Family values and domestic interiors. A material-culture experiment using multi-technique analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show the results of a field research that examines the integration between the use of a questionnaire and the use of photographs in the quantitative analysis, to analyze models of values reflected in the furniture arrangement with special attention to the methodology used, to verify the compatibility of Visual techniques with quantitative questionnaires, and that to reinforce the importance of sociological observation of material culture to describe and understand social life.
Keywords: consumption, material culture, family values

1. Objects and relations

The analysis of material culture and the research of process' indicators and social phenomenon can lead to specific methodological and technical problems. If there is a vast opportunity for a sociologist to research in such a prolific field of study, he often realises that this new research area needs to test the inefficacy of the customary observational tools and it obliges him to find new techniques for the observation of social reality. One of the problems that we can immediately observe is the usual unawareness of the interviewee concerning the social strategies of how material culture is used and the social meanings of such uses. As an example, let us consider the choice of objects; an interviewed subject is often conscious only if he likes or dislikes a thing and usually is unaware of the social construction and the rules which lie hidden behind a choice which appears to him entirely subjective and aesthetic.

In exploring this difficult field of research we maintain that it is not easy to use the tools of the traditional research. These indicators presuppose the subject's awareness of the indicators which are the objects under examination and they also suppose that the person interviewed is capable of both expressing and conceptualising the processes which are the focus of research. This means that research in this kind of area of symbolising and social communication has sought out new observational tools and often through the methodological integration of different and unrelated techniques. Seen in this light, it is not difficult to understand that these strategies have been influenced by methods which derive from anthropology which used material culture as a field of observation and research long before sociology. It is our belief (Secondulfo 1995) that the social significance of objects and consumer goods, from which we observe their semiotic and communicative reflexes, resides in their profound connection with social relationships. In other words, both the act of exchange and the existence itself of goods and objects, contribute to

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expressing and rendering operative the social relationships within which the objects or consumer products are exchanged or displayed. The making a culture out of objects and goods, seen as the material and visible part of society, derives the possibility of its existence from the very relationships which are the foundations of every society. Everything begins with the necessity of making existing relationships socially functional at an abstract level, in the relational network and in the bio-fabric of every society. These kinds of relationships, normally present in everyone's expectations, are activated and updated through the communicative behaviour which is consubtantial with those very relationships. It is this which keeps social relationships alive, functioning and effective. Objects considered in their relational dimension have the ability, more than any other objectified structure of symbolic mediation - thanks to their nature which is material and objective - to make visible the social relationship or relationships from which they are built. In this sense, objects use the communicative potential of the relationships to exist and to operate at a social level. Among the many relationships, we can consider two particular kinds in which much of the mediation is entrusted to objects: the status difference and the identification of the social class (Secondulfo 1995).

Even if, taken together, these are oriented to the symbolization and communication of social differences, they offer two different perspectives: on the one hand, the diversity regarding the other social groups and on the other hand, the homogeneity and similarity within each social group, understood as the reflex of the constitutive culture of the group itself. These are two aspects of the connection between individuals and their social class representation as collective subject of identification which may be real or only desired. The status difference and the social class identification are commonly mixed into the communication process activated by individuals in order to display the identification itself. In particular, material culture has a relevant role in this kind of process because it represents an objectified area of cultural mediation, which is able constantly to communicate significances which they do not necessarily have for the creator of the message. With regard to texts which are created for "public" communication showing the social class of the agent group, the component of similarity (sought to sustain self-image) within the group and the component of diversity through the other groups (sought as consolidation of the self-image which individuals need to communicate) are mixed into a unique strategy of social action.

This point of view regarding the role of objects and social stratification is of recent origin and derives from French sociology, and in particular from the work of Jean Baudrillard and Pierre Bourdieu (Baudrillard 1968-1972; Bourdieu 1979). This contribution analyzes objects as a "system of signs" in which the most important change, in comparison to traditional approaches, is the 'reading' of objects and goods which discovers their significance more from the network of reciprocal relations they create, rather than from their individual connection to the cultural and value structures of the society or the group which uses them (Baudrillard 1972). The cultural and value models that constitute one of the key points of the self-identification process (Baudrillard 1968) are not committed, in terms of symbolic and communicative dimension, directly to the relationships between individuals, specific objects and value structures, but are placed in the context of the object's organization in systems of aesthetic representation, on the model of "style", in which the linking patterns among objects represent the vehicle of communication and the locus of the significance linked to the cultural and value models. The significance then shifts from the relationship between objects and culture to the relationship between the organizational patterns of the objects and the culture. This is a connection symbolized and communicated by ordering structures in which objects are placed for display in a socially meaningful space which, for families and individuals, is the home especially those communal areas intended for habitation and for sharing. Speaking of the "order" of the domestic furnishings, it is useful to look for evidence of the cultural value models typical of the social group to which the family belongs or to which the family aspires to belong.

Therefore, it is the grammar of semantic rules which allows the connections between objects in this social space to be become meaningful and it is the pattern of interlocking relationships which hold and communicate the cultural models which are important for the group. Connection rules among objects in the social space refer to the grammatics and it is the reciprocal relationship pattern which contains and communicates the cultural models which are strategically important for the group. The major contribution of this approach is that spatial relations among objects within

domestic family spaces, in those areas open to the "public" such as the living room, are homologous to value models of the group which has set out and used the space. The important point made here is that through objects the space acquires a semantic meaning and is organized through a network of relationships which directly echo the group's world view (Baudrillard 1968).

What certainly matters is to understand how the sociologist can analyze these kinds of structures, these patterns, how their secrets might be discovered. The use of traditional methodologies, such as questionnaires, even if they have produced interesting results, have never be able to detect the linking patterns connecting objects to social spaces; patterns which, on the contrary, are easily captured by iconographic techniques, especially photography, which belong to "visual sociology". Visual methods and a visual sociology approach are the best and sometimes the only observational strategies which are capable of analyzing both the complexity and the richness of material culture. The role and the support of photography, even if difficult on a methodological level, is irreplaceable in its ability to record reality accurately and thus to supply evidence of the significant items in their interconnectedness. Moreover, during subsequent analyses "in theory", this allows us to find those connections, those interlinking patterns (spatial and symbolic) that would have otherwise passed unnoticed by the observer-researcher.

For instance, let us consider Bourdieu's analysis (Bourdieu 1979) of living rooms, one of the most complete studies on this theme. While his sophisticated statistical technique (correspondence analysis) succeeds in framing groups of objects, significantly related to different "life-styles" and social status of people interviewed, it completely fails to record the linking patterns of these objects in their social space patterns. From this point of view, I have set up some interesting perspectives of empirical research to try to integrate the potential of photographic techniques with traditional methodologies, moreover qualitative, of sociological analysis (Secondulfo 1997). In what follows, I will present a two-step experiment that has two purposes; the first is to investigate the integration between questionnaire and photography in the study of the material-culture field with regard to social stratification and the second is to analyze the relationship between social-space patterns and culture which has been discussed only theoretically.

2. Values and furnishing: an experiment aimed at interpreting material culture

The general purpose of this empirical study is to analyze material culture as a source of sociological datum through the investigation of the linking patterns of the furnishings in domestic "public" spaces. The construction of an indicator which the "atmosphere" specific to every home and which is easily identified by participants in the culture, enables the study to pick up useful information regarding the family's social class and their life style, in a logic of social proximity or distance. We mention the concept of atmosphere because it is both holistic and inclusive, thanks to its ability both to integrate a large amount of information, and to be intangible and symbolic. It has the advantage of providing more information than we can acquire from single status-symbol goods; moreover, these kinds of objects if tastelessly placed in the house due to mistakes of judgement, might lead us to misunderstand a set of signs which do not conform to the original intentions. The purpose is to investigate the social space in which the furnishings do not appear as a sum of individual items but as a composed text in which the grammatical rule followed is demonstrated by the placement of "words" and appears as an important symbolic element. In such a "social space" both the single objects and their strategy of use and exposition constitute a definite social communication. The experiment was in two phases. The purpose of the first phase was to investigate photography as an observational technique for material culture and to try to manage the methodological problems in agreement with the principles of sociological research (Secondulfo 1993) and then to try to verify the existence of linking patterns observable in the spatial organization of objects, in particular the disposition of furnishings in the public area and thus socially aimed at this purpose (Baudrillard 1972). The first phase of the research produced two results.

a) First of all from the analysis of photographic images and photographic technique, a "shooting protocol" was drawn up in order to:

    - guarantee the standardization of the images and their comparability;

- preserve the environment of the images in the whole context represented by the furnishing and to control the subjectivity of the observer.

This process seeks to keep under control photography as a sociological technique of analysis by reference to the parameters of comparability and standardization. It tries to apply the rules supplied by sociological method which have been elaborated for other analytical techniques such as the questionnaire based on structured questions and the free interview in which the problems connected with standardization and comparability are still current.

b) The experiments and the photographic analysis have allowed us to discern two linking patterns which lie within the furnishing in agreement with the theories in the current literature. On the one hand, we observe a "center-edge" strategy in which objects in the room are always arranged according to the presence of a center, usually the center of the room. On the other hand, the "filling-up" strategy in which objects in the room are placed with a major or minor level of crowding at every point in the room with either a casual or a defined style. Two models, "center edge" and "filling up", are well represented by the following photos which are repertory images so as to respect the privacy of the interviewees.

Figure 2.1
Center-edge model in its maximum version called "monocentric"

Figure 2.2
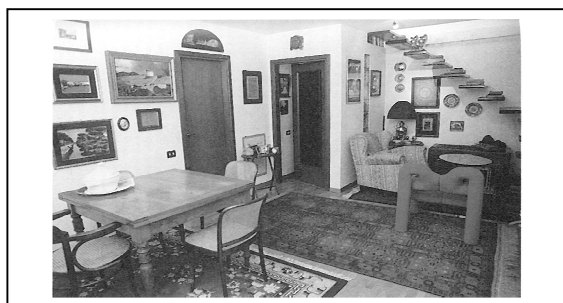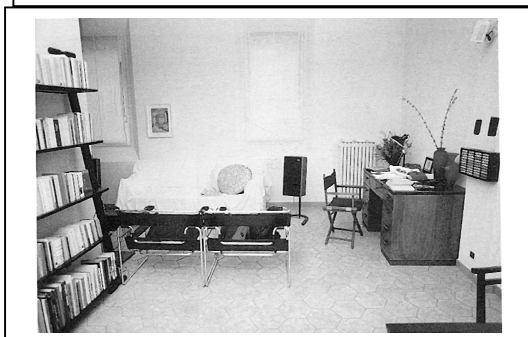*"Filling up-model" in high crowding version*

Figure 2.3 "Policentric model"-low edge of the center-edge continuum crossed with the filling up model

Figure 2.4 Policentric model crossed with the minimum "filling-up" crowding version

Each model studied through photographs shows many details apart from the furniture, such as household effects, pictures and accessories. It is all placed in an ordering pattern which governs and binds them into a unique "text". For instance, let us look at the "center-edge" model (fig. 2.1). When the ordering pattern is strongest, we observe a unique center and all the other furniture is disposed around it. The center stands in the midst of concentric circles which are visible signal-objects (chandelier/pendant and household effects) and reproduces this sort of ordering pattern in every part of the room including tables and book-cases. The center is well defined from the space that surrounds it and supplies boundaries to delimit the area. In these kinds of spaces everyone would have to behave in the same way and do the same things and share events and rituals which would take place probably in the central space. I think that the photograph demonstrates, broadly speaking, the value and ordering dimension achieved by this organisation of the space. To individuate the patterns we used behaviour scales (Goode-Hatt 1962) deploying the independent judgement technique, in which we asked different people, in an independent situation, to interpret from the photographs what kind of patterns they perceived in order to compare different judgments and to discover if we were in presence of some kind of unusual phenomenon. At the end of this phase we saw that two linking patterns showed the higher level of shared opinions. Initially we took just a few photos in order to analyze the procedure of the shoot and to have a large variety of furnishing styles and we then tested both the technique and the reliability of the linking patterns on a major scale. The experiment proceeded to try to integrate the visual techniques with other more structured observational techniques. One of the major problems was the difficulty to obtain permission to take photographs because both the questionnaire, which has the peculiarity of converting information, and the recorder used for interviews, which collects information with less intrusion in the overall situation, are less intrusive than photographs. Both photographs and video "freeze" the reality and record it and people contacted are reluctant to accept that some public area of their own home is being recorded. It is felt more like an invasion of their personal and private domestic territory.

The purposes of the second phase of the research were the following:

a) to test the level of integration between photographs and questionnaire in field research;
b) to verify the empirical use of linking patterns utilized for the furniture setting as indicators of value patterns.

This part benefits from an empirical inter-generational study on changing value patterns which I carried out using a structured questionnaire on a sample of 500 family units in the South of Italy. The specific purpose of this analysis turned out to be very useful for testing the significance of the linking patterns visible in the furnishing intended as values indicators. Moreover, interviewers used the occasion to talk to people, to interview them and to suggest the photographic analysis of the house. The questionnaire, drawn up following the Inglehart model, (Inglehart 1997) contained a large variety of self-anchored scales particularly suitable for use with visual tools.

Before proceeding to show the result of the integration between these two techniques, we need to clarify some important rules that we applied in this research. With regard to visual tools, the photographs were taken following the "shooting protocol" used in the first part of the experiment

with at least two shots for each single room pictured. In this way, for every family nucleus, we collected both questionnaires and photographs of areas "exposed to the public". With regard to the data elaboration, while questionnaires followed the traditional statistic analysis, the photographs were analyzed by a group of independent judges. The aim of the photographic analysis was to detect the existence of the patterns previously called "center-edge" and "filling-up" through three ordinal variables which were capable of registering their presence and their intensity level. Then these three ordinal variables were used within the statistical elaboration of the questionnaires in order to create a unique process which made up of both visual and questionnaire data. We observed that the number of variables did not yield a complete interpretation of the photographs and to obtain a deeper analysis, the consideration of linking patterns should be integrated with the observation of single "key-objects" pictured in photographs. Probably, the choice of using the semantic differential rather than a limited number of ordinal variables would have yielded a better result. In fact, the whole information embedded in the photographs was not transferred to the statistical database but only just a part of it. From this point of view, one of the most important advantages of photographs, as with questionnaires, is their capacity to freeze reality and to be the source of further analysis which allows the researcher to explore new techniques and approaches so as to translate the information embedded in photographs into concepts. Finally, we present the results in order to demonstrate the efficacy of linking patterns both found and tested.

a) The center-edge model shows a close connection to a specific socio-cultural profile derived from the statistical analysis. We assumed that this linking pattern could be considered a good indicator of a specific value profile representing the family nucleus even allowing for the small sample size.

b) The filling-up model did not offer a specific linkage with a socio-cultural profile; in fact, we observed its existence in many different family units as the questionnaire analysis reveals. Even if our analysis did not go through the interpretation of this linking pattern, we think that it needs a semantic elaboration through a qualitative approach such as in-depth or semi-structured interviews using the photo-elicitation technique. From the comparison between the two socio-cultural profiles arising from the multi-variable statistical analysis and the center-edge model in its double version (high crowding and low crowding), we found a perfect match in a semantic and statistical sense. In other words, the socio-cultural profiles of the statistical elaboration were well linked to profiles of the center-edge model.

From the table below (2.1), we can observe a description of the center-edge model version. We used the term "monocentric" to indicate a center-edge disposition in which all objects face the same area of the room - the center. Furnishings lie in concentric circles with a considerable use of concentric indicators, such as doilies and picture frames, to indicate the appropriate place for objects. Instead, the "multicentric" describes a room divided into different concentric circles in which every sphere is open to the others without any indicators for the position of objects. The schedule is composed of four columns; two of these display the monocentric and multicentric models and within them we show, in the first, the synthetic profile derived from the questionnaire analysis and, in the second, the specific statements which come from the questionnaire enquiries in order to provide the reader with the definitions used during the construction of the profiles. The analysis indicates a significant relationship between the two models and social status, even if room dimension, closely related to the disposition of objects, did not play an important role.

Table 2.1 Comparison between spatial patterns and ideal- type values

Monocentric	Multicentric

+ Mistrust	*Look after your own affairs*	- Mistrust	*To engage in public affairs*
+ Authority	*To refuse undesirables* *To protect public order*	- Authority	*To accept undesirables* *To protect the freedom of speech*
	To take strong decisions		*To support open debate*
	High trust in the Army		*High trust in the Judiciary*
+ Tradition	*Children's education: honesty and good manners*	+ Innovation	*Children's ed.: imagination and responsibility*
+ Religion	*Visit church more than once a week*	- Religion	*Visit church less than once a week*
- Information	*Low use of communication media (especially the press)*	+ Information	*High use of communication media (especially the press)*
- Education	*High trust in television* *The majority without a degree*	+ Education	*Low trust in the media* *The majority have a degree*
	Low trust in educational system		*High trust in educational system*
Age	*No Correlation*	Age	*No Correlation*
To be a fulfilled woman:	*It is necessary to have children but also a job*	To be a fulfilled woman:	*Children are not necessary*
What is important in life?	*Work*	What is important in life?	*Spare time*

3. Conclusion

Considering the small sample size, we have proceeded only to a comparison of data both derived from photographs and questionnaires with general consideration especially for methodological purpose. This research is a demonstration of the integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to create mixed-method linking iconographic tools with "traditional" tools such as the questionnaire. Visual techniques appear not only useful for the use of pictures as an integrating tool with respect to other approaches, but they are fundamental in order to investigate specific dimensions of social strategies, such as material culture, in which other techniques are unable to comprehensively display the social phenomenon. The creation, partially achieved, of a concept called "atmosphere" is evidence of what the article maintains. The convergence point between value profiles derived from the traditional scaling analysis applied in the questionnaire and the "ordering" pattern drawn from an analysis of furnishings, demonstrate the richness of the material-culture field of study. It underlines its role as a place of social analysis and the dimension of grammatics and relational rules reveal their ability to condition the group's value rules within the domestic arena. In this sense, we believe it is important to explore the use of new observational tools which are capable of recording these "evanescent" indicators unexplored by traditional techniques. The importance of pattern in the perception and interpretation of reality is well noted in the literature of psychology (Gibson 1986). In particular, in the material culture field of study and in the strategies of social differentiation, it is the grammatics and syntaxes of the organization of furnishings as composed networks of objects disposed in the space, which should be considered more important than single things exposed in the house. Anticipated group or class approval of the domestic layout (furnishings, accessories, clothes, tattoos, etc.) can be a more decisive and subtle criterion of acceptance or refusal than the choice of suitable objects. In fact,

these patterns reflect both values and a world-view which might be learned only after a greater familiarity which is very difficult to attain merely with money or other similar resources.

The convergence between value profiles and ordering patterns in the space is valuable both for its statistical relevance and its content thanks to a strong connection between two tendencies, which compose profiles, and the ordering semantic level of social-spatial patterns. The higher level of authoritarianism, the lower level of measured trust, the lack of discrimination regarding the media, and the stress on "discipline" which emerge from the mono-centric profile, are well connected to a vertex structure. In this particular kind of structure, there is an high level of control of the space such as all objects are positioned in a specific place and then everyone who uses the room has to take account of the disposition of objects in order to exploit the area as an individual and a social room. As we noted, the material construction of a social space conditions the nature of the social interaction which people can experience because they have first of all to consider the material frame in which those relationships can happen. These spaces are the evidence of specific action models which they try to reproduce; through their simple, natural and self-legitimating material existence they condition social interaction. The space has a strong symbolic and communicative importance thanks to which it is not only reified and conditioned but is endowed with sense and significance. In this sense, the "visible text" might be read and interpreted, first of all by onlookers and then by users, and this acknowledgement guarantees the acceptance of the significances created by those who live in the place. Moreover, the majority of these significances, perhaps the most important, are reflected by the organization of house spaces, in the linking patterns which compose the place and position objects and social actors. Users accept linking patterns and in this way they legitimate their existence in terms of the value models and significance which they represent and communicate.

Throughout this discussion we have focused our attention on material linking patterns and in particular those present in daily interactions in which they have the role of socialising mechanisms regarding specific value and behavioural models. In fact, every institution reflects its organizational values and often in a conscious way. Instead, the most interesting result, which we have partially obtained, is the attempt to get and to create a concept called "atmosphere" which represents the interpretive key for people, who, in the same culture, have an immediate comprehension of the user's profile. In other words, we might combine the sociologist's skills with the considerations supplied by mothers and aunts who judge their relatives and neighbours, in terms of life-style and morality, from the feelings they experience when observing their homes. It might be possible that the acceptance of this social control has its foundation in the customary behaviour in which people show their own homes to first-time guests in such a way as to display what might appear otherwise invisible: their own 'proper' moral attitudes.

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