

WHAT YOUR THINGS REALLY SAY ABOUT YOU

If you want to get to know someone better, it pays to look through their stuff. Dr Sam Gosling decodes three personality traits through the things they own.
By Catherine Jones

*Photographs by Anders Gramer
Styled by Liz Simon*

Last week you moved into your new home. Now everything's finally unpacked you've invited the neighbours round for some welcome drinks. As you take their coats from them and they walk through to the living room, what do you suppose is the first thing that will catch their eye and, more importantly, what sort of impressions have they started to form about you already? Do they see you as cultured, friendly and adventurous or uptight, vulgar and dull?

Forming impressions of people based on what we see displayed in their private spaces is nothing new, but it has only recently become a branch of personality psychology, thanks to the work of Dr Sam Gosling, who >



◁ has spent the past decade studying how our environments reflect who we really are.

There are numerous models available to psychologists who evaluate personality; Gosling uses what's known as the Big 5 (see overleaf). This is a measure of five universal personality traits – openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness and neuroticism – that we all have in different proportions.

A question of perception

Openness, conscientiousness and extroversion are the easiest to read from people's things, says Gosling, and impossible to disguise. 'Part of what makes you one personality over another is not just how you behave, it's also how you view the world. After my class I ask my students, "Who here carries stamps in their wallet?" Some do and some don't, but what's interesting is the people who don't carry stamps say, "Why would I want to carry spare stamps in my wallet? I've never even thought of carrying spare stamps in my wallet." Whereas the people who do carry them think that it's the most obvious thing in the world. "What if I run out? What if I need to post a letter?"'

It's not just the things we have but how we display them that give clues to our personalities. A large picture above your desk of you with, say, a prominent politician is a sign to other people that you have had a brush with power or status. Compare this to the small, possibly sentimental object placed discreetly in a wallet or a drawer, exclusively for the owner's benefit. Then there's behavioural residue, the things that show what activity has taken place, an old coffee cup or wine glass not yet cleared away, an application form half filled out or the contents of a waste paper basket.

'An FBI agent once told me that when he gets to a crime scene the first thing he does is sit down and ▷

Don't be misled by distinctive items, it's not just the things we have, but how we display them that give us away

RESOURCES

Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You by Sam Gosling (E15, Profile).
www.snoopology.com

E XTROVERT

Extroverts love people and prefer to be surrounded by them. They are gregarious and like to take charge.

- The first thing you notice is that there are lots of photos of people, which is to be expected since extroverts like people and all of the things on the board represent things about social connections. This is someone who clearly enjoys other people's company and cares a great deal about them. There are a number of invitations, which also suggests this person is very socially active.
- Many of the objects seem a bit thrown down, as though someone's just come back from somewhere, and is always dashing around, typically extrovert behaviour. This feels more of a storage space, as opposed to a quiet, comfortable little refuge from the world, like the desk on the previous page, which felt more like a sanctuary.
- Although it's not super tidy, there's evidence of conscientiousness here too. Look at the to do list on the chalkboard. This extrovert likes to plan ahead.
- Other indicators of extroversion, which aren't in the picture, are CDs or playlists of energetic music, or music with a lot of vocals. Extroverts are often fond of excitement-seeking activities too, such as snowboarding or bungee jumping. I wouldn't have been surprised to have seen a surfboard or skis propped up either.

C ONSCIENTIOUS

Highly conscientious people are self-disciplined, organised and prefer to live according to routines and schedules. They like to plan and make lists and have a strong sense of obligation and duty.

- This person is calm and controlled and thinks before they act. It contrasts with the extrovert's space, which belonged to someone impulsive.
- The desk is highly organised; everything is in the right place. There's even a place for the Post-it notes to go. Things are aligned, organised, clean and there's no clutter. I would also expect the bulletin board to have a schedule or a calendar.
- Everything here is arranged so the person can turn up and start working. If you want something you just have to stick your hand out and it's there. There's an angle poise lamp, all the pencils are sharp, and there are plenty of spare ones to hand. And all the stamps are kept in the glass – like the sharpened pencils – which shows that this person is thinking ahead: they're buying things before they're needed.
- Part of what makes someone a particular personality is not just how they behave; it's also how they view the world. Anyone could start working at this desk straightaway, but only a truly conscientious person could keep it this way permanently. Would you remember to buy stationery supplies before they ran out, ensure the pencil sharpener was always empty and everything was colour co-ordinated? I wouldn't notice if the magazines were out of order, but a highly conscientious person would not be able to sit down to work until they were.

'Let everything wash over him,' says Gosling. 'I never really understood at the time what he was talking about. But now I know what he was getting at.'

It's all too easy to be misled by the first thing you see in a room or any unique, out-of-place item and then jump to the wrong conclusions, he warns. 'Distinctive items are a real danger; it's where people often make mistakes. You get drawn to looking at them by their nature – they stick out – but it's the very fact they stick out that means you should be very wary about interpreting them, because they are inconsistent with the rest of the pattern.'

Gosling has decoded the dominant personality traits of each of the desks in these pictures, although his observations and tips could be applied to any space, including your own. ■

THE BIG 5

Below is an outline of the Big 5 personality traits. There are numerous Big 5 tests available online or take a look at 'Personality: What Makes You The Way You Are' by Daniel Nettle (£12.99, OUP)

TRAIT	HIGH SCORE CHARACTERISTICS	LOW SCORE CHARACTERISTICS
Openness	Creative, curious, imaginative	Conventional, traditional, sticks to what they know
Conscientiousness	Thorough, dependable, task-focused, good planners	Disorganised, late, careless, impulsive
Extroversion	Talkative, energetic, assertive, sociable	Reserved, shy, quiet
Agreeableness	Helpful, selfless, trusting, kind, considerate	Critical, harsh, blunt, aloof
Neurotic	Anxious, easily upset, moody, self-conscious	Calm, relaxed, emotionally stable