



Review

Primary spaces and their cues as facilitators of personal and social inferences

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 April 2016

Received in revised form

23 May 2017

Accepted 22 July 2017

Available online 25 July 2017

Keywords:

Personal inferences

Big Five

Instrumental and symbolic objects

Primary spaces

Personalisation

ABSTRACT

People leave ‘footprints’ in the environment in which they live and these become cues that reflect the occupants’ identity. The aim of the present study was to determine the inferences about sociodemographic and personality traits made from the observation of primary spaces, and to identify the cues that facilitate such inferences. In Study 1, participants (N = 214) observed non-shared spaces and completed a questionnaire about sociodemographic variables and the Big Five regarding each bedroom’s occupant. The results show that participants are able to infer resident’s characteristics such as gender and age, although differences are identified according to the observer’s age. Furthermore, different personality traits were associated with sociodemographic characteristics, thus Agreeableness and Extraversion were attributed to young occupants, and Conscientiousness and Openness to Experience were associated with older residents. In Study 2, participants (N = 150) reported the cues leading them to make inferences about both resident’s gender and personality traits. Simple Correspondence Analysis shows that different types of cues –functional and symbolic–were related differently to sociodemographic variables and personality traits.

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1. Introduction

Physical appearance, nonverbal expression, behavior, or belongings, among other things, evoke a number of inferences almost immediately. People are able to form an impression of a stranger in milliseconds (Borkenau & Liebler, 1992). Therefore, in 100 ms, observers of a set of photographs of unknown people were able to create an idea about aspects such as competence or honesty of the person who appeared in the snapshot (Willis & Todorov, 2006).

Previous research on impression formation through physical appearance has shown that clothing helps to draw conclusions about strangers' traits, such as intelligence, kindness, sociability or morality (Damhorst & Reed, 1986; Lennon, 1986). Recently, research has focused on *thin slices*, or fragments of behavior used to create an image of the emotional state, characteristics and personality traits of others (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). The results of these studies have shown that the way people behave is a sign of certain personality traits (Bayliss & Tipper, 2006; Koppensteiner & Grammer, 2011; Krumhuber, Manstead, & Kappas, 2007). In this regard, Bayliss and Tipper (2006) were interested in knowing how eye movements determine the assessments on the trustworthiness of the individual carrying out such movements. Likewise, Krumhuber et al. (2007) found that head movements were indicators of two characteristics: honesty and attractiveness. They also found that individuals who smiled longer were considered more attractive, reliable, authentic, and flirty, and less dominant than those who smiled for a shorter period of time.

Studies on *thin slices* focus on direct behaviors that arise from the way strangers behave. However, a reduced number of researchers have studied certain aspects arising from the traces of behaviors that might provide information about the person who performs such behaviors. For example, a music list on an mp3 player may indicate that the person is extroverted and open to experience (Rentfrow & Gosling, 2006); or a family photo in the office could give an indication about the occupant's personal values regarding marriage and love for their relatives (Wells, 2000). Regarding *thin slices* from indirect cues, few studies have shown that personal spaces, where people spend most of their day, are full of behavioral vestiges and as such, are potential pieces of information for observers to make inferences about strangers. Thus, it is a relevant field of underdeveloped research in Environmental Psychology.

1.1. Observing where you live, I can tell you what you are like

'Footprints' and objects that people leave behind in their environment represent their wishes, values and, eventually, their identities (Kaiser & Fuhrer, 1996). This idea is linked to the concept of personalization of space proposed by Becker (1977). Personalizing the space is a behavioral phenomenon whereby people display signals that relate to what they are and/or who they intend to be, which would involve identification processes.

Socioeconomic status, educational level, values, and personal characteristics are identity aspects and all of them seem to be reflected in primary spaces such as houses (Aragonés, Amérgo, & Pérez-López, 2010; Brown & Werner, 1985; Jones, Taylor, Dick, Singh, & Cook, 2007; Wilson & MacKenzie, 2000). However, studies have shown that not all spaces inside the house provide the same kind of inferences about its occupants. Thus, the interior and exterior of houses appear to offer differentiated information, with inferences being more accurate when looking at pictures of the inside of a house than when observing the façade (Sadalla, Vershure, & Burroughs, 1987; Smith & Gates, 1998). Similarly, inside the house, various spaces trigger different judgments. While living rooms are loaded with sociodemographic information (Wilson & MacKenzie, 2000), bedrooms seem to provide information related to personality traits (Pérez-López, Aragonés, & Amérgo, 2013). Moreover, several members might control certain rooms inside the house, and these spaces might contain aspects related to different identities and personalities.

In this line, Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, and Morris (2002) were interested in students' accommodations in order to know whether the environment was a reflection of personal identity. In this study, real spaces with active observers were used to see whether strangers were accurate in their judgments about resident's personality traits. After exploring the spaces, observers inferred residents' personality traits. Meanwhile, occupants also completed the Big Five Inventory in order to compare both evaluations. Results showed positive correlations in the factors of Extraversion, Responsibility and Openness to Experience between observers' inferences and residents' personal descriptions. In the same line, Aragonés et al. (2010) found that non-shared bedrooms facilitated inferences about occupants' personality traits.

Research focused on the symbolism of objects reveals that individuals share a code as to the meaning ascribed to these objects. Thus, it is observed that some possessions are seen as simple tools, and others, however, are associated with symbolic meanings, such as socioeconomic status, values or ideals (Dittmar, 1992; Poggio, Aragonés, & Pérez-López, 2013; Prentice, 1987). Similarly, it has been found that sociodemographic variables are associated with personal belongings deployed in space, so that there are differences in gender and life stage (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Kampter, 1991).

The studies above are linked to two different approaches, one related to the Environmental Psychology and the other related to Personality Psychology. The first approach is closely related to the Environmental Action and Perception Model proposed by Appleyard (1979), which highlights the symbolism of the environment and claims that both actions performed in a space (e.g. decorating) and the perception of such space, are imbued with significance. Thus, these spaces transmit information about their occupants due to the symbolism of the objects that, as a result of such behaviors of personalization, are deployed in these places. The second approach relates to the Five Factor Model proposed by

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