

Experiment: : Personal Space Invasion

This exercise acquaints students with the form and dimensions of the personal space bubble. Working in pairs, students invade each other's space. Experimental conditions include front versus side invasions and eyes open versus eyes closed. Class discussion emphasizes spatial behavior as a form of non-verbal communication.

Concept

Personal space is the emotionally charged zone around the human body. Often compared to a bubble, snail shell, or body buffer zone, it does not resemble a perfect circle, but is more like an hour glass with smaller dimensions at the sides than in front. Personal space plays an important role in maintaining privacy. Cultural, social, and situational differences in the size of the personal space zone can be demonstrated through simulated invasions.

Materials Needed

This exercise requires a classroom with open space at the sides or front or a combination of spaces that allows students to work in pairs. A hallway, corridor, or lounge can be used, or outside space if the weather is suitable. A written instruction sheet is needed for half the students. Use the scale at the edge of this sheet to measure distances, and a pencil or pen.

Instructions

The instructor divides the class into pairs according to a random system (for example, passing out numbers containing pairs to the class) or employs a representative sampling plan intended to yield a certain percentage of female-female, male-male, and female-male pairs. The instructor facilitates the pairings, making sure that no students are left out, and becomes a subject if there is an odd number of students in the class. After pairing, students move to locations where the invasions can be staged. The instruction sheet that follows is self-explanatory and no further directions are required.

Put all belongings, notebooks, etc. to the side. Have nothing in your hands.

1. Approach the person directly from the front until you feel that you are getting too close for comfort. Using the centimeter scale on this page, measure the distance nose to nose between you and the other person and record it here. ____ centimeters
2. Repeat the invasion but approach the other person from the side. Your partner keeps looking ahead as you approach from the side. Stop when you feel you are getting too close for comfort. Measure and record the distance between your chest and her/his shoulder. ____ centimeters
3. Switch roles and now you remain stationary while your partner invades your space from the front. The partner should stop just before the distance becomes too close for comfort. ____ centimeters
4. Now your partner invades your space from the side. Measure the distance. ____ centimeters
5. The stationary person closes his or her eyes while the invader approaches from the front. The invader must make the decision about where to stop for comfort's sake. Measure the distance nose to nose. ____ centimeters
6. Switch roles and repeat the procedure in Number 5. Record the nose to nose distance. ____ centimeters

