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CORNERS

In Certain Circles, Two Is a Crowd

By **STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM**

CHANCES are that in the last week someone has irritated you by standing too close, talking too loud or making eye contact for too long. They have offended you with the high-pitched shrill emanating from the earphones of their iPod or by spreading their legs unnecessarily wide on a packed subway car.

But what makes you feel hostile toward “close talkers,” as the show “Seinfeld” dubbed people who get within necking distance of you when they speak? Or toward strangers who stand very near to you on line? Or toward people who take the bathroom stall next to yours when every other one is available?

Communications scholars began studying personal space and people’s perception of it decades ago, in a field known as proxemics. But with the population in the United States climbing above 300 million, urban corridors becoming denser and people with wealth searching for new ways to separate themselves from the masses, interest in the issue of personal space — that invisible force field around your body — is intensifying.

Scientists who say Americans share patterns of movement and behaviors to protect their personal space have recently found new evidence in a cyber game.

Researchers who observed the avatars (digital representations of the humans that control them) of participants in Second Life, a virtual reality universe, found that some of the avatars’ physical behavior was in keeping with studies about how humans protect their personal space.

In other words, the digital beings adhered to some unspoken behavioral rules of humans even though they were but pixels on a screen.

Humans tend to avert eye gaze if they feel someone is standing too close. They retreat to corners, put distance between themselves and strangers, and sit or stand equidistant from one another like birds on a wire.

The study, which was accepted for publication in the journal *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, found that virtual environments may be another platform to study physical social interaction. It specifically found that the unwritten rules of personal space are so powerful, people even impose them on their cyber selves.

“The fact that they show up in the virtual world shows how deeply ingrained they are,” said Nick Yee, a graduate student in the department of communication at [Stanford University](#) and a lead author of the study along with Jeremy N. Bailenson, his adviser. “We don’t think about them. They’re very unconscious.”

According to scientists, personal space involves not only the invisible bubble around the body, but all the senses. People may feel their space is being violated when they experience an unwelcome sound, scent or stare: the woman on the bus squawking into her cellphone, the co-worker in the adjacent cubicle dabbing on cologne, or the man in the sandwich shop leering at you over his panini.

But whether people have become more protective of their personal space is difficult to say. Studies show people tend to adapt,

even in cities, which are likely to grow ever more crowded based on population projections.

Yet studies involving airlines show the desire to have some space to oneself is among the top passenger requests. In a survey in April from TripAdvisor, a travel Web site, travelers said that if they had to pay for certain amenities, they would rather have larger seats and more legroom than massages and premium food. And a current advertisement for Eos Airlines, which flies between New York and London, is promoting the fact that it offers passengers “21 square feet of personal space.”

While people may crave space, they rarely realize how entrenched proxemics are. Scholars can predict which areas of an elevator are likely to fill up first and which urinal a man will choose. They know people will stare at the lighted floor numbers in elevators, not one another.

“In order to overcome the intimacy, you have to make sure you don’t make eye contact,” said Dane Archer, a professor of sociology at the [University of California, Santa Cruz](#), who studies proxemics.

They know commuters will hold newspapers in front of them to read, yes, but also to shield themselves from strangers. And they know college students will unconsciously choose to sit in the same row, if not the same seat, each class.

“If you videotape people at a library table, it’s very clear what seat somebody will take,” Dr. Archer said, adding that one of the corner seats will go first, followed by the chair diagonally opposite because that is farthest away. “If you break those rules, it’s fascinating,” he said. “People will pile up books as if to make a wall — glare.”

Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist and the father of proxemics, even put numbers to the unspoken rules. He defined the invisible zones around us and attributed a range of distance to each one: intimate distance (6 to 18 inches); personal distance (18 inches to 4 feet); social distance (4 to 12 feet); and public distance (about 12 feet or more).

But personal space is not merely a numbers game. Preferences differ from culture to culture. Scholars have found that Americans, conquerors of the wild frontier, generally prefer more personal space than people in Mediterranean and Latin American cultures, and more than men in Arab countries.

“In the U.S., it’s very closely linked to ideals of individuals,” said Kathryn Sorrells, an associate professor of communication studies at [California State University, Northridge](#), who is writing a book, “Globalizing Intercultural Communications.” “There’s an idea that you have the right to this space,” she said, noting that it was born of a culture that prizes independence, privacy and capitalism.

Dr. Archer tells of a Brazilian man he interviewed who, when speaking to the American waiters with whom he worked, used to casually touch them for emphasis. The man’s overtures of friendship toward his co-workers were always rejected and he wanted to know why. So when business was slow he observed how the Americans interacted. And eventually he arrived at this conclusion: Americans hate to be touched.

“He’s absolutely right,” Dr. Archer said. “He figured it out by himself and no one ever told him. The sad thing about these nonverbal rules across cultures is you’re on your own.”

The Brazilian man’s experience also shows how people are quick to judge those who break the unwritten rules, unless we are attuned to the cultural differences.

John Bringardner, 26, a staff reporter at IP Law & Business, said that when he was studying philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris, he lived next door to an Algerian man who had a habit of standing mere inches from his face. “His spittle would get in my face,” said Mr. Bringardner. But he did not back away. “If it were an American guy that close,” he said, “it would have been a different situation.”

Yet it is rare for people to have confrontations about personal space. “No one will ever turn to the nice person from Italy or Greece and say ‘I like you but you’re standing too close to me.’” said Dr. Archer, who has videotaped strangers’ responses to personal-space violations.

Rather, they will likely angle and inch their bodies away from anyone they feel breached their buffer zone. Blood pressure may rise, the heart rate may go up and the palms may sweat, said David B. Givens, the director of the Center for Nonverbal Studies in Spokane, Wash. “All animals tend to have an aversion to being touched by a strange critter,” he said.

Proxemics, however, is not merely about interactions between individuals. On a larger scale, it helps developers, urban planners and executives in various industries understand how people move through public spaces, how they shop, even what type of restaurants they find most comfortable.

Paco Underhill, the author of “Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping” and the chief executive of Envirosell, a research and consulting company whose client list includes Bloomingdale’s, Saks Fifth Avenue, Starbucks and McDonald’s, discovered that most consumers will walk away from whatever they are looking at in a store if a customer inadvertently brushes against their backside, disturbing his or her personal space.

And so, what may seem like a minor behavioral tic can help department stores determine how far apart to place racks of clothes, bistro owners figure out how to configure the bar area and college campuses to design residence halls.

Yet there are paradoxes to personal space, and one is that people do not always want it.

“If you’ve gone to see a funny movie in an empty theater, you can appreciate the facilitative effects of the presence of others,” said Robert M. Krauss, a professor of psychology at Columbia. “We went to see ‘Borat’ and every seat in the theater was full, and I have no doubt that it enhanced our enjoyment of it.”

Being crowded in a dance club or running the [New York City Marathon](#) is far different from being packed into a train car during rush hour or stuck on a freeway (yes, proxemics has been linked to road rage).

“In these spaces, when you’re not commuting, you feel fine,” Dr. Givens said. But in both positive moments of closeness and those that make the blood boil, one tenet of proxemics is the same: the near presence of people is arousing. “It will enhance the amount that you enjoy things that are enjoyable,” Dr. Krauss said. “It will make more aversive the things that are not enjoyable.”

And when people want to avoid someone who is less than enjoyable, they employ a variety of tactics. Some scholars say this goes a long way toward explaining the iPod craze, which turns city streets and commuter trains into islands of individuality.

The same principle makes it easier to get close to strangers in low-lit places. “Visually, you’re not getting as much information,” Dr. Givens said, adding that if the lights were suddenly flipped on in a dim bar, “everybody would spring back.”

In general most people understand the rules of personal space and heed the cues. Then again, the world is littered with clods. As Dr. Archer put it, people generally view personal-space rules in one of two ways: “the wrong way and my way.”