Interpersonal Relationships and Personal Space: Research Review and Theoretical Model

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This article reviews research concerning interpersonal distance as a function of interpersonal relationships, attraction, and reactions to spatial invasion. To integrate research findings, we propose a simple model, based on the idea that people seek an optimal distance from others that becomes smaller with friends and larger for individuals who do not expect to interact. The model describes comfort-discomfort as a function of interaction distance in three situations: interacting friends, interacting strangers, and strangers who do not expect interaction. These three personal space profiles are discussed in terms of qualifying variables, such as seated vs. standing interaction, sex composition of the dyad, intimacy of conversation topics, and situational variables.

KEY WORDS: personal space; interaction distance; spatial invasions.

INTRODUCTION

Personal space typically refers to "an area with an invisible boundary surrounding a person's body, into which intruders may not come..." (Sommer, 1969, p. 26). Since the early writing and research of Hall (1959, 1963, 1966) and Sommer (1959, 1962), over 200 empirical studies have been made on personal space and interpersonal distance (Altman, 1975). Reviews of this literature...
suggest a continuing interest in the field (Evans and Howard, 1973; Linder, 1974; Pedersen and Shears, 1973).

This article reviews research on personal space that concerns interpersonal relationships, attraction, and spatial invasion. Our goal is to review and integrate the data available on these topics, and to propose a simple model that encompasses the major findings. Briefly, current empirical evidence suggests that friends or people who like one another prefer close distances, but under some conditions close proximity is intrusive and uncomfortable, especially for strangers.

CONSISTENCY AMONG TECHNIQUES FOR STUDYING PERSONAL SPACE

Research on personal space has employed diverse methods (see Knowles and Johnsen, 1974), so a question arises as to whether findings based on different methods agree with one another. Our review distinguishes three classes of methods (Altman, 1975):

1. *Simulation methods* ask subjects to arrange dolls, figures, or symbols that represent persons; the distance between these figures represents interpersonal distance. For example, Kuethe (1962) had subjects place small felt silhouettes of people and animals on a flannel board. Simulation procedures involve encoding studies, where subjects arrange figures or symbols representing people to portray a particular relationship, and decoding studies, where subjects infer relationships among figures. The majority of studies of personal space have used simulation techniques (Altman, 1975).

2. *Laboratory methods* examine the actual distance between subjects in settings where an experimenter exercises control over stimulus conditions, and where subjects typically know they are being observed. For example, McBride *et al*. (1965) measured galvanic skin responses (GSR) as subjects were approached by people at various distances and angles; other researchers asked subjects to approach another person, or to allow another person to approach them to a point of comfort or discomfort.

3. *Field methods* involve unobtrusive observation of subjects in everyday settings, e.g., classrooms, cafeterias, libraries, and parks. Observed behaviors include distance, body orientation, and other spatial responses, such as selecting chairs or establishing conversation distances. For example, Felipe and Sommer (1966) observed the length of time a person remained on a park bench or at a library table when a stranger sat close by. Field methods have been used less frequently than other techniques (Altman, 1975).

A few studies have reported data on two or more of these three types of methods — usually a laboratory technique is compared with a simulation meth-