

Geography and personality: Why do different neighborhoods have different vibes?

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Many travelers today, like Marco Polo in the 13th century, marvel at the different vibes possessed by different nations. Portugal has a different feel than France, which has a different feel than the United Kingdom, which is also very different from China. These differences arise in part because of different languages, customs, climates, and geographies. What about different neighborhoods in the same city? Do different neighborhoods have different vibes, even if they speak the same language, have the same holidays, the same favorite sports teams, and the same high and low temperatures? Most people living in a large city would say, “Yes, of course!” However, do they know why different neighborhoods feel so different, even within the same city? My guess is that most people can point to demographic or socioeconomic status differences across neighborhoods (e.g., “that is a Mexican neighborhood,” or “a lot of rich folks live there”), but would have no idea where agreeable people live or where introverts live. Jokela et al.’s (1) paper presents the possibility that different neighborhoods feel different not just because of their residents’ socioeconomic status, demographics, or built-environments, but also because of the actual personality of their residents. Jokela et al. collected self-reports on Big Five personality (extraversion, neuroticism, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness) and life satisfaction from over 56,000

Londoners (1). Using respondents’ residences, Jokela et al. mapped the personalities of 216 London neighborhoods. Not surprisingly, people high in openness to experiences tend to live in the city center (e.g., Camden Town, King’s Cross), whereas people low in openness live in the outer regions of London (Fig. 1). Similarly, agreeable and conscientious people overwhelmingly live outside of the city center. Residents of Hammersmith and Battersea are very extraverted, whereas residents of East Ham and Hanwell are very introverted. Interestingly, the Hammersmith and Hanwell neighborhoods are only about 5 miles away from each other, yet the personality of these neighborhoods is very different.

Readers could spend hours dissecting the six maps of London. A contribution of Jokela et al. (1) is that they have quantified neighborhood variations in terms of residents’ personalities and life satisfaction rather than in terms of demographic and economic characteristics, and have demonstrated geographic clustering, as well as sudden shifts in personality across neighborhoods.

However, Jokela et al.’s (1) paper is not just a collection of pretty maps. Rather, the work presents a major advancement in personality research (and the psychology of geography in general).

Psychology, which is typically defined as the scientific study of thinking, feeling, and behavior (2), has long been interested in the

role of the environment. Social psychology in particular has extensively explored the role of the environment in thinking, feeling, and behavior. However, the “environment” most often investigated by social psychologists has been a person’s immediate context, such as orders given by an authority figure (3), the presence of others in bystander intervention (4), or specific roles assigned by the experimenter, such as “prisoner” and “prison guard” (5). Community psychology and environmental psychology emerged in the 1970s to address macroenvironments (6, 7). Unfortunately, although community psychology and environmental psychology did address many important issues related to macroenvironments, the movements never became a dominant force within psychology. The rise of close relationship research, cultural psychology, and evolutionary psychology in the 1990s and the 2000s expanded the environmental scope of social psychological investigations to chronic relationship contexts, cultural contexts, and ancestral environments. However, these programs of research rarely explored objective macroenvironments, such as population density, ethnic diversity, and residential mobility (8). Jokela et al.’s (1) paper finally breaks away from the traditional, microview of environment, and combines it with another new development in psychological science: Big Data.

In addition to personality and life satisfaction data from over 56,000 Londoners, Jokela et al. (1) gathered many neighborhood characteristics, including unemployment rates, population density, crime rate, green space, and so forth. Combined with earlier research suggesting that personality is partially heritable (9), the present findings imply that open people are not just attracted to urban neighborhoods, but that they help “create” that urban neighborhood feel.

Perhaps open people are more likely to paint a funky mural, play instruments on the street, display unusual ornaments in their



Fig. 1. (A) Camden Town (NW5), London. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Misterzee. (B) Ormonde Terrace (NW7), London. Image courtesy of Selin Kesebir, London Business School, London.

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windows, or patronize an off-beat café. In doing so, they create and spur the urban feel of their neighborhood. Likewise, agreeable and conscientious people are not just attracted to the suburban areas of London, but help create their neighborhoods' safe and predictable feel, perhaps by maintaining and displaying neat, green gardens and keeping the streets clean and orderly. Although sociologists have already documented diverse scenes in different neighborhoods (10), Jokela et al.'s (1) work points out the dynamic possibility that people with different personalities may create different neighborhood scenes, which further help others identify their preferred places to live, work, and play in the future. However, Jokela et al.'s study was cross-sectional, and they did not follow the same individuals over time. Thus, the temporal process is uncertain. In the future, it will be important to document whether certain personalities predict residential relocation to certain neighborhoods [selection effect (11)], or whether living in certain neighborhoods leads to the development of certain personality characteristics (location effects). Similarly, the role of residents' personalities in the creation of neighborhood cultures and scenes should be documented longitudinally. For example, does an influx of open individuals lead to the creation of more galleries and museums in neighborhoods? Finally, it is important to examine whether similar geographical clustering is happening in great cities with different histories and cultures (e.g., Shanghai, Mumbai, Nairobi, Buenos Aires).

In addition to the geographical clustering of personality and life satisfaction, Jokela et al. (1) demonstrate the importance of the person–environment fit effect on life satisfaction. Person–environment fit has been one of the oldest and most important questions in personality psychology (12). However, most research so far has focused on the fit between personality and immediate situations, such as being alone or with someone, working, or recreation (13). Many other famous “person–environment” studies did not really measure environments, but rather assessed life events (14). There is no question that these studies provide valuable information regarding the person–environment interaction. However, most previous studies missed the potential impact of concrete macroenvironments. There have been several person–environment fit studies that did explore the role of macroenvironments, but these studies have been mostly at the level of the

nation (15). However, there is a great deal of heterogeneity in any nation, and thus the interpretation of those findings has not been definitive. In contrast, Jokela et al. (1) investigated fit at a much finer level—namely, postal code areas—which presented much more concrete information about the environments, and therefore made the current person–environment fit effect much more

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convincing. Specifically, Jokela et al. show that individuals high in openness to experience were more satisfied with their lives if they lived in neighborhoods characterized by high population density, younger people, childless couples, and ethnic diversity than if they lived in neighborhoods characterized by low-density, older people, couples with children, and ethnic homogeneity. To my knowledge, this is the first study to show that personality predictors of life satisfaction vary depending on neighborhood characteristics.

Why is the current person–environment fit finding on life satisfaction so important? This is partly because it is very difficult to figure out how to be happier (16). For example, many people think that making \$10,000 more per year would make them

substantially happier. However, when people start making \$10,000 more, they realize that their happiness level has not increased. “Love is all you need,” the Beatles sang, and many think the same. However, even the happiness gained by marriage is typically short-lived. It is not an overstatement to say that it is difficult to be happier. Fortunately, although people may fail at introspection regarding what makes them happy, people are fairly good at evaluating their own personality. People know whether or not they are agreeable or open to new experiences. The present findings thus have direct implications for people's subjective well-being, as people high in openness to experiences can now intuit that they should live in a city center (if they want to be happy), whereas those low in openness should avoid living there. Where to live is an important and often very expensive decision. Jokela et al.'s (1) research suggests that knowing one's personality and neighborhood characteristics can help facilitate such a decision.

Great cities in the 21st century, such as London and New York, are increasingly diverse. Marco Polo was one of the few individuals in the 13th century to travel extensively outside of his native land and experience different worlds. Now ordinary people in great cities can travel within the same city, experiencing diverse worlds only footsteps away. However, who would have thought that it was the personality of residents that matters so much in creating neighborhood vibes?

Jokela et al. (1) demonstrate both how that neighborhood diversity is created, and how important it can be for the well-being of its residents.

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