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L_p Loss Functions in Invariance Alignment and Haberman Linking

Alexander Robitzsch ^{1,2*} ¹ IPN – Leibniz Institute for Science and Mathematics Education, Kiel, Germany² Centre for International Student Assessment (ZIB), Kiel, Germany

* Correspondence: robitzsch@leibniz-ipn.de

Abstract: The comparison of group means in latent variable models plays a vital role in empirical research in the social sciences. The present article discusses extensions of invariance alignment and Haberman linking concerning the choice of linking functions for comparisons of many groups. Robust linking functions are proposed for invariance alignment and robust Haberman linking that are particularly suited to item response data under partial invariance. In a simulation study, it is shown that both linking approaches have comparable performance, and in some conditions, the newly proposed robust Haberman linking outperforms invariance alignment.

Keywords: factor model, 2PL model, linking, invariance alignment, Haberman linking, partial invariance, item response model, structural equation model, differential item functioning

1. Introduction

In the comparison of multiple groups in latent variable models like factor analysis or item response models, some identifying assumptions have to be posed. In practice, it is often assumed that item parameters are equal across groups, which is denoted as invariance. The invariance concept has been very prominent in psychology and the social sciences in general [1,2]. For example, in international large-scale assessment studies in education like the programme for international student assessment (PISA), the necessity of invariance is strongly emphasized [3].

In the violation of invariance, linking approaches have been proposed to allow group comparisons. In this article, two important linking approaches are compared: invariance alignment [4] and Haberman linking [5]. These two approaches are contrasted by introducing a unifying notation. Moreover, these approaches are extended by considering a broad family of linking functions, the L_p loss function. By means of this extension, invariance alignment and Haberman linking appear to be very similar on a formal level, and through a simulation study it is shown that they provide comparable results.

2. Unidimensional Factor Model with Partial Invariance

In this section, the unidimensional factor model for continuous and dichotomous items for multiple groups (i.e., multiple populations) is introduced. Afterward, different assumptions about levels of invariance of item parameters are discussed.

2.1. Unidimensional Factor Model

Let X_{ig} denote the item response variable of item i ($i = 1, \dots, I$) in group g ($g = 1, \dots, G$). For continuous items X_{ig} , a unidimensional factor model is assumed [6]

$$X_{ig} = \nu_{ig} + \lambda_{ig}\theta_g + \varepsilon_{ig}, \quad \theta_g \sim N(\mu_g, \sigma_g^2), \quad \varepsilon_{ig} \sim N(0, \psi_{ig}), \quad (1)$$

where λ_{ig} are item loadings (that are typically assumed to be nonnegative), and ν_{ig} are item intercepts. It has to be noted that the parameters in Equation 1 are not identified. An identified model is obtained by assuming a standardized latent variable θ_g :

$$X_{ig} = v_{ig,0} + \lambda_{ig,0}\theta_g + \varepsilon_{ig}, \quad \theta_g \sim N(0,1), \quad \varepsilon_{ig} \sim N(0, \psi_{ig}) \quad (2)$$

The model parameters are then related as follows

$$\lambda_{ig,0} = \lambda_{ig}\sigma_g \quad (3)$$

$$v_{ig,0} = v_{ig} + \lambda_{ig}\mu_g = v_{ig} + \frac{\lambda_{ig,0}}{\sigma_g}\mu_g \quad (4)$$

For dichotomous (i.e., binary) variables, a logistic link function Ψ is employed and the resulting unidimensional factor model is

$$P(X_{ig} = 1|\theta_g) = \Psi(v_{ig} + \lambda_{ig}\theta_g), \quad \theta_g \sim N(\mu_g, \sigma_g^2) \quad (5)$$

This model is also known as the two-parameter logistic (2PL) model [7] and is widely spread in the literature of item response theory (IRT) models [e.g., 8,9]. Again, the model in Equation 5 is not identified, but an identified parameterization can be employed using the same conversion formulas 3 and 4. It should be noted that the 2PL model in Equation 5 is often reparameterized as $P(X_{ig} = 1|\theta_g) = \Psi(\lambda_{ig}(\theta_g - \beta_{ig}))$, where $\beta_{ig} = -v_{ig}/\lambda_{ig}$ are item difficulties. Using identified parameters $\lambda_{ig,0}$ and $\beta_{ig,0}$, the relations among item parameters hold by rewriting Equations 3 and 4

$$\log \lambda_{ig,0} = \log \lambda_{ig} + \log \sigma_g \quad (6)$$

$$\sigma_g \beta_{ig,0} = \beta_{ig} - \mu_g. \quad (7)$$

Equation 7 can also be rephrased in terms of random intercepts v_{ig} :

$$\sigma_g \frac{v_{ig,0}}{\lambda_{ig,0}} = -\beta_{ig} + \mu_g. \quad (8)$$

2.2. Full Invariance, Partial Invariance, and Linking Methods

The main goal is to compare the distribution of θ_g among groups. As the unidimensional factor model is not identified, some identification constraints have to be imposed to enable group comparisons. Three main approaches can be distinguished that differ concerning the assumptions of item parameters.

First, in a *full invariance* approach [1,2,10,11] it is assumed that all item parameters are equal among groups, e.g., $\lambda_{i1} = \dots = \lambda_{iG}$ and $v_{i1} = \dots = v_{iG}$ for all items $i = 1, \dots, I$. This approach presumes the existence of common item parameters λ_i and v_i across groups and the unidimensional factor model is identified by posing constraints on the parameters of the first group (i.e., $\mu_1 = 0$ and $\sigma_1 = 1$).

Second, in a *partial invariance* approach [12–14] it is assumed that a subset of item parameters is the same across groups. More formally, the group-specific item parameters are decomposed into common item parameters and group-specific item parameters as follows:

$$\lambda_{ig} = \lambda_i + u_{ig} \quad \text{and} \quad v_{ig} = v_i + e_{ig} \quad (9)$$

The existence of group-specific item parameters is also labelled as differential item functioning (DIF, [1,15]). The presence of group-specific item intercepts is denoted as uniform DIF, while the presence of group-specific item loadings is denoted as nonuniform DIF [15]. In partial invariance, it is assumed that a subset of effects u_{ig} and e_{ig} is equal to zero. In the extreme case that all parameters equal zero, full invariance is obtained. A crucial issue is that a researcher does not know which item parameters differ among groups and some statistical procedure has to be applied for detecting the group-specific parameters (see [16–20] for overviews). By assuming some zero effects u_{ig} and e_{ig}

and the identification constraint $\mu_1 = 0$ and $\sigma_1 = 1$ of distribution parameters of the first group, the unidimensional factor model can be identified. In [21] it is suggested that at most 25% of all item parameters can be noninvariant to get trustworthy estimates of group means in the IA approach, a rule that can be also transferred to the partial invariance approach (see also [22]).

Third, in a *full noninvariance* approach, all item parameters are allowed to differ among groups. The unidimensional factor model is identified by posing some identification constraints on group-specific parameters [23]. For example, $\prod_{i=1}^I \lambda_{ig} = 1$ and $\sum_{i=1}^I v_{ig} = 0$ (for all groups $g = 1, \dots, G$) are sufficient conditions for ensuring identifiability. In the linking approach [see 24–28], the sets of identified group-specific item parameters $\hat{\lambda}_{g,0} = (\hat{\lambda}_{1g,0}, \dots, \hat{\lambda}_{Ig,0})$ and $\hat{v}_{g,0} = (\hat{v}_{1g,0}, \dots, \hat{v}_{Ig,0})$ ($g = 1, \dots, G$) are used to compute group means $\mu = (\mu_1, \dots, \mu_G)$ and group standard deviations $\sigma = (\sigma_1, \dots, \sigma_G)$ by minimizing some linking function $H(\mu, \sigma) = f(\mu, \sigma; \hat{\lambda}_{1,0}, \dots, \hat{\lambda}_{G,0}, \hat{v}_{1,0}, \dots, \hat{v}_{G,0})$. The main idea is that deviations $\lambda_{ig} - \lambda_{ih}$ and $v_{ig} - v_{ih}$ should be small for all pairs of groups g and h . In this article, two linking methods will be investigated in more detail that are introduced in Section 3.

In practice, the full invariance or the partial invariance assumption are often only approximately fulfilled and diversity of statistical methods has been proposed to tackle this case [29–32]. These approaches are of particular importance in studies of cross-cultural comparisons in which many groups (i.e., countries in this case) are involved [3,33]. Moreover, the issue of invariance is also vital in studies involving longitudinal measurements [34,35].

3. Linking Methods

In this section, the linking methods invariance alignment [4] and Haberman linking [5] are introduced. It was highlighted by researcher Matthias von Davier that the alignment method appears to be very similar to the Haberman linking approach [see 36, p. 4]. In the following section, both approaches are discussed using a unifying notation.

3.1. Invariance Alignment

Asparouhov and Muthén [4,21] proposed the method of *invariance alignment* (IA) to define a linking method that maximizes the extent of invariant item parameters. The approach uses estimated identifiable item parameters $\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0}$ and $\hat{v}_{ig,0}$ ($i = 1, \dots, I$; $g = 1, \dots, G$) as the input. The goal is to minimize deviations $\lambda_{ig} - \lambda_{ih}$ and $v_{ig} - v_{ih}$ for pairs of groups g and h . By rewriting Equations 3 and 4, we obtain

$$\lambda_{ig} - \lambda_{ih} = \frac{\lambda_{ig,0}}{\sigma_g} - \frac{\lambda_{ih,0}}{\sigma_h} \quad (10)$$

$$v_{ig} - v_{ih} = v_{ig,0} - v_{ih,0} - \lambda_{ig,0} \frac{\mu_g}{\sigma_g} + \lambda_{ih,0} \frac{\mu_h}{\sigma_h} \quad (11)$$

These relations motivate the minimization of the following linking function for determining group means μ and standard deviations σ :

$$H(\mu, \sigma) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g,h=1}^G w_{i1,gh} \rho \left(\frac{\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0}}{\sigma_g} - \frac{\hat{\lambda}_{ih,0}}{\sigma_h} \right) + \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g,h=1}^G w_{i2,gh} \rho \left(\hat{v}_{ig,0} - \hat{v}_{ih,0} - \hat{\lambda}_{ig,0} \frac{\mu_g}{\sigma_g} + \hat{\lambda}_{ih,0} \frac{\mu_h}{\sigma_h} \right) \quad (12)$$

Where $w_{i1,gh}$ and $w_{i2,gh}$ are user-defined weights and ρ is a loss function [37]. Asparouhov and Muthén [4,21] proposed to use $w_{i1,gh} = w_{i2,gh} = \sqrt{n_g n_h}$ and $\rho(x) = \sqrt{|x|}$. To balance the impact of groups in the estimation, all weights could be chosen equal to one. In the following, we omit weights for ease of notation.

It is instructive to reformulate the minimization problem of H in Equation 12 as a two-step minimization problem. In the first step, the vector of group standard deviations σ is obtained by minimizing

$$H_{1u}(\sigma) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g,h=1}^G \rho \left(\frac{\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0}}{\sigma_g} - \frac{\hat{\lambda}_{ih,0}}{\sigma_h} \right) \quad (13)$$

In the second step, estimated standard deviations $\hat{\sigma}_g$ ($g = 1, \dots, G$) from the first step are used, and the vector of group means μ is obtained by minimizing the following criterion:

$$H_{2i}(\mu) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g,h=1}^G \rho \left(\hat{v}_{ig,0} - \hat{v}_{ih,0} - \hat{\lambda}_{ig} \frac{\mu_g}{\hat{\sigma}_g} + \hat{\lambda}_{ih} \frac{\mu_h}{\hat{\sigma}_h} \right) \quad (14)$$

Alternatively, one can use relations 6 and 8 to define a linking function. By using 6 and 8, we obtain

$$\log \lambda_{ig} - \log \lambda_{ih} = \log \lambda_{ig,0} - \log \lambda_{ih,0} - \log \sigma_g + \log \sigma_h \quad (15)$$

$$\beta_{ig} - \beta_{ih} = \sigma_g \frac{v_{ig,0}}{\lambda_{ig,0}} - \sigma_h \frac{v_{ih,0}}{\lambda_{ih,0}} + \mu_g - \mu_h \quad (16)$$

For estimating group standard deviations in the first step, logarithmized item loadings can be used by minimizing

$$H_{1l}(\sigma) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g,h=1}^G \rho (\log \hat{\lambda}_{ig,0} - \log \hat{\lambda}_{ih,0} + \log \sigma_g - \log \sigma_h) \quad (17)$$

For estimating group means in the second step, the differences in item difficulties in Equation 16 are used to minimize

$$H_{2d}(\mu) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g,h=1}^G \rho \left(\hat{\sigma}_g \frac{\hat{v}_{ig,0}}{\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0}} - \hat{\sigma}_h \frac{\hat{v}_{ih,0}}{\hat{\lambda}_{ih,0}} + \mu_g - \mu_h \right) \quad (18)$$

The IA approach can be applied by combining the two alternatives of minimization functions for untransformed item loadings (H_{1u}) or logarithmized loadings (H_{1l}) and item intercepts (H_{2i}) or item difficulties (H_{2d}) for standard deviations and means, respectively. Hence, four different linking functions can be defined: H_{1u} and H_{2i} (Method IA1), H_{1l} and H_{2i} (Method IA2), H_{1u} and H_{2d} (Method IA3), and H_{1l} and H_{2d} (Method IA4). In this article, it is investigated in two simulation studies which linking method is to preferred with respect to the performance in the estimated group means $\hat{\mu}$.

The statistical properties of the estimator for μ and σ also strongly depend on the choice of the loss function ρ . In the case of partial invariance, only a few of the pairwise differences of item parameters are nonzero. This motivates the use of robust loss functions ρ because a few large differences can be interpreted as outlying cases [38–46]. Asparouhov and Muthén [4,21] implemented the loss function $\rho(x) = \sqrt{|x|} = |x|^{0.5}$ in their commercial Mplus software [47]. In this article, we propose the robust loss function $\rho(x) = |x|^p$ for nonnegative p (L_p loss function, [48–52]). This loss function is implemented in the R package *sirt* (see the function `invariance.alignment()`; [53]). [54] investigated different values of p in a simulation study and found that $p = 0.1$ was superior to $p = 0.5$ in many conditions when data has been generated under partial invariance. It should be noted that in the limiting case of $p = 0$, the number of noninvariant parameters is minimized. In Figure 1, the loss function ρ is displayed for different values of p .

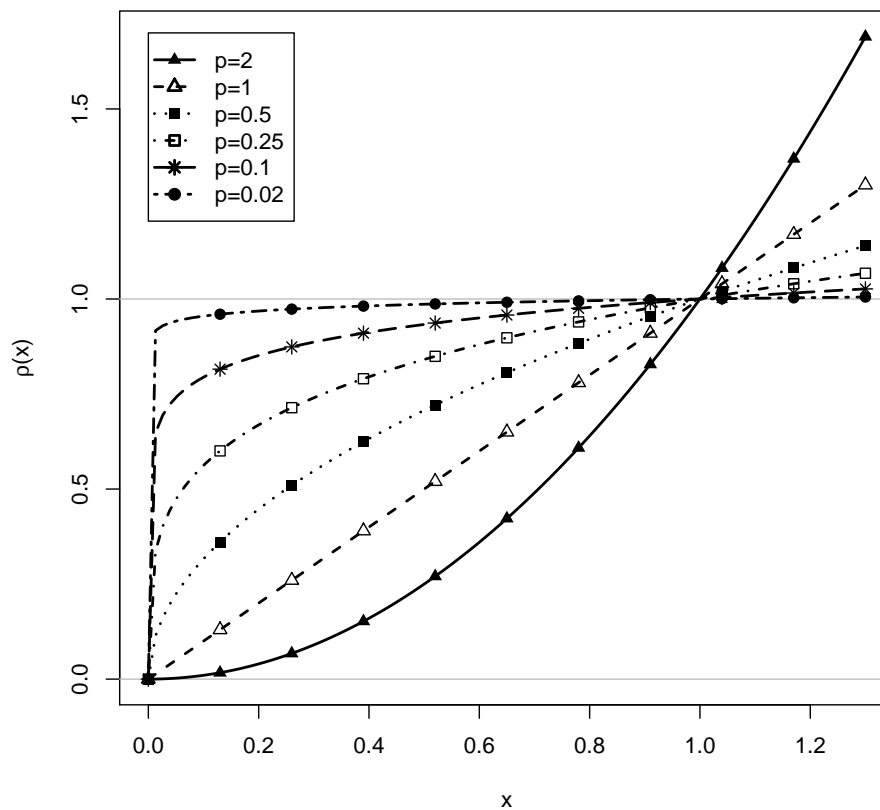


Figure 1. L_p loss function $\rho(x) = |x|^p$ for different values of p .

The loss function $\rho(x) = |x|^p$ is not differentiable for $p \leq 1$ that prevent from using optimization algorithms that rely on derivatives. However, in the alignment, the function ρ is replaced by a differentiable approximating function $\rho_D(x) = (x^2 + \varepsilon)^{p/2}$ using a small $\varepsilon > 0$ (e.g., $\varepsilon = .01$ [used in the software Mplus] or $\varepsilon = .001$). Because ρ_D is differentiable, quasi-Newton minimization approaches can be used that are implemented in standard optimizers in R [55]. In our experience, in the case of small ε values, the optimization of the alignment function is very sensitive to starting values [see also 4]. Hence, the implementation in the sirt [53] package specifies a sequence of decreasing values of ε in the optimization, each using the previous solution as initial values (see [56] for a similar approach).

There are a few simulation studies that investigate the behavior of the IA method with $p = 0.5$. Previous simulation studies for unidimensional factor model investigated the case of continuous items [4,31,57,58], dichotomous items [59,60], and polytomous items [61,62]. The extension of IA to multidimensional factor models with continuous items was discussed in [63] and [64]. As the IA approach is implemented in the popular Mplus software, it was already employed in a broad range of applications [34,64–83].

3.2. Haberman Linking

The *Haberman linking* (HL) approach [5] also has the goal of linking multiple groups. In contrast to the IA approach, HL also estimates joint item loadings $\lambda = (\lambda_1, \dots, \lambda_I)$ and item difficulties $\beta = (\beta_1, \dots, \beta_I)$ or item intercepts $\nu = (\nu_1, \dots, \nu_I)$. HL is conducted in two estimation steps. In the first step, the group standard deviations σ are computed. In the second step, the group means μ are computed. We now describe the estimation procedure in detail.

In the first step, estimated item loadings $\hat{\lambda}_g$ ($g = 1, \dots, G$) are used to obtain group standard deviations σ and joint item loadings λ by minimizing a criterion $H_1(\sigma, \lambda)$. Using logarithmized estimated item loadings (see Equation 6), the following linking function is minimized:

$$H_{1l}(\sigma, \lambda) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g=1}^G \rho(\log \hat{\lambda}_{ig,0} - \log \lambda_i - \log \sigma_g) \quad (19)$$

Where ρ is a loss function. In this article, the loss function $\rho(x) = |x|^p$ is applied like for the IA method. Haberman [5] used $p = 2$ for ρ in Equation 19. Alternatively, one can employ untransformed item loadings for determining σ and λ . In this case, untransformed estimated item loadings are used and one minimizes

$$H_{1u}(\sigma, \lambda) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g=1}^G \rho(\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0} - \lambda_i - \sigma_g) \quad (20)$$

In the second step, estimated item intercepts ν_g and standard deviations $\hat{\sigma}_g$ from the first step ($g = 1, \dots, G$) are used to compute group means μ and item difficulties β . By using Equation 8, the following criterion originally proposed by Haberman [5] is minimized

$$H_{2d}(\mu, \beta) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g=1}^G \rho\left(\hat{\sigma}_g \frac{\hat{\nu}_{ig,0}}{\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0}} + \beta_{ig} - \mu_g\right) \quad (21)$$

Alternatively, one can use Equation 4 for motivating the minimization of the following linking function

$$H_{2i}(\mu, \nu) = \sum_{i=1}^I \sum_{g=1}^G \rho\left(\hat{\nu}_{ig,0} - \nu_{ig} - \frac{\hat{\lambda}_{ig,0}}{\hat{\sigma}_g} \mu_g\right) \quad (22)$$

In this case, item intercepts ν instead of item difficulties β are estimated.

As for the IA approach, the HL method can be applied by combining the two alternatives of minimization functions H_{1u} or H_{1l} and H_{2n} or H_{2l} for standard deviations and means, respectively. Again, four different linking functions can be defined: H_{1u} and H_{2i} (Method HL1), H_{1l} and H_{2i} (Method HL2), H_{1u} and H_{2d} (Method HL3), and H_{1l} and H_{2d} (Method HL4). The originally proposed Haberman method is Method HL4 with the loss function $\rho(x) = x^2$ (i.e., $p = 2$).

HL has been studied in [84] and is implemented in the R packages `equaIRT` [85] (function `multieq()`) and `sirt` [53] (functions `linking.haberman()` and `linking.haberman.lq()`). SAS code is also available [86]. The linking of multiple groups using other linking functions has been treated in [84,87–89]. In contrast to the IA method, HL has only been scarcely applied [90–98].

4. Simulation Studies

In this section, we present two simulations studies that compare different specifications of IA and HL. In Study 1 (Section 4.1), we consider continuous items. In Study 2 (Section 4.2), we investigate the case of dichotomous items.

4.1. Study 1: Continuous Items

4.1.1. Simulation Design

We chose a simulation design that was similar to Simulation Study 1 of Asparouhov and Muthén [4]. Data was generated using a unidimensional factor model with $G = 3$ or $G = 6$ groups, each of size $N = 250, 500, 1000$, or 5000 . The normally distributed factor was measured by five normally distributed items. In the case of $G = 3$ groups, the means of the normal distributions of the factor were -0.365 , -0.112 , and 0.477 , while the standard deviations were 0.842 , 1.032 , and 0.923 . This choice resulted in a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 for the total population comprising all groups. For $G = 6$ groups, the means and standard deviations were duplicated, i.e., the fourth group uses the same parameters as the first group, and so on.

In the no DIF condition, all item parameters were assumed to be invariant across groups. In the DIF condition, we generated item responses so that in each group there is exactly one noninvariant item intercept and one noninvariant item loading. In all groups, the invariant loadings and the residual variances of the indicator variables were set to $\lambda_i = 1$ ($i = 1, \dots, 5$) and the invariant item intercepts of the were set to $\nu_i = 0$. The noninvariant item parameters in the first group were $\nu_{51} = 0.5$ and $\lambda_{13} = 1.4$. The noninvariant item parameters in the second group were $\nu_{12} = -0.5$ and $\lambda_{52} = 0.5$. The noninvariant item parameters in the third group were $\nu_{23} = 0.5$ and $\lambda_{43} = 0.3$. In the case of 6 groups, item parameters of Group $g + h$ were chosen to be equal to item parameters of Group g ($g = 1, 2, 3$; $h = 1, 2, 3$). For each condition, $R = 300$ replications were used.

4.1.2. Analysis Methods

The performance of IA and HL was investigated by varying specifications of the linking functions. Four IA and HL specifications were tested: IA1, IA2, IA3, and IA4 (see Sect. 3.1), and HL1, HL2, HL3, and HL4 (see Sect. 3.2). For IA and HL, the powers $p = 0.02, 0.01, 0.25, 0.50, 1$, and 2 were used in the linking functions.

To identify group means and group standard deviations in the linking procedure, for the first group, the mean was set to 0 and the standard deviation was set to 1. After estimating all group means and group standard deviations, these parameters were transformed to obtain a mean of 0 and a standard deviation 1 for the total sample comprising all groups. These conditions were also fulfilled in the data generating model.

The statistical performance of the vector of estimated means $\hat{\mu}$ and estimated standard deviations $\hat{\sigma}$ is assessed by summarizing bias and variability of estimators across groups. Let $\gamma = (\gamma_1, \dots, \gamma_G)$ be a parameter of interest and $\hat{\gamma} = (\hat{\gamma}_1, \dots, \hat{\gamma}_G)$ its estimator (i.e., for means and standard deviations). For R replications, the obtained estimates are $\hat{\gamma}_r = (\hat{\gamma}_{1r}, \dots, \hat{\gamma}_{Gr})$ ($r = 1, \dots, R$). The average absolute bias (ABIAS) is defined as

$$ABIAS(\hat{\gamma}) = \frac{1}{G} \sum_{g=1}^G \left| \frac{1}{R} \sum_{r=1}^R \hat{\gamma}_{gr} - \gamma_g \right| = \frac{1}{G} \sum_{g=1}^G |Bias(\hat{\gamma}_g)| \quad (23)$$

The average root mean square error (ARMSE) is computed as

$$ARMSE(\hat{\gamma}) = \frac{1}{G} \sum_{g=1}^G \sqrt{\frac{1}{R} \sum_{r=1}^R (\hat{\gamma}_{gr} - \gamma_g)^2} = \frac{1}{G} \sum_{g=1}^G RMSE(\hat{\gamma}_g) \quad (24)$$

The ARMSE is the average of the root mean square error (RMSE) of each parameter estimate. In all analyses, the software R [55] was used. Haberman linking and invariance alignment was performed with the R package *sirt* [53].

4.1.3. Results

Tables A1 and A2 in Supplement A show the ABIAS in the no DIF condition for group means for 3 and 6 groups, respectively. There are no notable differences between the different IA and HL approaches, and all methods are unbiased.

Table 1. Study 1: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Means as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of No Differential Item Functioning (No DIF) and $G = 6$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.060	.060	.070	.072	.059	.060	.060	.060
0.1	.060	.059	.069	.071	.059	.059	.060	.060
0.25	.059	.059	.068	.070	.059	.059	.059	.059
0.5	.058	.058	.066	.068	.058	.058	.059	.058
1	.056	.056	.062	.064	.056	.056	.057	.057
2	.056	.056	.061	.062	.056	.056	.056	.056
$N = 500$								
0.02	.045	.045	.049	.049	.046	.046	.046	.046
0.1	.045	.045	.048	.049	.046	.046	.045	.045
0.25	.045	.045	.048	.048	.045	.045	.045	.045
0.5	.044	.044	.047	.047	.044	.044	.044	.044
1	.043	.043	.045	.045	.043	.043	.043	.043
2	.042	.042	.043	.044	.042	.042	.042	.042
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.030	.030	.034	.034	.030	.030	.030	.030
0.1	.030	.030	.034	.034	.030	.030	.030	.030
0.25	.030	.030	.033	.034	.029	.029	.029	.029
0.5	.029	.029	.033	.033	.029	.029	.029	.029
1	.029	.029	.032	.032	.029	.029	.029	.029
2	.029	.029	.031	.032	.029	.029	.029	.029
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.013	.013	.014	.014	.013	.013	.013	.013
0.1	.013	.013	.014	.014	.013	.013	.013	.013
0.25	.013	.013	.014	.014	.013	.013	.013	.013
0.5	.013	.013	.014	.014	.013	.013	.013	.013
1	.013	.013	.014	.014	.013	.013	.013	.013
2	.013	.013	.014	.014	.013	.013	.013	.013

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 1, the ARMSE is displayed in the condition of no DIF and 6 groups. In large samples, all methods showed similar performance in estimated group means. However, the IA methods IA1 and IA2 (based on item intercepts) and all four HL methods performed similarly. For smaller sample sizes (i.e., $N = 250$ or $N = 500$), HL based on intercepts (HL1 and HL2) was superior to HL based on item difficulties (HL3 and HL4). It can be seen that there are efficiency losses in terms of ARMSE when using a power $p \leq 1$ instead of $p = 2$. However, in many conditions, the efficiency loss is negligible.

Table 2. Study 1: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Means as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of Differential Item Functioning (DIF) and $G = 6$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.072	.073	.108	.112	.071	.071	.077	.077
0.1	.072	.073	.107	.111	.071	.071	.077	.077
0.25	.070	.070	.105	.113	.070	.070	.077	.077
0.5	.069	.069	.101	.108	.071	.071	.077	.077
1	.073	.071	.102	.113	.075	.075	.084	.084
2	.094	.088	.130	.126	.087	.088	.096	.096
$N = 500$								
0.02	.048	.048	.099	.100	.046	.046	.053	.053
0.1	.048	.048	.095	.098	.047	.047	.052	.052
0.25	.048	.048	.094	.097	.047	.047	.052	.052
0.5	.048	.048	.096	.100	.047	.047	.051	.051
1	.052	.050	.096	.108	.053	.053	.058	.059
2	.083	.075	.118	.115	.076	.075	.084	.086
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.032	.032	.083	.088	.033	.033	.034	.034
0.1	.032	.032	.085	.086	.033	.033	.034	.034
0.25	.033	.033	.084	.090	.033	.033	.033	.033
0.5	.032	.032	.084	.094	.032	.032	.034	.034
1	.038	.037	.098	.108	.039	.039	.043	.043
2	.078	.068	.115	.108	.070	.068	.076	.078
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.013	.013	.041	.055	.013	.013	.013	.013
0.1	.013	.013	.040	.063	.013	.013	.013	.014
0.25	.013	.013	.050	.066	.013	.013	.014	.014
0.5	.013	.013	.045	.049	.013	.013	.014	.014
1	.019	.018	.092	.098	.021	.021	.023	.024
2	.073	.059	.112	.100	.063	.059	.067	.072

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 2, the ARMSE is shown in the condition of DIF and $G = 6$ groups. Alignment methods IA3 and IA4 that rely on linking item difficulties are inferior to all other methods, even for huge sample sizes. It can be seen that the methods (except IA3 and IA4) performed very similar for power values $p = 0.02, 0.1, 0.25$, and 0.5 for sample sizes of at least 500. Using a p of at least 0.5 is effective in reducing the bias introduced by linking using $p = 1$ or $p = 2$. For a small sample size of $N = 250$, $p = 0.1$ or $p = 0.02$ introduced non-negligible amounts of uncertainty. In general, the linking methods IA1, IA2, HL1, and HL2 have comparable performance. Notably, the additional number of estimated common item parameters in HL did not introduce additional variability in estimated group means. Moreover, it was found that HL based on item difficulties (as originally proposed in [5]; methods HL3 and HL4) resulted in more variable estimates than HL based on item difficulties (methods HL1 and HL2).

The results for the ARMSE for 3 groups were almost identical to 6 groups, see Tables A5 and A6 in Supplement A.

The ABIAS in the DIF condition for 3 and 6 groups are shown in Tables A3 and A4 in Supplement A. The sample size of $N = 5000$ essentially presupposes known identified item parameters because only negligible sampling variability is introduced. It can be seen that all methods using the power $p = 2$ provide biased estimates. In contrast, bias is acceptable for powers p of at most 1. Interestingly, methods whose linking is based on item difficulties (IA3, IA4, HL3, HL4) are inferior to methods based on item intercepts (IA1, IA2, HL1, HL2).

Table 3. Study 1: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Standard Deviations as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of Differential Item Functioning (DIF) and $G = 6$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.057	.059	.062	.061	.062	.059	.062	.060
0.1	.057	.059	.061	.060	.061	.059	.062	.060
0.25	.056	.058	.061	.060	.061	.059	.062	.060
0.5	.055	.058	.060	.060	.062	.059	.062	.060
1	.057	.066	.067	.060	.073	.069	.073	.070
2	.071	.123	.123	.075	.107	.123	.107	.123
$N = 500$								
0.02	.036	.036	.041	.041	.037	.037	.037	.038
0.1	.036	.035	.040	.041	.037	.037	.037	.037
0.25	.035	.035	.040	.041	.036	.036	.037	.037
0.5	.035	.035	.039	.041	.036	.036	.036	.036
1	.037	.041	.043	.043	.045	.044	.045	.044
2	.060	.108	.106	.066	.089	.108	.089	.107
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.026	.026	.029	.030	.025	.025	.025	.026
0.1	.026	.025	.029	.030	.025	.025	.025	.025
0.25	.025	.025	.029	.030	.025	.025	.025	.025
0.5	.025	.025	.028	.030	.025	.025	.026	.026
1	.028	.032	.034	.034	.035	.035	.035	.035
2	.056	.106	.103	.061	.088	.106	.087	.105
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.010	.010	.013	.015	.010	.010	.010	.010
0.1	.010	.010	.013	.016	.010	.010	.010	.011
0.25	.010	.011	.014	.016	.010	.011	.011	.011
0.5	.011	.011	.013	.014	.011	.011	.011	.011
1	.013	.017	.020	.020	.020	.021	.019	.021
2	.050	.104	.098	.055	.086	.104	.084	.102

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 3, the ARMSE of group standard deviations for 6 groups in the DIF condition is shown. For power values $p = 0.02$ to $p = 0.5$, the methods IA1, IA2, HL1, and HL2 were similar, but provided substantially different results for $p = 1$ and $p = 2$.

Overall, simulation study 1 showed that HL could be regarded to be very similar to IA by using the same robust loss function as in IA. Both approaches can be effectively used to reduce bias in estimated group distribution parameters in the situation of partial invariance.

4.2. Study 2: Dichotomous Items

4.2.1. Simulation Design

In this study, we generated dichotomous item responses and investigated the performance of IA and HL for the 2PL model. We adopted a simulation design that was used in [94]. We simulated item responses from a 2PL model for $G = 3$ and $G = 6$ groups. For each group g , abilities were normally distributed with mean μ_g and standard deviation σ_g . Across all conditions and replications of the simulation, the group means and standard deviations were held fixed. In the case of $G = 3$ groups, the means were 0.030, -0.262 , and 0.232 , and the standard deviations were 0.958, 0.948, and 1.029, respectively. In the case of $G = 6$ groups, the means were chosen as 0.078, -0.205 , 0.273 , 0.625 , -0.830 , and 0.059 , while the standard deviations were 0.927, 0.918, 0.996, 0.879, 0.810, 0.820, respectively. The total population comprising all groups had a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. Item loadings λ_i were assumed to be invariant across groups. Group-specific item intercepts ν_{ig} were generated according to $\nu_{ig} = \nu_i + e_{ig}$, where ν_i is the common item intercept, and e_{ig} is the group-specific uniform

DIF effect. The item parameters were held constant across conditions and replications. In total, $I = 20$ items were used in the simulation.

For each item in each group and for a fixed proportion π_B of items with DIF effects, a discrete variable Z_{ig} , which had values of 0 (if the item had an invariant item intercept), or +1 (biased item with a uniform DIF effect). The constant DIF effect δ was chosen either 0 (no DIF condition), or 0.6 (DIF condition). All biased items within a group received a uniform DIF effect of either $+\delta$ or $-\delta$. This property was implemented by defining a variable D_g that had either a value of 1 or -1 . The DIF effects for unbalanced DIF were defined as $e_{ig} = Z_{ig}D_g\delta$.

For each condition of the simulation design, $R = 300$ replications were generated. We manipulated the number of persons per group ($N = 250, 500, 1000$, and 5000). We fixed the proportion of items with DIF effects to 30% (i.e., in every group, 6 out of 20 items have DIF effects).

4.2.2. Analysis Methods

The same four IA and HL methods were tested as in simulation study 1. Again, power values $p = 0.02, 0.1, 0.25, 0.5, 1$, and 2 were compared. We implemented the IA and HL approaches in the *sirt* package [53] and used the TAM package [99] for estimating the 2PL model with marginal maximum likelihood.

4.2.3. Results

Table 4. Study 2: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Means as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of No Differential Item Functioning (No DIF) and $G = 6$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.080	.074	.106	.135	.075	.075	.091	.088
0.1	.073	.072	.105	.146	.075	.074	.090	.086
0.25	.072	.071	.103	.196	.073	.073	.085	.083
0.5	.068	.067	.096	.169	.070	.070	.080	.078
1	.065	.064	.087	.114	.065	.066	.073	.073
2	.069	.067	.130	.171	.066	.067	.125	.119
$N = 500$								
0.02	.054	.053	.074	.086	.056	.058	.058	.059
0.1	.053	.052	.073	.083	.056	.057	.057	.058
0.25	.051	.050	.073	.080	.054	.054	.057	.057
0.5	.048	.048	.070	.074	.052	.052	.054	.055
1	.046	.046	.063	.063	.046	.047	.051	.051
2	.046	.046	.063	.070	.046	.046	.057	.056
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.035	.035	.056	.052	.038	.038	.039	.039
0.1	.035	.035	.055	.051	.037	.037	.038	.038
0.25	.034	.034	.053	.047	.036	.036	.037	.037
0.5	.033	.032	.048	.043	.034	.034	.035	.036
1	.031	.031	.043	.038	.031	.031	.033	.033
2	.031	.031	.041	.041	.030	.031	.036	.036
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.014	.014	.046	.043	.015	.015	.016	.016
0.1	.014	.014	.045	.042	.015	.015	.016	.016
0.25	.014	.014	.043	.040	.015	.014	.016	.016
0.5	.014	.014	.039	.036	.014	.014	.016	.015
1	.013	.013	.030	.027	.014	.014	.015	.015
2	.013	.013	.019	.017	.013	.013	.016	.016

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 4, the ARMSE of the estimated group means is shown in the condition of no DIF and 6 groups. IA methods IA1 and IA2 performed slightly better than HL for a small power p . Like for normally distributed item responses, using a power p smaller than 2 in the no DIF conditions results in some loss of efficiency in estimated group means. Moreover, methods IA3 and IA4 that perform alignment based on item difficulties were again clearly inferior to alignment based on item intercepts (methods IA1 and IA2). In Table B1 and B2 in Supplement B, the ABIAS is shown for 3 and 6 groups. The ARMSE in the case of 6 groups and the no DIF condition is shown in Table B5.

Table 5. Study 2: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Means as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of Differential Item Functioning (DIF) and $G = 6$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.157	.156	.164	.187	.129	.128	.160	.156
0.1	.151	.155	.163	.231	.127	.126	.159	.152
0.25	.149	.153	.163	.236	.126	.126	.154	.148
0.5	.146	.149	.158	.184	.124	.125	.146	.142
1	.140	.144	.160	.157	.120	.121	.136	.136
2	.154	.156	.179	.179	.155	.156	.185	.183
$N = 500$								
0.02	.117	.117	.144	.145	.075	.075	.105	.105
0.1	.116	.117	.143	.140	.074	.075	.104	.107
0.25	.117	.118	.141	.137	.074	.076	.103	.108
0.5	.118	.120	.141	.134	.074	.076	.102	.098
1	.127	.130	.145	.133	.091	.092	.109	.110
2	.146	.149	.164	.153	.148	.149	.162	.162
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.070	.072	.115	.123	.048	.049	.060	.059
0.1	.071	.072	.117	.122	.048	.048	.060	.060
0.25	.071	.072	.119	.114	.048	.048	.062	.061
0.5	.079	.076	.124	.121	.048	.048	.063	.063
1	.115	.116	.137	.129	.066	.067	.085	.086
2	.144	.145	.158	.150	.145	.145	.161	.161
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.017	.017	.070	.068	.017	.017	.020	.019
0.1	.017	.017	.070	.068	.017	.017	.020	.019
0.25	.018	.018	.065	.064	.017	.017	.020	.019
0.5	.020	.020	.067	.073	.018	.018	.021	.020
1	.065	.065	.115	.113	.033	.033	.041	.042
2	.140	.141	.149	.147	.140	.141	.153	.154

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 5, the ARMSE of estimated group means is shown in the condition of DIF and $G = 6$ groups. Again, the methods IA3 and IA4 were not well-performing, in particular with a small p . Interestingly, when comparing the linking functions that use the same power p , HL performed better than IA except in the case of a very large sample size. HL based on item difficulties (HL3 and HL4) was again substantially worse than HL based on item intercepts (HL1 and HL2). However, HL based on item difficulties was also preferable to all IA methods.

Table 6. Study 2: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Means as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of Differential Item Functioning (DIF) and $G = 3$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.124	.118	.125	.140	.136	.136	.169	.158
0.1	.123	.117	.127	.140	.135	.135	.167	.158
0.25	.122	.118	.122	.136	.135	.135	.163	.158
0.5	.127	.123	.125	.140	.130	.130	.160	.158
1	.135	.131	.130	.136	.131	.131	.153	.152
2	.156	.152	.150	.157	.152	.152	.179	.179
$N = 500$								
0.02	.075	.073	.109	.110	.094	.092	.123	.123
0.1	.075	.073	.108	.110	.091	.091	.123	.125
0.25	.076	.075	.108	.111	.091	.091	.120	.125
0.5	.078	.077	.110	.111	.091	.092	.120	.123
1	.107	.106	.118	.122	.106	.106	.129	.129
2	.148	.147	.151	.154	.146	.147	.170	.171
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.043	.043	.080	.079	.058	.058	.098	.099
0.1	.043	.043	.080	.079	.058	.058	.095	.095
0.25	.050	.050	.082	.080	.058	.058	.098	.100
0.5	.052	.052	.084	.083	.060	.060	.101	.101
1	.085	.085	.109	.110	.086	.086	.117	.117
2	.148	.148	.154	.155	.147	.148	.171	.171
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.015	.015	.035	.034	.015	.015	.016	.016
0.1	.015	.015	.035	.034	.015	.015	.016	.016
0.25	.015	.015	.035	.034	.015	.015	.016	.016
0.5	.017	.017	.036	.035	.017	.017	.019	.019
1	.042	.042	.073	.073	.045	.045	.066	.066
2	.142	.141	.147	.148	.141	.141	.161	.161

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 6, the ARMSE of estimated group means is shown in the condition of DIF and $G = 3$ groups. Surprisingly, IA was superior to HL in this situation. The best performance was obtained by using $p = 0.1, 0.25$, or 0.50 and the IA1 or the IA2 method. However, methods IA1, IA2, HL1, HL2 performed nearly equivalent for a very large sample size of $N = 5000$.

Table 7. Study 2: Average Root Mean Square Error (ARMSE) of Group Standard Deviations as a Function of Sample Size in the Condition of Differential Item Functioning (DIF) and $G = 6$ Groups

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
$N = 250$								
0.02	.170	.076	.083	.181	.077	.082	.078	.083
0.1	.140	.075	.082	.196	.076	.082	.076	.083
0.25	.133	.072	.080	.252	.072	.079	.073	.080
0.5	.114	.067	.075	.146	.067	.073	.067	.073
1	.100	.060	.069	.091	.059	.063	.058	.062
2	.093	.064	.069	.087	.057	.064	.056	.062
$N = 500$								
0.02	.071	.057	.064	.071	.055	.057	.057	.059
0.1	.070	.056	.064	.070	.054	.057	.056	.060
0.25	.068	.054	.062	.068	.051	.055	.053	.057
0.5	.065	.051	.059	.064	.048	.052	.050	.053
1	.062	.048	.054	.059	.044	.047	.046	.049
2	.060	.050	.054	.057	.045	.050	.045	.049
$N = 1000$								
0.02	.044	.041	.050	.050	.040	.042	.041	.042
0.1	.044	.039	.049	.049	.039	.041	.040	.042
0.25	.043	.038	.048	.048	.038	.040	.039	.041
0.5	.042	.037	.046	.046	.036	.038	.037	.039
1	.043	.037	.044	.044	.033	.035	.035	.037
2	.045	.037	.042	.043	.036	.037	.037	.039
$N = 5000$								
0.02	.015	.014	.032	.031	.015	.015	.015	.015
0.1	.015	.014	.032	.031	.015	.015	.015	.015
0.25	.015	.014	.032	.031	.014	.015	.014	.015
0.5	.014	.014	.032	.030	.014	.014	.014	.014
1	.018	.018	.030	.028	.014	.015	.016	.016
2	.024	.024	.029	.028	.024	.024	.027	.028

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

Finally, in Table 7, the ARMSE for estimated standard deviations for $G = 6$ groups in the DIF condition is shown. It can be seen that alignment based on untransformed item loadings (IA1), as originally proposed in [4] had inferior performance compared to using logarithmized item loadings (IA2). Like for group means, estimated group standard deviations for HL resulted in more precise estimates than for IA.

To conclude, simulation study 2 provided a mixed pattern of findings regarding the superiority of one method over the other. For a smaller number of groups ($G = 3$), IA was preferable, while for a larger number of groups ($G = 6$), HL was preferable. For a sufficiently large sample (e.g., $N \geq 500$), power values smaller than the original proposal of $p = 0.5$ (see [4]) provide smaller biases and more precise estimates.

5. Empirical Example: 2PL Study

In the following small empirical example, we use estimated item parameters from a 2PL model. Item parameters were taken from [100], see Table 8.

Table 8. 2PL Study: Item Parameters Taken from Meyer and Zhou

Item	Form X		Form Y	
	a_i	b_i	a_i	b_i
1	1.17	0.56	1.31	1.09
5	0.95	−0.90	1.09	−0.30
9	0.90	−0.85	1.14	−0.01
13	1.07	−0.39	1.22	0.13
17	1.27	−1.19	1.53	−0.59
21	0.77	−1.26	0.95	−0.43
25	0.96	−0.66	1.14	−0.07
29	1.14	−0.51	1.36	−0.02

The original application was a linking study in which two test forms X and Y should be linked onto a common scale using 8 common items (displayed in Table 8). The computation of linking constants is equivalent to the computation of group means and standard deviations in the case of two groups of persons that correspond to forms X and Y. We estimated the mean and the standard deviation of the second group (i.e., Form Y) while for the first group the mean was set to 0 and the standard deviation was set to 1. As in the simulation studies, we specified different variants of IA and HA as well as different power values p in the loss function.

Table 9. 2PL Study: Group Mean Corresponding to Form Y

p	IA1	IA2	IA3	IA4	HL1	HL2	HL3	HL4
0.02	−0.43	−0.43	−0.34	−0.34	−0.57	−0.57	−0.54	−0.54
0.1	−0.43	−0.43	−0.34	−0.34	−0.57	−0.57	−0.54	−0.54
0.25	−0.43	−0.43	−0.34	−0.34	−0.57	−0.57	−0.55	−0.55
0.5	−0.44	−0.44	−0.35	−0.35	−0.57	−0.57	−0.55	−0.55
1	−0.47	−0.47	−0.44	−0.44	−0.58	−0.58	−0.58	−0.58
2	−0.60	−0.60	−0.62	−0.62	−0.59	−0.59	−0.62	−0.62

Note. p = power used in invariance alignment (IA) or Haberman linking (HL) approaches; N = sample size; IA1 corresponds to the IA specification proposed by Asparouhov and Muthén [4], and HL3 is the original specification of Haberman [5].

In Table 9, the obtained means for the second group are displayed. It turned out that all Haberman approaches (HL) led to similar results, relatively independent of the choice p . Interestingly, IA and HL only resulted in similar estimates of the mean for $p = 2$. For $p \leq 1$, IA produced substantially lower group differences (in terms of absolute values). The IA approaches based on item difficulties (IA3 and IA4) was different from the use of item intercepts (IA1 and IA2). However, no substantial differences for logarithmized and untransformed item loadings were obtained. Overall, this example shows that the use of a particular linking method can affect the outcomes of group comparisons.

6. Discussion

In this article, we investigated the performance of extensions of invariance alignment (IA; [4]) and Haberman linking (HL; [5]) with respect to the flexibility of linking function in the analysis of more than two groups. The linking functions build on the principle that deviations between group-specific item parameters should be made as small and as sparse as possible. We have proposed a class of linking functions based on the family of robust L_p loss functions $\rho(x) = |x|^p$ ($p \geq 0$). It was shown that using robust link functions in HL can have similar performance to IA.

HL was originally proposed using the power $p = 2$ resulting in quadratic loss functions. IA used $p = 0.5$ and was primarily targeted to the situation of partial invariance in which only a few item parameters are noninvariant. HL with robust linking functions ($p \leq 1$) has similar performance to IA. Moreover, we have shown that using item intercepts instead of item difficulties for HL has more desirable statistical properties. For IA, we found that using logarithmized instead of untransformed item loadings led to precision gains.

As it is true for all simulation studies, our study has some limitations. First, we restricted the number of groups to at most 6. For international large-scale assessments like PISA (e.g., [101]), the number of groups–countries in this case—are much larger, say 30, or even 50. As IA was mostly advertised for applications involving many groups [31], it would be interesting whether robust HL would be competitive in this situation. Second, we only used 5 continuous items and 20 dichotomous items in the simulation studies. The performance of the linking methods with an increasing number of items could be a relevant topic future research (see [54]). Third, we restricted ourselves to dichotomous data. The performance of IA and HL for polytomous items (see [62]) or the mixed case of dichotomous and polytomous items could be investigated in future studies.

In the simulation study and the empirical example, different values of the power p of the loss function were compared. It should be noted that using a particular type of loss functions can be reinterpreted as an optimal estimation method that corresponds to some distributional assumption of deviations between group-specific item parameters. By using this idea, the power p in the loss function can be estimated by means of the exponential power distribution [102,103]; see [104] for a two-step estimation algorithm.

The choice of a particular value of the power p in the linking function implies a decision whether some items (or item parameters) should be treated as outliers in a group comparison [94]. Typically, outliers are down-weighted in the estimation. Hence, the group-specific contribution of items to a group mean is determined by a statistical approach. In contrast, using $p = 2$ corresponds to a quadratic loss function, and all items contribute to the computation of group means. Several researchers have argued that the decision to eliminate items from group comparisons should be (mainly) driven by substantive considerations (see [94,105–110]).

The presence of DIF effects introduces an additional source of ambiguity in determining group means in latent variable models. A consequence of noninvariance is that a subset of items can provide different group means even for infinite sample sizes. In large-scale assessment studies, this source of uncertainty that is due to a selection of a particular set of items has been labeled as linking errors [111–118]. Uncertainty in group means due to item sampling has also been extensively studied in generalizability theory [119–121].

Linking of multiple groups in the presence of DIF can alternatively be conducted using regularization techniques (for an overview, see [122]). In a regularization based approach to DIF, group-specific item parameters are decomposed into common item parameters and group-specific deviation [123–127]. By using maximum likelihood estimation, this approach would result in a nonidentified model. In regularization, penalty terms for the non-identifiable group-specific deviations are added to the log-likelihood function in the optimization function, which ensures empirical identifiability of model parameters and imposes assumptions about the distribution of parameters of noninvariance. IA, which uses the power of $p = 0.5$, can be rephrased as a regularization problem with an $L_{1/2}$ -penalty function [128]. The general case of powers p can be reformulated as an L_p regularization problem [129,130]. As regularization techniques with $p \leq 1$ set a subset of deviations of group-specific and common item parameters to 0, a reformulation of linking problems would be particularly suited to situations of partial invariance.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

2PL	two-parameter logistic model
ABIAS	average absolute bias
ARMSE	average root mean square error
DIF	differential item functioning
HL	Haberman linking
IA	invariance alignment
PISA	programme for international student assessment
RMSE	root mean square error

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