

Social norms: subtle violations of personal space essay

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



While all of humanity shares commonalities, one of the most fascinating forms of cultural difference are the social norms or folkways of a culture. Most cultures in the modern world share major beliefs-- for example, murder without reason is restricted in nearly all cultures-- but the social norms of a culture vary greatly from place to place. Never are these folkways so apparent as when an individual is immersed within a culture that has vastly different social norms. However, the importance of social norms and the ways in which society enforces them can also be seen when an individual violates them.

One of the more subtle social norms is the amount of personal space an individual needs when talking to someone they do not have a close relationship with. Every culture has a certain distance that is most comfortable to speak to strangers and acquaintances from; when violating this distance, either by being too far or too close, it is easy to see the discomfort that people experience. In the United States, for instance, most individuals born and raised in the culture are most comfortable with speaking to someone from approximately an arm's length away (Bicchieri, 2006). Conversely, the Japanese are much more comfortable having a conversation from approximately half an arm's length away. This cultural clash can easily be seen when an American unfamiliar with Japanese culture is speaking to a Japanese person; there is a consistent struggle between the two to find a private sphere for communication that is comfortable for both individuals (Bicchieri, 2006). Their social norms are at odds, and it makes both individuals feel a feeling of vague discomfort.

The initial observation was done in a retail setting, where the researcher

discussed a product with a number of different employees, stepping in approximately half a foot to a foot closer than usual for the conversation. The employees reacted with discomfort to the intrusion into their space; women seemed much more uncomfortable with the intrusion than men did, and seemed to register the intrusion much more quickly than their male counterparts. This may be, in part, because women tend to be more aware of social norms than men (Cialdini, 2007). According to Cialdini (2007), women in the western world are both more aware of social norms and much more willing to enforce social norms for other women than men are willing to enforce social norms for other men. However, women were generally unwilling to enforce social norms on men, although men were willing to enforce them for women (Cialdini, 2007). Examining female reactions to male intrusions into personal space may be fraught with issues of intimidation as well, however, and may not only be a reaction to the violation of the social norm.

Next, the researcher tried standing further away than normal from the individuals being observed. These individuals tended to move into the space generally reserved for polite conversation with strangers, and none moved any closer. It should be noted that the researcher was speaking loud enough to be heard clearly, and that the movement was not based on a practical need to hear more clearly, but instead based on the discomfort posed by speaking to someone that is perceived as being too far away.

In an attempt to determine what effect speech has on the sphere of personal space, the researcher also rode the elevator. Initially, the researcher rode in the elevator as far as possible away from the other occupants, and received

no reaction. However, when the researcher began standing within two feet or so of the other occupants, the other occupants in the elevator moved away from the researcher into the open space of the elevator, even if the researcher was not looking at or touching the other occupants. It seems that while there is no desire to scold or enforce social norms of personal space by actively acknowledging the intrusion, there is certainly discomfort and an attempt to re-establish norms that have been violated.

Social norms are interesting because they are entirely subjective, and yet, they are ingrained into the very fabric of society. How far another person stands when speaking is a matter of preference, but it is a preference that is generally shared by society as a whole. The fact that these social norms can be so woven into the fabric of society that they are unspoken rules of everyday engagement is a fascinating insight into human psychology and social control. Folkways like personal space are used as methods for keeping the peace within society; gross violations of these social norms can be explosive, and even potentially result in violence (Bicchieri, 2006).

References

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