

# Violating social norms assignment

[Sociology](#)



||| Violating Social Norms ||||| Did you ever feel as though someone was “ too close for comfort? ” I’m sure we all have.

But, how close is too close? The idea of closeness is linked to the idea of personal space and intimacy. The ideas that “ close” can get “ too close” has been observed and researched by social behavioralists and sociologists for decades. It is an intrinsic human behavior to seek out personal space. Perhaps it is a defense mechanism, perhaps an assertion of territorialism; there are theories to support each idea. However, social behavior does dictate that there is a social norm of personal space. Americans typically have a standard or norm that determines “ appropriate” distances from others.

Personal space as defined by Anthropologist Edward hall is divided into four different zones- Intimate Distance, Personal Distance, Social Distance and Public Space. (Hall, The Hidden Dimension, 1966) Intimate distance (less than 18 inches) is often reserved for family and very close friends, Personal Distance(arms length to 4 feet) applies to friends and acquaintances, Social Distance (four to 12 feet) refers to formal or impersonal interactions, and Public Space(12 or more feet) indicates space that is not guarded such as in a park or shopping mall.

Hall’s theory also examined the variations of personal space among gender, culture, and age. Further research has shown variation by personality and relation to the other person. (H. Hogh-Olesen, Journal of Cognition and Culture 8, 2008). To test the boundaries of this norm, I visited a busy 7-11 store to observe people’s responses to their personal space being violated. I

tested boundaries on people of different gender, age, and culture to see how their reactions varied. I targeted three different subjects in different areas of the store. The first subject was female, presumably older than I am by 20 or so years and of Latin decent.

I approached her in the self-serve coffee preparation area of the store. I initially stood approximately four feet from her. She hardly noticed I was there. As I began to move closer, she looked up and smiled. I continued to grab cups, lids and the coffee mugs directly next to whatever she touched. In less than a minute, she engaged me in conversation. I felt as though she was trying to feel comfortable with me, so I barely responded and began to reach over her even when there was clearly no need to. It wasn't until I was less than a foot away from her that she said, " you know they have the same stuff right there. I knew that I had violated her space but I wanted to see if she would continue to be so subtle in her request for space, so I did not move. At that point, she stopped making eye contact, and hurried through making her coffee and walked away. The seemingly sweet and polite lady rushed off in a huff, and did not even bid me a farewell. The next subject I approached was lingering in front of the deli section. The subject was Male, approximately the same age as I, and African-American. I was feeling a little more confident so I immediately stood about two-and-a-half feet away from him. He glanced at me at first, but did not say anything.

Another customer and asked, " Do you mind if I just reach across you to grab that? " It was clear that the customer assumed we were together. When the other customer walked away, the subject stepped about a foot away from me. I casually stepped closer to him, as if I were following him. He then

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asked me, " Did you need to get over here? " I replied, " No, I'm OK" and continued to browse the section. He seemed very intimidated by my presence, though he had a very strong outward appearance, and spoke with firm, assertive tone. He finally grabbed his item, and then gave me a quick head nod and grimace goodbye. I followed him to the checkout line.

When we approached the line, I was standing less than two feet behind him. He looked back and said, " It's OK, you can go ahead of me. " As soon as I stepped in front, he moved approximately 4 feet away from me. The final subject was the person I stood in line behind at the checkout. The subject was Female, Caucasian, approximately the same height, body type and age as I. She was the third person in line. I was the fourth, and the guy from the deli section was the fifth. I noticed that while people were standing in line, each person allowed the customer who was paying at the counter stand 6 to 8 feet in front of them.

When the subject approached the cashier, I immediately stepped directly behind her, about two feet from her back. The guy from the deli counter stayed back. At first I attempted to be subtle, I knew that this could be a tricky situation. I grabbed a pack of gum right next to where she was standing. She glanced at me as I reached for the gum. When I stepped behind her and did not return to where everyone else was standing, she looked back at me and paused before resuming her transaction. It took her a few seconds, but she went on to her interaction with the cashier. The cashier then became my secondary subject.

He was immediately distracted by my presence, he spoke to the customer and rang up the items, but he seldom let his gaze drift from watching me. I tried not to look at him; I concentrated more on the lady and what she was doing. She too was distracted. As she tried to ask the cashier for an item that was behind the counter, she spoke slower, looked back at me a couple times, and finally stumbled out what she wanted. The cashier gave the lady her total, and she reached for her purse. I then leaned slightly toward her. The lady, totally irritated by then, finally looked back and said, " Excuse me, do you mind? The guy from the deli section giggled a little. At first, I was embarrassed even a bit threatened by her tone. Then I remembered, it's just a social experiment, and I relaxed. When the lady finished her transaction, I stepped to the register. The cashier was no longer looking at me; in fact, he didn't even greet me pleasantly. The only time that he even spoke to me was when he gave me my total. My observations at the 7-11 supported common theory with certain variations. Most people reacted uncomfortably when approached by a stranger within two to four feet.

Every person that I came within two feet of immediately attempted to escape the uncomfortable situation by suggestion, assertion, or aversion. I found that people who belong to so-called " contact cultures" such as the Latin Woman at the coffee service or the African-American Man at the deli section allowed me to get closer to them before attempting to escape the situation. The Caucasian Woman in the checkout line is a part of a " non-contact culture" and appeared to respond the most assertively when her personal space was compromised. I, too, felt particularly uncomfortable for a moment while interacting with the woman.

Her aggressive behavior may have also been compounded by the theory that personal space is a defense mechanism and that a person will feel more protective of their space or territory when their personal belongings are threatened. In this case, the woman asked me to step away while she was opening her wallet. (H. Hogg-Olesen) One thing that is universal is that humans all have a distinct set of boundaries that determine personal space. Though what that space is may vary from one person or another, at some point everyone feels a little “ too close for comfort. “