

PERSONAL SPACE, TERRITORIALITY, AND VISUAL TERRITORY

The first zone surrounding us is called the intimate zone. This is the zone that we guard the most and is reserved for close friends and relatives, those that we love and that are emotionally close to us. It extends from skin contact to 18 inches away from us. As a general rule, the more we like a person, the closer we stand to them.

Voluntarily allowing someone to enter our intimate zone is a sign of trust. If someone enters this zone without our consent, we feel threatened. Sometimes we are forced to let strangers into this zone (in crowded elevators or buses, when visiting the doctor or dentist). In these circumstances, we will draw away, turn away, tense our muscles, and avoid eye contact. Non-verbally, these actions say that we are sorry for invading their territory, but are forced to do so by the situation. Sometimes people will use a prop such as a briefcase or a purse as a barrier to protect their personal space.

In a dating situation, one partner's reaction will convey to the other whether they have permission to enter your intimate zone. In your own dating experiences, think of the messages you received according to where you and your date sat on the sofa or car seat. If your date sat close to you, it meant they liked you. If you both sat on opposite ends of the sofa or car seat, it meant something entirely different.

Your personal space zone begins at about 18 inches and extends to about four feet. Eighteen inches is the space for couples who are in public. Two and one half feet to four feet is for casual conversation (at arm's length). Contacts in this zone are reasonably close, but are far less personal.

The social zone is used for parties and friendly gatherings, for friends and for casual acquaintances. It is also used in business situations. It extends from four to twelve feet. Between four and seven feet is an appropriate space for salespeople, customers, and people who work together. Seven to twelve feet away is reserved for more formal and impersonal situations. This would be the distance at which an employee and his/her boss would feel comfortable. It provides for a less relaxed conversation.

The public zone is used by speakers and their audiences and is used in many classrooms. It begins at twelve feet and extends outward. At this distance, two-way communication is practically impossible. Anyone who voluntarily remains at 25 feet and beyond is definitely not interested in dialogue.

These distances given for personal space are according to our culture. Many cultures differ in their definitions of personal space. You might feel very uncomfortable talking to someone from Japan or Latin America because they stand closer in ordinary conversation than we do. They may consider you to be cool or distant, because of your tendency to stand further away from them than is common in their culture.

VISUAL TERRITORY

Penetrating visual territory is as uncomfortable as physical invasion. Any glance lasting longer than three seconds is likely to be as threatening to you as someone who is standing too closely when walking in public. As you approach another person, that person will glance away from you at a distance of a few paces, almost like a visual dimming of headlights. Strangers will maintain eye contact at a close distance, generally speaking only when they want something such as information, assistance, a handout, signatures on petitions, to complete a survey, etc.

TERRITORY

We all stake-out and mark our own territory-space that we consider to be private and our own. It remains stationary, we don't carry it around with us; it is merely a geographical area where we assume some types of rights. An example of this would be your room. It is yours whether you are physically there or not. Another example would be your desk in class. Teachers who do not use assigned seating in their classrooms, find that the students in their classes will generally choose seats and make

"unwritten" seating arrangements. They feel affronted if they come to class and find that someone is seated in "their" chairs, even though no formal assignments have been given.

People who have achieved a higher status are granted more personal territory and greater privacy. An example of this is that an employee will knock before entering the boss's office, but the boss can walk into the employee's work area without hesitation.

Sometimes people will temporarily claim space in public situations. They may create a "territorial marker" by spreading coats, or books, or belongings on tables or chairs. This informs other people that the space is taken. Studies done in public libraries have found that when a book or a personal object has been left on a desk, it will hold the space for a person for about 30 minutes. If you leave your coat or jacket on the back of a chair, people will stay away for about two hours.

Some people seem to imitate birds. To claim public space, they arrange objects around themselves in much the same fashion as a bird builds a nest. A student can claim a table or desk as his/her own by arranging a temporary nest of books and other items.

One rule of claiming space is that when a lot of space is available, you do not crowd someone else's space. If a person is seated at a large table and is surrounded by empty chairs, you would be expected to choose a chair far away from the person who is already seated. If you were to choose a chair next to the person, he/she would probably react with defensive gestures as he/she edged away. If you were to move your chair even closer, that person would probably leave. Although people have strong feelings about having their personal space invaded, rarely will anyone verbally protest an invasion of that space.