BILL MOIR MARKETING SPEAKER SERIES

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Approach Behavior Affects Social Categorization

We often assign people to social categories based on how they look, but do we also categorize people based on where they are going? Do we use this categorization to make inferences about their traits? In this paper, we identify the existence of an approach heuristic, whereby seeing an actor approach an entity (e.g., place, group, organization) increases the extent to which observers categorize the actor as belonging to the approached entity and leads them to make destination-driven inferences about the actor's characteristics. This occurs even when such approach behavior ought not to be diagnostic of membership (such as when judging whether fellow airplane passengers are from equally populated departure or destination cities). We test and find evidence for the approach heuristic in a series of studies (one preregistered) that use different populations (1,421 college students from the US and 688 adults from Mturk) and different paradigms: airplane travel between cities (studies 1a-1c), movement between abstract groups (studies 2a and 2b), and approach behavior at job fairs (studies 3a and 3b). The studies rule out alternative explanations based on population estimates, proximity, distinct space, and mere association. Together, these studies contribute to research on social categorization—which has predominantly focused on how actor characteristics (e.g., skin color, physical features, waist-to-hip ratio) are used in social categorization—by showing that seemingly insignificant and inconsequential actor behavior, such as the mere act of walking toward something, can have a major influence on social categorization.

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