efforts to integrate various approaches or 'schools' in the clinical psychological setting are hindered by similar obstacles, and underline the existence of similar concerns in the discipline of psychology in general. The main question, which according to Messer (1989) has to be answered in the clinical setting, is "whether being integrative (or eclectic) undermines the premises of the theory of therapy which one draws" (p. 72).

Messer chose the nature of relationship between therapist and client to illustrate the application constraints of such efforts, and highlighted the barrier that arises from the different value various schools place on human beings during the therapeutic process. For instance, he claimed that in their own particular ways both behavioral and psychoanalytic therapists consider themselves as experts (educators or healers, respectively), whereas person-centered therapists see clients as the experts of themselves and their own role as that of a facilitator. For Messer, the problem of integrating approaches is: (i) clinical; (ii) methodological -since the evaluation methods of therapy (i.e., process, effectiveness) also tend to be nomothetic or idiographic in nature (see Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992) and "value-laden" (Messer, 1985); (iii) deeply philosophical, for therapies also represent and even mold visions of life. Messer emphasized that "it is not simple stubbornness or inflexibility that arouses opposition to eclecticism or integration. Rather, it is the deeply held beliefs about what constitutes human nature..." (p. 83). In agreement with the above position, Crellin (1998) stated that "philosophical questions are implicit in every therapy. Whatever the approach, the therapist is unavoidably taking up a philosophical position

often without being aware of this. The belief that science is value-free and therefore that, in applied scientific psychology, the therapist is objective, is a philosophical position" (p. 170).

Returning to our discussion about methods of knowing, it seems that the division of the idiographic and nomothetic approaches has become larger in recent years. The developing trends of idiographic inquiry appear to increasingly distance themselves from the epistemology of empiricism and to gradually abandon all residues of realism, naturalism and deductivism, residues that were probably responsible for the lack of homogeneity in the field of qualitative research. The analysis of Henwood and Pidgeon (1994) shows that, historically, the first trend that became dominant was still rather close to the epistemology of empiricism, valuing the way in which empiricism defined reliability and validity, and using methods such as the "data display model" and the strict content and protocol analysis (see Miles & Huberman, 1984). The second trend that later prevailed based itself on the epistemology of contextualism, valuing notions such as generativity and grounding, and using methods such as "grounded theory" and ethogenics (see Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988). The trend that now seems to stand out is inspired by post-structuralism and is based on the epistemology of constructivism and social constructionism. It values notions such as discursiveness and reflexivity and uses the methods of discourse and narrative analysis (see Gergen & Gergen, 1991). According to Henwood and Nicolson (1995), this current movement favors the adoption of "a more complete version of the metaphor of science and all social life as a discourse or text", thus proposing a more radical break with empiricism and the notion of naturalism (p. 110).

The view put forward in the present paper is that despite existing difficulties -deriving from apparently incompatible ideologies- assimilating ideas and searching for a unitary language, with the purpose of facilitating the communication of

ideas and findings among professionals, is undoubtedly beneficial and should not be abandoned. However, the view, which is also supported here is that efforts to integrate approaches can never constitute a neutral or unbiased effort. As I will attempt to show in the next section by providing specific examples, careful scrutiny reveals that strong ideological influences are present in models, which claim to have managed integration by objectively balancing advantages from both traditions.

### **Instances of bias in integration efforts**

In his article "Psychologists are human too", Mair (1970) stressed that "each [psychologist] has a limited viewpoint, personal and often unacknowledged assumptions, preferred theories and explanations, favored methods for raising and answering questions. Like others, a psychologist can only subsume the assumptions, theories, methods, and activities of others in relation to his personal points of view and to the extent that his own sense-making system allows" (p. 182). In this section I will try to illustrate this point in relation to integration efforts.

When Allport was emphasizing the usefulness of both the idiographic and the nomothetic approaches in the area of personality, he was nevertheless suggesting that the nomothetic approach has no value unless its general findings are checked against individual cases. However, the same cross checking with general findings was not seen as a necessity for idiographic researchers (Allport, 1962). Furthermore, when offering examples of mixed ("halfway") methods, what Allport was in fact describing were methods with an obvious idiographic - or in some cases even nomothetic - bias. That is, they either had a direct link to a certain theory of strong philosophical convictions (i.e., personal construct theory) or favored a particular way of collecting data (i.e., single case study) and doing analysis (i.e., factor analysis).

Other theorists tried to propose ways to integrate the idiographic and the nomothetic approaches in the study of personality, also without concealing their idiographic bias and by rejecting any "patchwork solutions which fail to address themselves to the more general question of how an individual's uniqueness may be incorporated into a general understanding of how to define him or her" (Silverstein, 1988, p. 425). The examples that follow show that when failing to address this question the produced integration models appear indeed as "patchwork solutions".

Working in the area of personality, Jaccard and Dittus (1990) have claimed that the differences between the idiographic and the nomothetic approaches exist at the level of application only. They have disagreed with Lamiell's (1981) belief that generalizations do not provide any information about any one individual, and have supported the view that, whereas both nomothetic and idiographic theorists search for general frameworks, the latter apply them to single individuals so as to gain insight into the factors that guide a person's behavior. They have continued by arguing that idiographic theorists then evaluate the validity of the framework on a large number of individuals and reach a number of generalizations. As an example of integration, they have provided a method for assessing the relationships between beliefs-attitudes, attitudes-behavior, and for looking at beliefs and decision options.

So, for instance, the attitude of each individual toward each of various decision options is measured by use of "standard semantic differential scales". Consequently, the predicted behavior that has the most positive attitude is selected, and then the consistency between attitude and behavior is obtained individually for each person. Jaccard and Dittus (1990) claimed that their approach respects individuality and is far more advantageous than traditional methods -such as Fishbein's- which cannot provide any meaningful individual measurements (see Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). In

spite of their criticism, it is not difficult to evaluate that the similarities between their own and that of traditional methods have more things in common than not. For instance, the possibility of a person not fitting in the "general framework" is not discussed, participants' own input (reasons, explanations) is not sought, and the disadvantages of using standardized scales are not reversed.

In another example, Anderson (1990), after highlighting the liabilities of both the experimental and the phenomenological approach, proposed the "personal design" as an appropriate integration theory and method for the purposes of social cognition. As Anderson has pointed out, the three basic aspects of this approach are the functional perspective, the discovery of "cognitive algebra", and the emphasis on experimental control. The proposed algebraic equations for understanding cognitive functions (e.g., blame) are considered as universal patterns, which still allow for individual differences (e.g., different background values). Anderson's belief was that "personal design" combines nomothetic and idiographic approaches, emphasizes person-environment interaction, and still expects regularities across individuals.

As in the previous case, even though the "personal design" theory appears to integrate both approaches, some basic demands of the idiographic perspective are not satisfied. One is the destiny of 'deviants'. According to Anderson's reported study, "nearly" all the participants exhibited the parallelism pattern. Idiographic-oriented critics would rightly claim that "...laws' are regularly broken not only outside the laboratory and in the course of time, but in the here and now of the experiment, by the recalcitrant and neglected minority who fail to implement the hypothesis" (Jahoda, 1989, p. 77).

In contrast to idiographic principles, Anderson's theory also appears to be primarily concerned with reducing data to cognitive algebraic symbols, and although it recognizes

that there is a varied background (e.g., values) to each identical result (e.g., blame), it is not interested in exploring these dynamics further. In general, the admitted emphasis on experimental control does not permit the monitoring or tolerance of ambiguities.

### **Broadening the frame of reference**

It was supported so far that epistemological integration has to overcome the important obstacle of antithetical philosophies. The suggestion put forward here is that in order to avoid any ideological compromises it is necessary to view the quest for integration as a search for a unitary language with the purpose of facilitating the communication of ideas and research findings. To achieve this we would need to redefine methodology-related terms, achieved by broadening our frame of reference (moving up to a higher level of abstraction) (see Katakis, 1986), to construct unifying, synthetic concepts.

It is important to note that the proposed type of synthesis should not be associated with the claim that inquiry positions lie along a continuum, and that in doing so they allow for a third inquiry position to cover the middle ground as Moon, Dillon, and Sprenkle (1991) have proposed. In their opinion, a third inquiry position may be that of post-positivism, a position that accepts that the world cannot be represented accurately, and that the 'best' accounts of our imperfect understanding should count as valid. As Stevenson and Cooper (1997) noted, this view leaves both positivists and constructivists unsatisfied, because it does not really deal with the question of antithetical philosophies.

Stevenson and Cooper's position is that the question of antithetical philosophies is very "knotty" and that it is possible for theorists to step out of it, because it does not seem to have an answer. Using the notion of generalization as an example, if we wished to step out of the "knotty" question of antithetical philosophies we would probably need to adopt the stance that

nomothetic methods provide generalizability, whereas idiographic methods offer detail and accuracy (see Hammersley, 1996). The opinion, however, which was supported in the previous section is that researchers cannot conduct research, interpret findings or create integration models pretending they hold no 'life theory'.

Thus consider the following (ideological) differences between the two traditions as far as generalization is concerned: nomothetics value their ability to generalize findings from a sample to a finite population, but they more or less treat any exception as confirming the rule (Jahoda, 1989). Advocates of the idiographic approach are unwilling to accept the generalization of observations, where generalizing means composing strict predictive laws (Jahoda, 1989). Idiographic researchers are more concerned with making inferences about the usefulness (rather than truthfulness) of a theory (theoretical inference), which is supposed to "apply to all circumstances where specified conditions hold" (Hammersley, 1996, p. 170). Theoretical inference is possible due to the more or less homogeneous population, which is selected based on a number of inclusion or exclusion criteria.

If the solution to the quest for integration is not to compromise ideologies, then the solution may be to: i) adopt a clear epistemological stance and, ii) seek synthesis by broadening our frame of reference and redefine methodology-related terms (for example, the meaning of the term 'generalization'). An example of a way in which generalization could be redefined is provided by the work of Reason and Rowen (1981). Introducing the basic principles for a "new research paradigm" the authors redefined the concept of generalization as "general statements about the power, possibilities, and limits of persons acting as agents", instead of looking at it merely as a tool for deterministic prediction. In their approach one clearly detects the rejection of either/or dilemmas concerning the choice between 'soft'/ 'loose constructing'/

qualitative/ 'subjective' research and 'hard'/ 'tight constructing'/ quantitative/ 'objective' research. At the same time, one notes the acceptance of "multi-level, multi-disciplinary modes of understanding" which, however, "do justice to the person-in-context as a whole" (Reason & Rowan, 1981, p. 490).

Assuming though, that a whole list of such redefined methodology-related terms were one day complete, the problem that would arise would be how to fit them into a research process frame that would account for various methods, when there are differences in how the research process itself may be seen by the two traditions.

Let us first consider what these differences are. Rowan (1981) has suggested that all types of research can be considered as following the same cyclic model, the stages of which are: (i) finding a problem ("being"), (ii) refining the problem ("thinking"), (iii) designing the study ("project"), (iv) doing the study ("encounter"), (v) analyzing the data ("making sense"), (vi) sharing the findings with others ("communication"). There are differences, though, between approaches. The empiricist tradition expects researchers to go round the cycle one time and to remain uninvolved and alienated from the participants, with whom they usually meet only once. This way, however, the cycle seems to be turned into a straight, predictable line of inquiry (linear process). On the contrary, the phenomenological and constructivist traditions encourage researchers to go round one or many interlocking cycles more than once, be involved with the participants, and meet with them at various phases of the cycle(s) (cyclic process).

I believe that one, among many possible solutions, as to which research process frame would be appropriate for fitting in the redefined terms is provided by the "creativity cycle" of "circumspection" (brainstorming), "pre-emption" (inventing, choosing issues of concern) and "control" (seeking specific answers), proposed by Personal Construct Theory. According to Bannister (1981), within any creativity cycle both

"tightening" (specific, directive) and "loosening" (creative, vague) phases are necessary if we are to avoid experiencing research as either "boredom" (extremely tight quantitative studies) or "chaos" (extremely loose qualitative studies). Within the creativity cycle one is free to contribute at and through any of its phases and to offer any type of data -qualitative or quantitative-, based on a subjective understanding of what is interesting, relevant or worth reporting. Thus "research can be both an act of the imagination and a hard-nosed testing-out process" (p. 199).

The above proposition goes beyond Bryman's (1988) suggestion that qualitative research may be seen as the preparatory stage for quantitative research (i.e., as a source of hypotheses, etc.) and that quantitative research may be seen as the preparatory stage for qualitative research (i.e., selecting case studies, etc.). By using the idea of the creativity cycle, the collection of quantitative or qualitative data is viewed as just one phase in a sequence of progressive tightening (nomothetic) and loosening (idiographic) phases (although each one of them would, of course, contain many tightening and loosening micro-phases). This sequence could -theoretically- continue indefinitely by the same or by other researchers.

Generalization, as previously redefined, would be possible at any given phase of the research process. It could be linked with prediction at the tightening phases and it could be linked with checking the usefulness of a theory at the loosening phases. Researchers would be able to situate any study of theirs in a particular phase within this process, put findings or claims of generalization into perspective, and generate ideas for future research.

### **Conclusion**

It was argued that integration should not be confused with methodological eclecticism or pluralism. At the same time, if one sees integration as a combination of epistemologies

(epistemological integration), one is bound to face the obstacle of antithetical philosophies underlying idiography and nomothesis. Facing this obstacle a researcher could be tempted to either step out of it -pretending the problem does not exist- or to unwillingly make compromises with some aspect of his/her ideology. The researcher could be also tempted, of course, to abandon the quest for integration altogether (see Smith & Heshusius, 1986).

My conviction is that none of the above would be possible or useful. Stepping out of the obstacle of antithetical philosophies or sacrificing ideology seem impossible since commitment to a 'life theory' is unavoidable. This commitment, even if made reluctantly or without awareness, affects the type of research questions we pose, the theoretical models we choose to test or create and so on. As for abandoning the quest for integration, this would equal with wasting the possibility for assimilating ideas and searching for a unitary language to communicate ideas and research findings. The opinion which was supported in this paper is that integration could be redefined as a synthesis requiring as a first step the adoption of a clearly stated epistemological stance -whichever one prefers- and as a second step the broadening of our frame of reference, with the purpose of redefining methodology-related terms so as to construct unifying, synthetic concepts. It was mentioned that the use of redefined terms makes sense in a frame for conceptualizing research process such as the one offered by Personal Construct Theory.

As a final note, I recognize that, first, the present paper is placed within a loosening phase in thinking about methodology issues. Further elaboration of these suggestions is needed. Second, I recognize that this proposed redefinition of the term 'integration' is probably an example itself of the process suggested.

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