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Replied PICTA
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To: Pablo

From: Luigi

Re: "Factors and taxa, traits and types, differences of degree and differences in kind" (Meehl, 1992)

You've done it again: You've provided me with a new security blanket (see my chapter in your Festschrift). I'd been getting tired of "Why I do not attend case conferences," and now I can put away that old gem and focus on my new love, which I've already read for the fifth time. Like fine wine, this one gets even better upon subsequent re-readings, a tribute to your erudition and wisdom. It is a magnificent achievement.

As you might guess, I find myself stewing about the nature of those "environmental mold" taxa. Just as I would be loath to join a club so indiscriminating as to permit me membership, so am I loath to admit taxonic status to some of your examples. Among the hardest to swallow are "frenzied egalitarianism" and self-monitoring. Indeed, if self-monitoring is an example of a taxon, then to hell with the distinction between taxonic and nontaxonic individual differences. And, if "frenzied egalitarianism" is a taxon, how do I categorize all those "laid-back egalitarians" and "frenzied autocrats"?

More seriously, I wish you had said more about the nature of the differences between taxon and nontaxon membership at the latent level in the nonpathological range of individual differences. From the way that you describe taxa, one would infer that you subscribe to a classical conception of taxonic categories, one where at the genotypic level everyone is clearly in or out of each taxon. But, even the biological sexes are imperfect taxa; whereas most individuals are clearly either male or female, some individuals have genotypic features of both men and women. And so it will be at the genotypic level of bridge-players, races, cultures, vocations, ideologies, and religions. One can distinguish in principle between perfect and imperfect taxa, and therefore one might think of various kinds of taxa being arrayed on a continuum from perfectly separated taxa (e.g., the chemical elements?) through higher and higher degrees of overlap. I suppose that as taxa overlap more and more at the latent level, they shade into dimensional (or as you call them "factorial"--not the most helpful term in this context) structures.

At the phenotypic level, I wish you had said more about the topic of the bipolarity of fallible indicators. It would seem to me that in a sample of roughly one-half taxon members and one-half nontaxon members, none of the distributions of valid indicators can be Gaussian. What am I missing here? I

602, 216

would think that some degree of bipolarity of valid indicators would be necessary (and perhaps sufficient) for one to infer taxonic status. For biological sex, bipolarity is rampant. But for self-monitoring, not to mention frenzied egalitarianism, one will probably not find any bipolar indicators. Indeed, for virtually all measures of individual differences in abilities and personality traits, one virtually never encounters bipolarity. Why does this problem not worry you?

Finally, while I am quibbling with you about the limitations of one of the finest articles I've ever read, I want to call attention to two books that seemed to be conspicuously missing from your discussion of authoritarianism (McClosky & Meehl, in preparation): Bob Altemeyer's (1981) Right-Wing Authoritarianism [University of Manitoba Press] and his (1988) Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-Wing Authoritarianism [Jossey-Bass]. Altemeyer's meticulously constructed RWA scales would seem to be prime candidates for analyses by some of your taxometric methods.

Thanks again for stirring up the old juices.

All my best.

To you might guess, I find myself standing about the nature of these "environmental" cold taxa. Just as I would be loath to join a club or organization as its parent membership, so am I loath to admit taxonic status to one of your samples. Among the hardest to swallow are "frenzied egalitarianism" and self-monitoring. Indeed, if self-monitoring is an example of a taxon, how to tell with the distinction between taxonic and non-taxonic individuals? "Frenzied egalitarianism" and "self-monitoring" as a taxon, how to I distinguish all these "taxa" from "frenzied egalitarianism" and "frenzied authoritarianism"?

Some certainly, I wish you had said more about the nature of the differences between taxon and non-taxon membership at the latent level in the "psychological" range of individual differences. From the way that you describe taxa, one would think that you subscribe to a classical conception of taxon membership, where at the phenotypic level everyone is clearly in or out of each taxon. But you seem to suggest that some taxa are "bridge" taxa, and that individuals have "partial" features of both men and women. And so it will be at the phenotypic level of bridge-players, races, cultures, vocations, ideologies, and religions. One can distinguish in principle between perfect and imperfect taxa, and therefore one might think of various kinds of taxa being arranged on a continuum from perfectly individual taxa (e.g., the "frenzied egalitarianism") through higher and higher degrees of overlap. I suspect that we have overlap only and none at the latent level, they show into dimensional form as you call them "factorial" (not the most helpful term in this context) structures.

At the phenotypic level, I wish you had said more about the nature of the "vigilance" of reliable indicators. It would seem to me that in a sample of roughly one-half taxon members and one-half non-taxon members, none of the distributions of valid "indicators" can be Gaussian. What am I missing here?