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META-THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF PRIMATE PERSONALITY RESEARCH – AN OVERVIEW

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Variations of individual-specific patterns in behavior and mind that are commonly construed as personality differences are increasingly studied also in nonhuman primate species. Primatologists that aim to investigate the ecological and evolutionary relevance of such between-individual variation in their study species are confronted with fundamental meta-theoretical and methodological challenges. Variations of individual-specific patterns of behavior are always partially masked by considerable random or ephemeral variation derived from behavioral flexibility, ephemeral environmental conditions, and measurement error. How can we identify individual differences that are, in fact, based on individual-specific patterns? From meta-theoretical perspectives, I discuss basic principles of empirical measurement and data analyses that allow extracting individual-specific patterns in empirical sets of behavioral data. Two principal perspectives on individuals can thereby be taken. The variable-centered perspective focuses on population-level phenomena and empirically explores between-individual variations. The individual-centered perspective focuses on individual-level phenomena and empirically explores the single individual's unique configuration of behavioral tendencies and their deviations relative to those of the other individuals in the population. I close with a discussion on methods of measurement. I highlight that the apparent advantages of observer judgments, such as higher correlations among measurement variables or across situations, may derive from biased perceptions and ascriptions of human observers that need not accurately reflect the behavioral reality of primate individuals.

Keywords: personality, individual differences, measurement, analytical methods