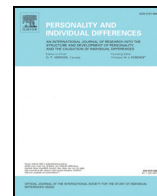




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A snapshot of person and thing orientations: How individual differences in interest manifest in everyday life

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ABSTRACT

Individuals selectively orient toward their social environment (people) and toward their physical environment (things/objects). These orientations are key predictors of important life outcomes, including career decisions. However, research has not yet examined whether orientations toward people and things manifest in naturalistic environments. The present two-part study addressed this gap. In part one, participants rated their interest in person- and thing-related books (e.g., on relationships; robots). Participants then took a camera home for several days to photograph anything or anyone they considered an important part of their life. In part two, the photographs were submitted and coded for content. Results support the construct validity of person and thing orientations. Greater interest was expressed in orientation-related than unrelated books and photograph content was consistent with individuals' orientations. The findings suggest that person and thing orientations leave traces in everyday environments and behaviors. This research highlights implications for the development of interests and academic and occupational decision-making.

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1. Introduction

Personality is expressed not only through words and actions, but also through everyday environments (Carney, Jost, Gosling, & Potter, 2008; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). The things people own, the places they inhabit, and the people they surround themselves with are shaped by each individual's unique preferences and dispositions. Exploring these environments can provide rich insights into the ways personality operates outside of the laboratory. Using a photography method, the current study investigated how interests in people and things manifest in everyday environments.

Individuals selectively orient toward some aspects of their environment more than others. Person orientation reflects interest in people, such that person-oriented individuals preferentially attend and respond to their social environment (Graziano, Habashi, Evangelou, & Ngambeki, 2012; Graziano, Habashi, & Woodcock, 2011). Similarly, thing orientation reflects interest in objects; thing-oriented individuals preferentially attend and respond to their physical environment. Person and thing orientations are independent, orthogonal constructs rather than two ends of a bipolar continuum (Graziano et al., 2011; Graziano et al., 2012; Tay, Su, & Rounds, 2011). Thus, it is possible to be high (or low) on both orientations, rather than simply person-oriented or thing-oriented.

These traits have primarily been studied as predictors of educational and occupational choices. Interests in people and in things can guide

career-related decisions (Branch, Woodcock, & Graziano, 2015). For instance, a highly person-oriented individual may seek to help and engage with people, becoming a teacher or a counselor. A highly thing-oriented individual may seek to design or work with objects, becoming an architect or a mechanic. Notably, thing orientation is a strong predictor of students' interests in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (STEM; Graziano et al., 2012; Su & Rounds, 2015). Thing orientation also predicts whether students persist in STEM majors like engineering across a four-year span (Woodcock, Graziano, Branch, Habashi, Ngambeki et al., 2013). Given that person and thing orientations predict consequential outcomes, it is valuable to understand how and why they are linked to these important life choices. However, little is known about the mediating processes through which these orientations guide academic and career decisions. Recent evidence indicates that interests in people and things operate via selective attention processes (McIntyre & Graziano, 2016), but there is still much to learn about how these traits influence behavior and decision-making.

This study examines how person and thing orientations relate to naturalistic environments and preferences. Given that interests in people and in things are related to important life outcomes (Graziano et al., 2012; Su & Rounds, 2015; Woodcock et al., 2013), they presumably leave traces in everyday environments. Person and thing orientations may guide who and what people value, and how they spend their time. These everyday experiences likely build toward meaningful personal decisions, such as choosing a career path. When an individual decides to become an engineer, a psychologist, or an accountant, years of everyday choices and behaviors have led up to that decision. Indeed,

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individual differences in interest are rooted in situational experiences (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 2014). To the extent that environments afford or appeal to certain interests, they may contribute to the development of interest-related traits like person and thing orientations. Thus, a better understanding of the environments people inhabit can illuminate the relationship between orientations and choices.

To explore how person and thing orientations are expressed in environments, we used autophotography to capture a rich glimpse into participants' lives. In autophotography methods, participants take pictures of their environments. This allows people to represent themselves in greater detail and with greater latitude than typical research approaches. Through photography, participants can vividly express themselves, offering researchers a direct view into their everyday environments. This method has been used to examine a range of individual differences, including Big Five personality traits (Dollinger & Clancy, 1993), self-esteem (Noland, 2006), social connectedness (Clancy & Dollinger, 1993; Dollinger, 2002), and meaning in life (Steger et al., 2013). This study extends the autophotography method to person and thing orientations, investigating whether the degree of social and non-social content in photographs varies as a function of these traits.

We expected that person orientation would be associated with greater social content in participants' photographs, including pictures of people and pictures that express a social identity. Likewise, we expected that thing orientation would be associated with greater non-social content. This includes pictures of objects, but particularly technological items due to the relationship between thing orientation and STEM interest (e.g., Graziano et al., 2012). To supplement the relatively unstructured autophotography task, a more structured interest task involving book selections was included. In this task, we expected person-oriented participants to prefer books with greater social content, whereas thing-oriented participants were expected to prefer books with greater non-social content. These two tasks are expected to offer converging evidence that interests in people and things surface in everyday environments and preferences.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 87 undergraduate students. This sample size was constrained by time and equipment availability due to the involved nature of the procedures. A two month period was designated a priori for data collection, during which as many participants as possible were recruited and assigned cameras on a weekly basis. The resulting sample included 52 women and 35 men, with an average age of 19.3 (range: 18 to 26). Participants were predominantly White/Caucasian (71.3%), but the sample also included Asian (11.5%), Black/African American (8.0%), Hispanic/Latino (4.6%), and Middle Eastern/Indian (4.6%) participants.

2.2. Procedures and materials

Participants attended two laboratory sessions, spaced four to five days apart. Before any study activities took place, informed consent was obtained from each participant. During the first session, participants provided demographic information, completed the book preference task, and received cameras for use in the photography task. During the second session, participants returned the cameras with their photographs and completed personality measures.

2.2.1. Book preference task

The authors identified 16 potential books on a range of person- and thing-related topics. All books were non-fiction and written for a general, popular-press audience (i.e., not textbooks). These books were then

pilot-tested by a separate sample of 11 naïve raters who judged each book on its degree of person content, thing content, difficulty, and general interest. The final set of eight books was selected to match difficulty and interest across content categories, while ensuring that the books had a sufficient person or thing focus.

On average, the final set of books was pilot-rated as neutral in difficulty ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.38$ on a scale from 1 = "very easy" to 5 = "very difficult") and interest ($M = 2.60$, $SD = 0.38$ on a scale from 1 = "not at all interested" to 5 = "very interested"). The person-focused books were rated as high in person content ($M = 4.48$) and low in thing content ($M = 2.56$), whereas the thing-focused books were rated as high in thing content ($M = 4.17$) and low in person content ($M = 2.25$). The supplementary materials include a list of these book stimuli.

Participants viewed the titles and covers of the eight books, presented individually in a random and counterbalanced order. Half of the books were on person-focused topics, such as relationships or emotional perception. The remaining half were on thing-focused topics, such as robotics or architecture. For each book, participants responded to three questions on scales from 1 ("Not at all") to 7 ("Extremely"): "How interested are you in reading this book?," "How much do you think you would enjoy reading this book?," and "How likely would you be to read this book?"

2.2.2. Photography task

Following the book preference task, each participant was issued a 14.1 MP Vivitar digital camera. They were instructed to "take pictures of anything, anyone, or any place you think is an important part of your life" in their everyday environments. Research assistants demonstrated the basic functions of the camera and ensured that participants were comfortable using the device. Before being dismissed, participants scheduled their follow-up session for 4–5 days later and received a brief information packet that reiterated the task instructions.

2.2.3. Personality measures

During the second session, participants completed the 13-item person and thing orientations scale (Graziano et al., 2011). In this measure, respondents indicate how much they would enjoy a range of situations on a scale from 1 ("Not at all") to 5 ("Extremely"). Eight items correspond to person orientation (e.g., "Make the first attempt to meet a new neighbor," "Notice the habits and quirks of people around you") and five items correspond to thing orientation (e.g., "Stop to watch a machine working on the street," "Try to fix your own watch or toaster"). In previous research, these subscales demonstrate internal reliability and within-person stability over time (see Woodcock et al., 2013).

Participants also completed a 44-item measure of the Big Five (John & Srivastava, 1999). This is a 1-to-5 scale that measures extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness. These variables were not of direct interest in the current study, but they were collected to examine whether the outcomes are uniquely attributable to person orientation and thing orientation.

3. Results

3.1. Personality descriptives

The 8-item person orientation scale demonstrated acceptable reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.76$, $M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.63$), and the 5-item thing orientation scale demonstrated high reliability ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 2.19$, $SD = 1.05$). Consistent with prior research, the orientations were orthogonal in this sample, $r(85) = -0.01$, $p = 0.92$. Reliability was acceptable to high across the Big Five traits (α s = 0.78 to 0.86). Correlations between all personality measures are displayed in Table 1.

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