

The impact of social norms on seat assignment

[Sociology](#)



Every person entering the theater thereafter is subject not only to their own theater experience preferences but more importantly by the seating selections of all the people already seated. There are many norms for attending a movie theater. These include explicit norms, norms that have been openly written or spoken (Starker, 1) and implicit norms, norms that are understood but not precisely recorded (Cornball, 59). Explicit or formal norms have clear rules for punishment. Creating a disruption during the movie is grounds for ejection from the theater.

Most theaters openly state during the previews that cell phones need to be turned off and that talking should be kept to a minimum. Implicit or Informal norms regulate seat selection in a theater where at least one person is already present and seated. These informal norms are strengthened by the anticipation of a crowd. The anticipation of a crowd has been shown to encourage more socially isolated seating choices and an increase in the avoidance of contact with others (Greenberg, 672).

As additional people enter the theater, their seating choices are no longer based on the anticipation of a crowd but on the reality of the remaining availability of seats. The dwindling number of empty seats forces the choice of seats that are closer to other people. For example, the first person entering the theater chooses the seat they consider perfect, the center seat in the center row. The second person enters, surveys the locations of any other patrons in the theater and picks a seat using a loosely formed set of Informal norms or rules.

All subsequent people repeat these steps taking into account the locations of each of the seats filled. The unstated rules are either more or less strictly interpreted based on the percentage of the theater capacity filled. The second and third people entering the theater are expected to interpret the rules strictly, thus anticipating a crowd in the theater. As the theater fills, the interpretation weakens. Most of the norms are related to the amount of personal space around each person in the theater. In American society intimate space is defined as 0-18 inches, personal space 1. To 4 feet, and social space 4 to 10 feet. (iron) These distances serve as a basis for the social norms used to select seating. In an attempt to explain the decisions related to seat selection in a movie theater, I propose the following as the implicit norms observed by American movie theater patrons; 1) do not obstruct anyone else's view of the screen, 2) do not sit directly in front of another person, 3) do not sit directly behind another person, and 4) do not sit in the seat adjacent to another person..

The second and third people entering strictly interpret the norms by choosing seats in entirely different sections; I. E. Ten TLS person chosen center row, center seat; Ten second person will choose the right front section, and the third person will choose the left section closer to the rear. These seats were chosen as a way of avoiding contact with those already seated and creating the greatest amount of social isolation possible. As the theater fills, the implicit rules are interpreted less strictly. Eventually the amount of social isolation is decreased to the point where the norms are actually broken.

High attendance on opening night at many popular movies will cause all of the implicit norms to be broken. The previously defined social norms must be adjusted slightly when couples or groups are attending a movie together. If the couple is two females or a male and female then the two are likely to sit side-by-side. Two males will often leave an empty seat between them. Groups will usually sit together in a general area sometimes using similarly located seats on multiple rows. Their seats may not be located side-by-side but are considered a single unit.

Available seats that comply with the implicit norms are still not directly in front of or directly behind any person in the couple or group. Also, at least one seat should be vacant to the left and right of the couple or outermost members of the group unless extremely high movie attendance prohibits.

What happens when the implicit rules are not properly interpreted while determining seat selection? More specifically, how would a person react if a stranger sat in the adjacent seat in a nearly empty movie theater?

As a jugular movie theater patron I evaluated my own reaction were I put in the proposed situation. If a stranger sat beside me in a theater where there were numerous other seats available, I believe I would get up and move to a different seat. I posed this question to several other people and each replied they would be uncomfortable and relocate to another seat. I decided to break this informal norm and observe whether the affected person reacted as anticipated. I needed a movie that had a low percentage of the theater seats filled.

To predict which movie would have low attendance I took into consideration the number of weeks the movie had been in theaters, the amount of current publicity about the movie and the stereotype of the average person attending the movie. Movies showing at discount cinemas have been in theaters the greatest number of weeks. So I picked the Pollack Tempe Cinema which shows second-run movies for \$2.00. To ensure the smallest number in attendance at the Pollack Tempe Cinema, I also had to pick a night other than Tuesday, when the ticket prices are reduced even further to \$1.50 and attendance soars. Next I deduced that movies having recently won an Oscar would have an increased amount of publicity thus leading to an increase in attendance. Lastly, I decided to eliminate children's movies from my choices because that implies an audience of parents and children and might discourage single individuals from attending. Ultimately, I chose a 7:00 pm showing of "Oceans 12" on a Thursday night. I entered the theater at almost exactly 7:00 pm. The lights were dimming and the previews beginning as I studied the available seating locations throughout the theater.

This theater had a seating capacity of 400 and on this particular night was about 25% full. There were numerous seats available that did not violate any of the implicit norms regulating seat selection. My observation partner, Alistair, took a seat in the center of the second row from the rear. The nearest occupied seats were located two rows forward to the left and one row behind in the right section separated by the aisle. Alligator's seat console neared to all the implicit norms. In the fifth row from the rear, three seats to the left of the aisle sat a lone male, Ralph.

Since he was alone and in clear view of my observation partner Ralph seemed to be a perfect choice. I walked down the aisle and decided that I would sit in the second seat from the aisle, which was the adjacent seat on Rally's right. This would mean that Ralph would have to cross in front of me to easily relocate to another seat, which was what I expected. When I arrived at the end of Rally's aisle I leaned down, gestured toward the empty seat to his right and asked if the seat was taken. This offered Ralph an opportunity to protect his personal space and create a reason why I should not sit in the available seat.

Instead, it seemed as if he stammered for a moment but ultimately replied no. This indicated to me that Ralph was aware that I was taking the seat and he was not stopping me. I sat down in the center of my seat, UT my soda in the cup holder to my right and began eating my popcorn. I sensed unease from Ralph but did not turn to face him or acknowledge him any further than my initial question about the availability of the seat. Since I was already nervous about sitting down next to a stranger in a dark movie theater, I was unsure if the perceived unease was real or imagined.

Alistair, later stated that from his rear viewpoint it appeared as if Ralph was extremely uncomfortable but he continued watching the preview on the screen. He did not turn toward me again after I sat down but rather shifted in his seat to the side furthest away. As the first preview ended and the second began, I wondered if Ralph would remain in his seat throughout the entire movie. I speculated that if the roles were reversed I would have probably relocated to a new seat already. As each moment passed I felt my own

apprehension dissipating. Then out of my peripheral vision I saw a woman walking slowly down the aisle to my right.

Silently I begged her to keep walking past me but somehow I already knew where she was going. Fully aware of her presence as she stopped at the end of the row shared only by Ralph and myself, I realized that Ralph was not alone as I had previously deduced. Instead Ralph and Alice were attending the movie as a couple. Not only had I purposely broken the social rules affecting seat selection but I had inadvertently broken a much stronger social norm that extends beyond the movie theater. Do not sit adjacent to the opposite sex member of a couple, when another less invasive seat is available.

In response to Alice's arrival at her seat, which I was currently occupying, I rose with my popcorn and soda in hand and moved to the aisle. Alistair reported that from his vantage point, it appeared as though I realized I had taken someone else's seat and was moving to another location in the theater. Instead of relocating I decided to sit down in the open seat between Alice and the aisle. I continued eating my popcorn and watching the movie previews as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Alice did not speak to me or look in my direction after she sat down.

She began talking to Ralph loudly in Spanish, which I could not understand. She was gesturing emphatically and acting very agitated. Ralph responded in Spanish but his tone was much quieter. Alistair later said that he could hear Alice from three rows back and that she was directing her irritation toward Ralph. Alistair described Ralph as quietly facing the screen while

being berated by Alice. After a few minutes of outwardly ignoring the disturbance beside me I decided to take a quick peek at the situation to my left. Alice was gesturing toward me. Walt near left. Nana Ana speaking spans quickly with an angry tone.

I decided that if I remained in my seat much longer that Alice might decide to direct her anger toward me. I quickly rose and moved to the seat beside my observation partner. Immediately upon my departure Alice became silent. For nearly thirty minutes there was silence between Ralph and Alice. They leaned away from each other in their seats and did not share any physical contact. Then Alice left the theater and returned with popcorn. They quietly shared the popcorn while slowly shifting in their seats. First toward the center of their seats but by approximately 8:20 they were intimately pressed shoulder to shoulder.

After the movie ended, I quickly left the theater. I had initially planned to break only one social norm by sitting beside a stranger. In the process, I had actually broken an even stronger norm by taking the seat adjacent to that of someone's spouse or significant other. I was concerned that Alice might feel a need to confront me about what she possibly perceived as an attempt to intrude on her relationship with Ralph. This experiment clearly showed how breaking one social norm can easily result in the violation of additional unexpected norms.

Movie theaters offer an unusual environment for seating. Movies are shown in the dark which creates an intimate setting. At a movie theater the price of the ticket is not related to the location of the seat, unlike concerts or live

<https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-social-norms-on-seat-assignment/>

performance theaters. Also, movie theater patrons chose their own seats, unlike restaurants where the establishment often provides a hostess or direct seating locations. American society has developed a set of informal norms to regulate which seats people choose in a theater in the absence of official guidance.