

Running head: INTERPERSONAL SPACE AND GENDER

Interpersonal space and gender

Dani Geraci

C.W. Post Campus, Long Island University

Abstract

What factors are associated with the penetration of personal space? Who is more likely to have their space invaded? It may be that factors such as gender, race and status play a role in determining whether personal space will be penetrated. Personal space may be constructed as a dyad. It may be true that males are least effective at defending their interpersonal space because of social issues related to male interaction and associations made concerning male conversations. The current study investigated if gender is associated with the penetration of personal space. It was found that gender was not associated with the violation of interpersonal space. More specifically, males were not more likely to have their interpersonal space penetrated than females. It was found, however, that people were significantly more likely to penetrate personal space than to go around two people in conversation.

Interpersonal space and gender

Personal space has been a subject examined in social psychology for some time. There are many concepts associated with personal space such as violation of space, maintenance of personal space, and more. One idea that is important to these concepts is who is most likely to have their personal space penetrated? For example, do women tend to have their space violated more? Does race play a role? These are factors that deserve some examination.

The current study is based on previous studies by Knowles (1973) and Brown (1983). The goal of this study is to examine the role of one factor specifically in the penetration of personal space: gender. In light of this goal, the remainder of this introduction will be divided into four sections. The first section will discuss dyadic personal space. The next section will examine factors such as gender and race and interpersonal space. The third section will discuss men and personal space. Finally, the fourth section will provide an overview of the current study.

Interpersonal space as a dyad

Previous research has found that people tend to try and avoid invading the personal space of others, especially when the number of others increases. For example, Knowles (1973) found through observation that people are more likely to walk through two inanimate objects than two people, and more likely to walk through two people interacting than four people interacting. This supports the idea that the social interaction of two people (or more) may itself be considered the personal space of those two people (or more). Therefore, people may be more likely to avoid penetrating the personal space of two people in conversation if they were presented with such a scenario.

Gender and Race

Since previous research has shown that there are factors that influence the penetration of personal space, such as the number of people involved in the situation, this allows room for the examination of what other factors are involved. In a 1981 study, Brown examined if the racial composition of an interacting dyad was associated with the likelihood of people to invade the personal space of the pair. Through observation he discovered that race did make a difference. He found that shoppers were more likely to invade the space of a black dyad than a white dyad. In a mixed dyad, shoppers were more likely to go behind the white member of the dyad if they chose not to penetrate the space. This shows that characteristics of the members of the dyad do influence the likelihood of whether or not people choose to penetrate that space. It may therefore be reasonable to assume that other characteristics, such as gender, will also be associated with this tendency.

Previous studies that have investigated personal space have looked at gender as a factor as well. In their study, Cheyne and Efran (1972) hypothesized that gender composition would play a role in the tendency to invade personal space. They felt that mixed sex dyads would be least likely to have their personal space penetrated, followed by male dyads and then female dyads. They based their hypothesis on the concept that male animal species tend to be more territorial than female animal species and therefore human males would be more likely to better defend their space. However, they found the opposite. Male dyads tended to have their personal space invaded more often than female. These findings support the idea that people may be more likely to penetrate male dyads when presented with such a scenario.

Men and Personal Space

As mentioned, previous research has discovered that male dyads tend to be the least effective at defending their personal space (Cheyne & Efran, 1972). This finding begs the question of why this may be true for males. One reason may be the social stigma associated with two males interacting on a very personal level. Previous research has shown that males are less comfortable with same-sex touching than females (Crawford, 1994). This serves as an indication of the stigma associated with two males interacting personally. If there is less comfort between the members of the dyad then it may be more penetrable. Therefore, the tendency for males to be less comfortable with same-sex touch may imply to others that the personal space of a male dyad is more penetrable than a female-dyad. This is another reason as to why people may be more likely to penetrate the personal space of a male dyad.

In addition, it may be possible that people are likely to penetrate the personal space of a male dyad because there is the assumption that males are having a less important conversation. In a study by Martin (1997), researchers examined content of conversations between same-sex friends and cross-sex friends. Male conversations tended to be associated with “sports, women, fighting, bars and drinking.” If people tend to have a set idea in their heads as to the conversations of men and that they are less important then perhaps they would not feel as bad interrupting the conversation and penetrating the members of the dyad’s space. This is another reason that people may be more likely to invade the space of males more than females.

Overview of Present Study

The goal of the present study is to examine if gender plays a role in invasion of personal space. It is hypothesized that males will be more likely to have their personal space penetrated than females. A scenario design survey will be used, rather than

observation, in order to control for factors uncontrollable in observation studies such as personal appearance and race.

Method

Participants

There were 51 college students at C.W. Post, Long Island University who participated in this study. There were 29 males (57%) and 22 females (43%). The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 34 and the mean age was 20.18, $SD=2.75$. Participants were approached in residence halls and the student union and asked to volunteer to participate in the study.

Measures

Gender of dyad described. The first question of the survey described a scenario in which two figures are standing and having a conversation in a narrow hallway. Half of the surveys described these two figures as both male, and half of these surveys described these two figures as female. This represents the independent variable of the study, as participants were randomly assigned to complete the survey describing either a male dyad or a female dyad. The scenarios were described as:

Suppose you are walking down a narrow corridor in a shopping mall and approach two men [women] in conversation. They are standing a few feet apart with their backs to the walls. You have two options: either somewhat awkwardly pass between them or somewhat awkwardly pass behind one and the wall. Which do you do?

Participants who completed a survey describing a male dyad were coded as 1 and participants who completed a survey describing a female dyad were coded as 2.

Violation of Personal Space. In order to measure the dependent variable, which was likelihood to violate personal space; participants were asked to choose between two

options described in the scenario. The two options were to either, A. Pass between the two men [women], or B. Pass between a man [woman] and the wall. Participants who selected option A were considered to have violated personal space. They were coded as 1. Participants who selected option B were considered to not have violated personal space. They were coded as 2.

Participants were also asked to provide some demographic information. They were asked their ages and their genders. A sample of the questionnaire is provided in the appendix.

Results

It was hypothesized that participants will be more likely to penetrate the personal space of two men than the personal space of two women. In order to test this hypothesis, a chi-square test was used to analyze the variables of which type of dyad the participant was asked about in the scenario (either male or female) and whether the participant chose to violate the personal space of the dyad or if the participant chose to walk around the two people described in the scenario. Results showed that participants were not significantly more likely to penetrate the male-gender dyad, $\chi^2(1, N=51)=.488, p=.49..$ The hypothesis was therefore not supported, as these results show that the gender of the dyad described in the scenario made no difference in the participants' choices to either pass between and penetrate personal space or to go around. However, results did show that people were significantly more likely to pass between the members of the dyad than go around, $\chi^2(1, N=51)=7.07, p=.01$. Therefore, although the hypothesis was not supported, these results do support the idea that people may be more likely to penetrate interpersonal space regardless of the gender of the dyad.

Discussion

Summary of Results

In order to measure the tendency for people to penetrate the personal space of a dyad, a questionnaire was used. It was hypothesized that people would be more likely to penetrate the personal space of two men by walking through their dyad. Results of this study indicate that the gender of the dyad does not make a difference in the likelihood of people to penetrate the members' personal space. This does not support the hypothesis. However, results of this study do show significance in other ways. Although no hypothesis was made regarding the likelihood of people to penetrate the dyad in general,

previous research has shown that people tend to walk around the dyad and avoid penetrating personal space more often than choosing to walk through the dyad. However, results for the current study showed that people were significantly more likely to walk through the dyad.

Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of this study was that factors that are usually uncontrollable in observational studies were able to be controlled. For example, if observation had been used other factors such as the race of the members of the dyad, in addition to their gender, may have influenced decisions to penetrate personal space. Also, what the members of the dyad were wearing could have been influential as well. However, since a scenario design was used, the members of the dyad were described only as male or female. This is the only information that the participants received and therefore this is the only information that the participants could use to judge the members of the dyad. This allowed for a more accurate measure of the association between invasion of personal space and gender specifically.

There were some limitations to this study as well. For example, the fact that it was a scenario based study may have been a limitation in some aspects also. As mentioned, previous research has shown people tend to be inaccurate in reporting their own behaviors (Woodside & Wilson, 2002). The results of this study in comparison with results of other studies that have studied the same topic through observation seem to indicate that this is true, because those studies have shown very different results. Another limitation of this study may have been some of the wording used in the scenario questionnaire. The term “somewhat awkwardly” was added to both options. The subjects were offered two choices. They could either “somewhat awkwardly pass

between the two men/women” or “somewhat awkwardly pass between one man/woman and the wall”. This was done in order to make both choices seem equally awkward. However, the inherent nature of passing between two people in conversation is suggested to be awkward in itself. Therefore, by reiterating this idea, it may have seemed that the idea of penetrating personal space was based solely on physical contact by adding the term “somewhat awkwardly” to the option of passing between the two men or women. Perhaps if subjects thought that they were going to possibly physically touch the men or women either way, they thought that they may as well walk between them so as not to burden themselves. Basically, the wording of the scenario may have played a part in distracting the participants from the idea that two interacting persons create a sense of personal space and may have turned it into more of a physical interaction. This may have affected the findings of the study.

Directions for Future Research and Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that gender does not play a role in the tendency to penetrate personal space. However, it may be true that other characteristics do play a role. For example, some previous research has stated the status plays a role (Bouska & Beatty, 1978). This research investigated status using clothing. People were less likely to invade the personal space of people considered to be high status. What if status is associated with age? For example, are people more likely to penetrate the personal space of a dyad made up of children or adults? It may be argued that adults have greater status than children and therefore a dyad made up of adults may be less likely to be penetrated. This also brings up other questions. If one were to argue that as people get older it is less likely that their space will be penetrated, it may also be argued that elderly tend to be less valued in society and therefore maybe their space would be more likely to be penetrated.

Perhaps this is not a question of age and status but of value and status. These are all concepts worthy of investigation.

The current study found that people were not more likely to penetrate the personal space of men. However, people were more likely to penetrate personal space rather than avoid invasion of space, regardless of the gender of the members of the dyad. This implies that when presented with a scenario, people are less likely to take the personal space of others into account. However, it may be true that when presented with the same situation in real life, their reactions may be different. The current study implies that gender does not play a role in predicting who is more likely to have their personal space penetrated. More research should be conducted in this area in order to determine if this finding is reliable.

References

- Brown, C.E. (1981). Shared space invasion and race. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 7, 103-108.
- Bouska, M.L. & Beatty, P.A. (1978). Clothing as a symbol of status: Its effect on control of interaction territory. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, 11, 235-238.
- Cheyne, J.A. & Efran M.G. (1972). The effect of spatial and interpersonal variables on the invasion of group controlled territories. *Sociometry*, 35, 477-489.
- Crawford, C.B. (1994). Effects of sex and sex roles on same sex touch. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 78, 391-394.

- Knowles, E. (1973). Boundaries around group interaction: The effect of group size and member status on boundary permeability. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 26*, 327-331.
- Martin, R. (1997). "Girls don't talk about garages!": Perceptions of conversation in same- and cross-sex friendships. *Personal Relationships, 4*, 115-130.
- Woodside, A.G. & Wilson, E.J. (2002). Respondent inaccuracy. *Journal of Advertising Research, 42*, 7-20.