

## Human personal space

Humans, like most other species of animals, have what we call “personal space.” When we interact with other individuals, we prefer to be close enough to them for effective communication, but not too close. We feel uncomfortable when an individual gets too close or invades our personal space. The selective advantage for this behavior may lie in our evolutionary history as a social species. Most of the members of our social group are potentially rivals or social enemies; these individuals were in the past (and in some cultures still are) capable of inflicting bodily injury. But we must cooperate with other individuals in order to achieve some, if not many, of our goals with respect to survival and reproduction. We are trying to serve two conflicting social demands: one, to interact socially and thus foster cooperative behaviors, and two, to avoid potentially harmful competitive interactions. Our personal space or preferred social distance is a reflection of this internal conflict.

Personal space is affected by a variety of social factors. For instance, the personal space of married individuals is smaller when approached by the spouse than when approached by some other individual. Preferred personal distance between a married man and a woman who is not his spouse is greater when his spouse is present than when his spouse is absent. Personal space is greater (and emotional reaction is stronger) when individuals are approached (experimentally) by strangers who are perceived as “unattractive” or “creepy” than when approached by “attractive” or “normal” strangers. Intentional invasion of personal space may be used as an intimidating or threatening behavior in situations of social conflict (as in “in your face”).

There are also cultural differences in personal space and in tolerance of intrusion. Elevators, buses, theaters, and many other “crowding” situations tend to reduce personal space; people who routinely find themselves in such situations have smaller personal space and more tolerance for intrusion (at least in the crowding situations) than do people who are unused to crowding. People from the wide-open spaces of the west may feel uncomfortable in the crowded bustle of the big city. Tactile communicative interactions that violate personal space (such as allogrooming) are much more common in some cultures than in others. Such interactions foster social cohesion and cooperation.

As usual, our observational methods will be fairly simple (albeit somewhat embarrassing). You will go out around the campus armed with tape measures and data sheets, and perform an experiment. You will work in pairs, with one individual being the experimenter and one being the observer/measurer. Both will approach a potential experimental subject and request that the potential subject participate in the experiment, and give a brief description of the purpose of the experiment. With the consent of the subject, you will describe the procedure of the experiment to the subject: the experimenter will approach the subject slowly, from an initial distance of about 2 m; the subject will stop the test when he or she begins to feel uncomfortable. The experimenter will then begin to approach the subject. Once the subject stops the test, the minimum distance between experimenter and subject will be measured. The data should be recorded on the data sheets supplied, which have four categories of gender and experimenter vs. subject. Experimenters will record no information about the subjects other than their measured personal space and their gender.

**Our instructions:** We are conducting a study of human personal distance as a class project. Our purpose is to compare the personal distance of male and female subjects when approached by male versus female experimenters. One of us will approach you and you will tell us to stop approaching when you feel uncomfortable with our proximity.

Have you participated in this study today?      if the answer is no...

Are you willing to participate?

If the answer is yes, begin to approach from a distance of about 2 m.

Measure the distance between experimenter and subject when the subject says to stop.