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The Segmentation of Social Experience

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Previous research has shown that people break up or segment activities into discrete events. Most everyday activities are comprised of both social and non-social behaviors. For example, a trip to the zoo includes social behaviors such as interacting with the person at the ticket booth and non-social behaviors such as following a map to find an exhibit. While there has been some research on how social characteristics affect event structure, little has been conducted that investigates how the perception of social interactions between individuals affects one’s segmentation of those experiences into events.

In this study, we tested the effect of changes in social and non-social events on the segmentation of behavior. Additionally, we were interested in how variables like grain size (large vs. small events) and type of personality may influence the segmentation of social events. Grain (fine vs. coarse) can be described as the size of an event. For instance, fine grain (small) events in the experience of preparing breakfast could include picking up a plate, setting it down, cracking an egg, and more. Corresponding coarse grain (large) events in this experience could include taking out plates, scrambling eggs, etc. In relation to personality type, we were specifically interested in the level of extraversion and whether or not it mediates the influence of changes in social actions on a perceiver’s event segmentation. Participants were asked to watch four short films of dyads doing everyday activities (making breakfast, doing laundry, etc.) in two separate viewings (fine grain and coarse grain). While watching the films, participants were asked to indicate the points where one activity had ended and another had begun (i.e., segment the activity into discrete events), in a way that felt natural and meaningful to them. In one session participants were asked to break up the films into the largest meaningful units of activity (coarse grain segmentation), and in another session participants were asked to break up the films into the smallest meaningful units of activity (this order was counterbalanced). After the first viewing of each film participants were instructed to complete a recall task by typing in their response. Participants were instructed to describe what they recalled from the film, in order, with as much detail as possible. Lastly they were asked to complete a personality measure to assess levels of extraversion.

Results show that changes in both social and non-social actions predict segmentation and that grain size interacts with this effect. Fine grain event models are more strongly associated with changes in non-social actions and coarse grain event models are more strongly associated with changes in social actions. Level of extraversion did not moderate the extent to which changes in social actions predicted segmentation, or the extent to which changes in social actions were recalled.

*This scholar and faculty mentor have requested that only an abstract be published.