

Personal space and the impact of eye contact



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Everyone needs their own personal space. Different people, different cultures, different gender maintains different standards of personal space, some will be more but some will not. Personal space reflects our ways of thinking and feelings. People who are interested in personal space will be discover that the comfortable personal distance will need different amount of spaces; it is also depends on the social situation, gender, and individual preference. Someone like doctor and patient will need this personal space because when a female patient seeing a male doctor for some female disease, they will feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. Therefore, personal space between doctor and patient is very important.

Personal space is the variable and subjective distance at which one person feels comfortable talking to another (Dictionary. com, 2010). It can also be known as the area surrounding one's body into which others may not intrude(Sommer, 1969).

One of the factor is culture; it will affect people's definition of personal space. Culture is a particular form or stage of civilization, as that of a certain nation or period (Dictionary. com, 2010). Different cultures have their own varying rules on personal space and touching. For example, Americans sometimes touch each other while they are talking; however, Indonesian should not be patted on the head and cannot touch a person of the opposite sex (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994). Therefore, people with different culture will have different believes with the personal space.

Another important factor is gender, which can affect personal space.

Females always tended to have a closer space between someone while male

does not. Hughes and Goldman (1978) discovered that females preferred to violate the personal space of other female who are having direct eye contact while males always try to violate the personal space when people are not facing them. Therefore, these can show that males tend to have more personal space than females, whatever it is a male or female. However, females will tend to have less personal space when they are facing same sex.

Eye contact and personal space have a close relationship. When establishing eye contact, sex type and facial expressions are variables which may influence whether personal space violations will occur. Women tend to maintain better eye contact in conversations with other women. Generally, women interpret eye contact as a sign of trust and compassion (Hughes & Goldman, 1978). This explanation showed that eye contact can affect the relationship between people. Besides, eye contact will also have differences in culture.

Based upon background on the topic of personal space, it is predicted that with eye contact, the closeness to the confederate will decrease compared to without eye contact. This will be measure by the distance between the participants using a tape measure.

METHOD

Participants

In this experiment, there were a total of 91 participants. All participants were study Behavioural Science at International Education Services. There were

61 females and 30 males. All the participants are from different countries; there included 42 Chinese(25 from Hong Kong and 3 from Macau), 3 Korean, 3 Malaysian, 3 Singaporeans, 3 Taiwanese, 2 Japanese, 2 Vietnamese, 1 American, 1 Dubai people, 1 Indonesian, 1 Libyan and 1 Timorese. These participants are from the age of 17 to 25 ($M = 18.24$). There were 4 confederates, and they were all female Chinese student in Behavioral class at the university IV in University of Queensland foundation year.

Materials

Materials were used in this experiment were: wooden pegs for drawings of order, data, recording sheet, pens, audience and tape measure to measure the distance. Wooden pegs are numbered in the box so participants randomly picked one peg to decide the order of carrying out the experiment.

Procedure

This experiment held in the car park at International education service. Firstly, every participant picked a numbered wooden peg randomly to decide who were the confederate and the order of doing the experiment. After that, participants were asked to walk towards the confederate in two situations. In the first situation participants had to walk towards the confederate with eye contact; In the second situation participants had to walk towards the confederate without eye contact (confederate turned backward). Participants need to walk towards the confederate the starting point that was marked by the masking tape and they stopped until they feel uncomfortable. Distance between the participant and confederate will then be measured by a

measuring tape. At the end of this experiment, the two situations' data was recorded on the data list.

Results

Table one

The mean of condition one and condition two

M

condition one

64. 40

condition two

47. 30

In condition 1, the mean distance (M= 64. 40cm) was longer than in condition 2 (M= 47. 30cm).

Table two

A comparison of condition one and condition two – male or female

Sex

M(condition one)

M (condition two)

M

87. 83

70. 33

F

52. 87

35. 97

Figure 1. Means distance (in cm) taken in two conditions (with and without eye contact) to personal space by gender.

Taking a look at figure 1 shows male participants need more personal space with eye contact (M= 87. 83 cm) than female participants (M= 52. 87 cm).

Table three

A comparison of condition one and condition two – Chinese and non Chinese

Country

M(condition one)

M (condition two)

Chinese

48. 48

32. 48

Non Chinese

78. 04

60

Figure 2. Means distance (in cm) taken in two conditions (with and without eye contact) to personal space by nationality.

Chinese have longer personal space ($M = 48.48\text{cm}$) with eye contact than without eye contact ($M = 32.48\text{ cm}$). Non Chinese are opposite to the above group. They tend to need more personal space when eye contact occurs while comparing to Chinese. Non Chinese have bigger personal space ($M = 78.04$) with eye contact than without eye contact ($M = 60\text{ cm}$).

Table four

A comparison of condition one and condition two – Different age

Age

M(condition one)

M (condition two)

17

51.36

32.07

18

54.15

39.27

19

99. 68

74. 32

20

66. 57

44. 86

Figure 3. Means distance (in cm) taken in two conditions (with and without eye contact) to personal space by different age.

Taking a look at figure 3 shows older people tend to have more personal space with eye contact than younger people. Older people have longer personal space (M= 66. 58 cm) with eye contact than without eye contact (M= 44. 86 cm). Besides, younger people have less personal space in both two conditions comparing with the older people (M= 51. 34 cm) (with eye contact) & (M= 32. 07 cm) (without eye contact).

Discussion

The hypothesis was that personal space would decrease when there was no eye contact. In this experiment, all the participants are from different part of the world, different sex, different age and even results are all different as predicted. The overall result also supports the idea that personal space will be reduced when there is no eye contact (condition 2, M= 47. 30cm) < (condition 1, M= 64. 40cm). Since participants were all from different

countries, they all have their own special backgrounds and this is why they all need different personal space.

Different cultures have a lot of their own rules on personal space and touching. For example, Americans sometimes touch each other while they are talking; however, Indonesian should not be patted on the head and cannot touch a person of the opposite sex (Bonvillian & Nowlin, 1994); same as the result ($M = 32.48$ cm), taking a look at figure 2 shows non Chinese tend to need more personal space when eye contact occurs while Chinese is opposite. Females always tended to have a closer space between someone while male does not. Hughes and Goldman (1978) discovered that females preferred to violate the personal space of other female who are having direct eye contact while males always try to violate the personal space when people are not facing them. This can explain why the result ($M = 52.87$ cm) shows above that female always have less personal space than male, either with eye contact or not.

However, there are also some methodological errors that affect the experiment. First, there were all female confederates; it may affect the result of the male participants because gender is always a reason that can affect personal space. Moreover, confederate turned their back which introduced a new variable will also affect personal space. The extraneous variables include the distance which is 0 cm and those participants are both Chinese and sample was limited and biased may also affect the results.

An important avenue for future research would be choosing one male and one female confederate since gender can change the personal space. Also, it

is better that if the confederate is not student from Behavioural Science class since students from this class already known each other.