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Hoody, goody or buddy? How travel mode affects social perceptions in urban neighbourhoods



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ABSTRACT

When travelling through a new environment people can and do make very quick judgements about the local conditions. This paper explores the idea that such judgements are affected by the travel mode they use. We hypothesise that drivers generate a more superficial impression of the things they observe than those who walk because they are exposed to less information. This prediction is based on social psychological research that demonstrates that information that becomes available in “thin slices” affects superficial judgements. A survey study ($n = 644$) demonstrated that perceptions of a less affluent area are indeed negatively related to more driving and positively related to more walking, but only for those who do not live there. Perceptions of a neighbouring affluent area are positively related to more driving. Two experimental studies ($n = 245$ and $n = 91$) demonstrated that explicit (but not implicit) attitudes towards a group of young people in an ambiguous social situation are more negative when they are viewed from the perspective of a car user in particular in relation to a pedestrian perspective. These findings suggest that mode use may affect communities by influencing social judgements.

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1. Introduction

In most modern societies car use is increasing whereas walking and cycling is steadily declining. In the UK, for instance, the number of trips made on foot declined by 24% between 1995/1997 and 2008 ([Department for Transport, 2010](#)). Similarly in Canada, 68% of people aged 18 and over travelled everywhere by car in 1992 and this had increased to 74% in 2005. In the same period the proportion of people who made at least one trip by bicycle or on foot declined from 25% to 19% ([General Social Survey, 2010](#)). It is evident that these changes impact on local communities by affecting air quality and road safety. But, increasing car use may also affect communities by affecting social perceptions and community cohesion. This paper explores whether the mode by which people travel through a neighbourhood affects the views they form of the environment and the social situation. In particular, we hypothesise that drivers may form more superficial judgements than other mode users. Consider for instance the following scenario:

‘An urban road passes alongside a park. Three youths are in the park. Someone drives past in a car and sees ‘a few lads who are up to no good’. A passenger on a bus that stops at the local stop notices them and wonders: ‘What are they up to?’ Someone cycling through the park hears them making fun of each other and a person walking past recognises their neighbour’s son and says: ‘Hi.’

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People may be more likely to form negative perceptions (e.g., Hoodies, who are up to no good) of an ambiguous social situation when they drive past at speed than when they witness this situation from slower and less enclosed modes of transport such as a bicycle or on foot. This is because people who walk past are exposed to more individuating and detailed information of that situation than people who drive.

There is plenty of evidence that people are able to make accurate social judgements on the basis of very little information (e.g., Patterson, Tubbs, Carrier, & Barber, 2009). For instance, only very brief exposure to facial expressions or body postures can result into accurate perceptions of trustworthiness (Todorov, Pakrashi, & Oosterhof, 2009; Willis, Palermo, & Burke, 2011). This has been referred to as 'thin slicing'. 'Thin slicing' refers to people's (unconscious) ability to form judgements of others with very thin slices (100 ms) of information (Gladwell, 2005; Willis & Todorov, 2006).

The tendency and ability to make quick social judgements has an important function. One of the most basic judgements people need to make when confronted with others is whether those others can be trusted or are likely to pose a threat (Wojciszke, 2005). When entering a new neighbourhood, for instance, individuals will have to quickly judge whether it is safe to approach other people without coming to harm or whether it is better to avoid contact and leave (O'Brien & Wilson, 2011). The importance of being able to make rapid judgement of social threat for survival needs is supported by research in a range of psychological subdisciplines including cognitive, psychophysiological, neuropsychological, and neuroimaging (Green & Phillips, 2004).

Although quick judgements on the basis of thin slices of information tend to be (perhaps remarkably) accurate there is also some work that suggests this is particularly likely for negative judgements. For instance, negative affect has been shown to be rated accurately after only five seconds of exposure, whereas positive affect took 20 s or more (Carney, Colvin, & Hall, 2007). This may make perfect sense if one considers the relative importance of judging whether a situation is safe or not. Wojciszke (2005), argues that in particular for negative judgments people may err at the side of caution. After all a misjudgement of threat will be more costly than a misjudgement of beauty or pleasantness.

The accuracy of social judgements with thin slices of information can be distorted by existing views such as stereotypes (e.g. Crawford, Jussim, Madon, Cain, & Stevens, 2011). Generally people tend to rely on specific individuating information as well as stereotypes when making social judgements (Crawford et al., 2011). Stereotypes are beliefs about the attributes of groups and their individual members (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981). They can be activated unconsciously when people are exposed (very briefly) to features that are typical of a group (e.g., skin colour, gender features; Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996). The influence of stereotypes becomes more prominent when less detailed individuating information is available or can be processed (for instance due to time constraints) particularly when judging ambiguous situations or behaviours (Bodenhausen & Wyer, 1985; Sagar & Schofield, 1980). When more detailed information is available or accessible stereotypes are less likely to have a strong effect on social perceptions. With longer exposure to a social situation more information becomes available and judgements are therefore less likely to be influenced by (unconsciously activated) stereotypes. Kunda, Davies, Adams, and Spencer (2002), for instance, found stereotype activation after 15 s exposure to a video of an interview with a black person but not after 12 min of exposure.

Clearly people can and do make social judgements on the basis of very 'thin slices' of information. This 'thin slicing' results into superficial judgements where bad gets worse and good gets better. We argue therefore, that people's perceptions of their environment and the people within it may be affected by the mode by which they travel. Car users are typically exposed to very little information as they travel through environments quickly and from an enclosed space whereas pedestrians travel slowly and are able to see and hear what is there. The social perceptions of people who see an ambiguous (potentially threatening) social situation only very briefly from a fast driving car may therefore be more negative than those who witness the same situation while walking past, despite the fact that car users view the situation from the safety of their car.

If mode use affects social perceptions it can have significant implications for community wellbeing and cohesion. From an individual perspective the ability to make rapid social judgements can be very useful in particular when there is a potential threat to safety. However, from a collective perspective this can be problematic as it may undermine community cohesion and social integration. When impressions are formed they are often difficult to change. Research in social psychology has demonstrated that once impressions are formed people tend to select evidence to support their views even when conflicting evidence is available (Chen & Bargh, 1997; Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Rosenzweig, 2007). Moreover, once negative judgements have formed people are likely to avoid further contact with potentially threatening people and places and this may serve to further disconnect them from their social environment and confirm their views. This can be problematic, for instance, if it results into conflict between groups of people or when these processes serve to reinforce negative stereotypes. Bringing people together to create a better sense of community is unlikely to be easy in such circumstances. Increasing car use may therefore erode community cohesion by affecting perceptions of places and people. Increased walking, on the other hand may be beneficial in particular in areas where first impressions are likely to be negative.

We already know that people tend to walk less in their neighbourhood if they trust fewer people (Cleland, Timperio, & Crawford, 2008). And social interaction in neighbourhoods is significantly lower in streets with high volumes of motorised traffic (Appleyard, 1976; Hart, 2008). Walkable neighbourhoods can help tackle depression symptoms of elderly men not only because of increased physical exercise, but also because those walkable environments bring people outside and promote social interactions (Berke, Gottlieb, Moudon, & Larson, 2007). There is plenty of evidence in social psychology that exposure to others can lead to more positive social responses and reduce threat perceptions (Allport, 1954; Bornstein, 1989; Claypool, Hugenberg, Housley, & Mackie, 2007; Harrison, 1977; Kunst-Wilson & Zajonc, 1980; Zajonc, Wolosin,

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