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What Personal Space at Parkland Says About American Social Norms

How Personal Space is Maintained

Americans pride themselves on being welcoming. Their homeland a place of freedom, where anyone and everyone can come and have a place they can fit in. Under these circumstances, one would expect Americans to be that aunt that everyone child runs to with open arms when they arrive at the family gatherings. Although, America gives off the impressions of being welcoming to everyone and anyone, there is still a level of space that has not been breached among us; namely what we call personal space.

Personal space is a concept that has been ingrained into our brains since first attending school. An American child is probably taught the concept of personal space under the guise of “personal bubble”. This imaginary space is created with your hands clasped together and circling the hands around your body to symbolize a “no touch” zone. Along with a person having their own personal bubble other people have theirs as well, and a person is expected to respect their space. As a child, if you were to invade this bubble, you were scolded by the teacher or other authority figure and given a forceful reminder of the personal bubble being a no touch zone. The explicit expression of a “personal bubble” will end after the child is able to understand the concept of everyone having a personal area not to be invaded, but the idea will linger long after the fact and there will

be different forms of reminders at different ages.

Personal bubble is no longer explicitly stated after elementary school, but the idea soon comes back in the form of “get out of my face”. When people are talking or arguing, there seems to be this rule of a level of space that needs to be achieved at all times for there to be a mutual level of respect among them. If one were to invade this area it would be seen as a disrespectful gesture and under the circumstances could lead to a volatile situation. Even though after people reach a certain age of maturity no explicitly stated phrases are used to express the importance of personal space. At the college level, it is rare to see people actively telling someone that they are invading their personal space or screaming about personal bubbles. Explicit statements of personal spaces are soon dropped, although socially acceptable distances maintained. In order for the idea of personal space to be so ingrained into American society there has to be a constant reinforcement of this idea, and there have to be a set of social cues that actively or inactively maintain the system of personal space. The main purpose of this paper is to explore how and what social cues are given at Parkland that maintain the norm of personal space that is valued in America.

How Personal Space Was Examined At Parkland

Personal space is a topic that can be examined through a variety of ways. The topic is pretty broad in terms and it can be taken in an array of directions. Since personal space is fairly broad, I decided to make sure my research was coherent and conscientious. I gathered my research in four different sessions using a method of participant observation in which I recorded how Parkland students interacted in public space to maintain a personal space while waiting for classes. I recorded observations in four sessions on

November 17, November 24, December 1st, and December 3rd. All of these sessions were done in the lounging area near classrooms D144 and D1445, several vending machines, and a few water fountains down a long hallway toward an outside entrance. I named the couches and seats in this area, for an easier way of keeping track of my data. The first couch closest to the entrances from the north entrance by the water fountains is named couch 1. The couch on the left I have conveniently named couch 2, this couch is closest to the classrooms D144 and D145. The couch that is directly across from couch 1, is named couch 3, it is closest to the vending machines. All of the couches can hold up to about 3 people comfortably. There are 2 single chairs next to couch 3, these are closest to the south entrances, a set of doors that lead to a parking lot. Also, to make the data more concise I conducted my observations around 10:30 in the morning. The significance of observing around this time, is that the area is fairly busy as at least 3 classes are starting or about to start within 30 minutes of that time.

I gathered my data through participant observation. I studied and wrote down things that seem both unusual and normal during these sessions. Following situations or actions I viewed as unusual, I followed up those actions with informal talking with people who exhibited this behavior.

Session November 17

When I entered the waiting area by Wing D next to the vending machines I observed how many people are sitting in the seats available. There is one person sitting on couch 1. On Couch 2, there are two people sitting on the couch, with the middle spot left open. On Couch 3, there are 2 people initially sitting there. Also, the single seats are left open

at this time. Another person walks into the area, sits on the second couch which previously only had 1 other person on it. They observe that they know the person sitting on that couch, and make the decision to sit on the couch with them. Although they make sure to leave the middle spot open to make sure there is a level of space between them. I have counted at this point that there are 6 people actively sitting in the waiting area. The seventh person walks into the area around 10:49, they take the middle seat on couch 2. At this point, I look around and realized there are no longer any couches open that can provide an empty space between its occupants. Also, I notice that the seventh person knew the people on the couch, so there was none of the awkwardness that generally follows when sitting in the open seat. Shortly after that, around 10:55, two people enter the area and take the single chairs that had previously not been in use.

Observable Points from Session on November 17

The biggest thing I noticed among the students who entered into the waiting area was that people were not as inclined to take the single chairs like I expected them to. Initially I believe that people would take the easiest route or seating arrangement they could to avoid having to sit next to someone. Although, the session does not point to that. In fact, people seemed to want to be close to people to a certain degree, hence they sat on the couches with opportunity for more than one person to be on the couch. Although, they did not want to be too far away from people that they felt disconnected, which is why the single seats took so long to be filled up. The theory behind this led me to believe that personal space is not a sign of being out of touch or not wanting to be touched by a person; maybe it is something we have been socialized to believe is the right way to show respect. This idea is similar to an ethnography article in our *Applying Cultural*

Anthropology: An Introductory Reader textbook titled *How Many Fathers Are Best for a Child* written by Meredith F. Small. The article tells of how some cultures, specifically the Barí tribe of Venezuela, believe that a child can have more than one biological father, while in other cultures a child can only have one woman and man as their biological parents (Small 33). The significance of this article is it allows the reader to be reflexive of someone else's culture. Different cultures can have different interpretations of how things should be done. The Barí people believe in more than one biological father, and that may conflict with other people's views similar to how people may disagree with Americans believing they can maintain a sense of personal connection while maintain a physical level of distance. In American culture, personal space does not have to be used solely as a way to keep people out of touch with one another. When examining this concept, I figured out that personal space is a means of respecting someone else, as well as maintaining a connection with them. A person can be carrying on a personal conversation while obeying the space rule, and still be able to empathize with one another. Similar to the Barí tribe's perception of conception and American's rule of personal space, different ideologies in different cultures are not wrong. They just exhibit a different way of ordering society around culture norms among different groups.

Session on November 24

The session on November 24 went similarly to the previous session. When I entered the area around 10:36 I noticed that two people were on couch 1. Also, around 10:40 I noticed that couch 1 had two people on the couch with an empty space between them, and couch 3 had all the seats filled while couch 2 only had one person on it. One thing I noticed was that all of the people who occupied couches 1 and 3 knew someone they

were on the couch with. Couch 3 had two out of three occupants engaging in conversation. The single person who was lying on the couch began to stretch out and take a nap. This was different from previous behavior. Also, I began to notice a new trend among the students. Some students would enter the area and then choose to go sit directly in front of their classes, even though there were plenty of empty spaces, including completely empty couches.

Observable Points from session on November 24

At one point during the November 24 session, I was fairly confused. While one student chose to sit on the couch and eventually lie down on the couch, no one once decided to ask to sit on the couch. To me, choosing to lie on a couch that could harbor a few more people could be seen as rude. Although, more people seemed to view waking the person up to ask for room, as more rude than the former. The idea of what is and is not considered rude reminds me of an article that we read this semester called *To give up on Words: Silence in Western Apache Culture* written by Keith H. Basso. The article explores how in popular culture American natives have been portrayed as having an aura of coldness and “lack of sympathy” (Basso 36). The article took an in-depth look at times in Apache culture where their silence is valued. One of these valued situations was when a child returned home from a long absence. When the child returns, the parent and child will sit in silence for up to 15 minutes. The parent will then wait for the child to break the silence before they begin to talk (Basso 40). In mainstream American society we would view this behavior as a bit strange, although the reason that the parents refrain from talking is a sign of respect. They understand that when their children go off for long periods of time to other societies, they may return home with different views and beliefs.

The parents use that silence as chance for the child to first engage with their parents to create the environment of not feeling like the parent is trying to force the children to act a certain way. This is used as a sign of respect, letting their children choose their own beliefs, rather than forcing them to interact the way the parent wishes. This unorthodox sign of respect among parents and children reminds me of how the students at Parkland would rather not sit or have to sit more people on couches, than to ask someone to sit up who was lying on a couch. Both these situations are exhibiting signs of respect that under normal circumstance would not be commonly seen as respectful gestures. They are able to respect the person lying on the couch by sitting more people on couches together even though they are breaking the normal rules of personal space; the imaginary bubble.

Session on December 1

On this particular session I decided to explore a recurring phenomenon in my observations. This particular phenomenon was people who actively chose not sit in the waiting area regardless of if there are enough seats to sit comfortably. Around 10:40, I noticed a person enter the area, and proceed to sit in front of their classroom. I chose to ask this person, “Why they didn’t sit in the area, even though there was ample space?” They replied, “Sitting on the floor next to their classroom was more accessible”. That is very different from what I thought the reasoning would be. I assumed that people sit in front of their classrooms due to wanting to avoid having to interact with people or sit near someone. They simply just wanted to be closer to the classrooms. Also, when people sat in front of their classes, there seemed to be a number of people sitting there together who were still having to share space among other students.

Observable Points from Session on December 1

Even if someone chose to sit in front of a classroom, this did not hinder them from interacting with other students. On the contrary, they had to learn to interact and share their space more. Unlike the couches, there are no easily identifiable spaces that show how many students can sit there comfortably. A person who is sitting on the floor has to use their own personal identifiable marker of how much space is enough. In actuality, choosing to sit on the floor does not limit the amount of interaction one can have with other students. Although students still maintain a level of space with one another whether in the waiting room or sitting by the classrooms. This demonstrates that personal space is ingrained into American culture, even if were engaging in an activity that at first glance would seem like an action to create distances from other people or something that most people would not understand. This idea of cultural miscommunication is discussed in the article, *Eating Christmas in the Kalahari* by Richard Borshay Lee. The article examines an anthropologist among the !Kung Bushmen, who decides to give the Bushmen an ox for a Christmas gift. What follows is the increasing frustration of the anthropologist when his gift is criticized among the group. He feels as though they are ungrateful and are purposely singling him out. Later, he learns this is the way the group instils humility among their people (Lee 14). The article reminds me of how in American society personal space is just a social norm for public behavior that states that in every social situation there has to be a level of space, even in instances where you would not expect to see personal space.

Session on December 3

On the last session I decided to engage in a behavior I had not seen through any of my

sessions. That particular day, I decided I would sit in the middle seat on one of the couches, regardless of if I could sit on the couch and leave an open seat. When I entered at 10:36, I went to sit on the middle seat of couch 3, when there was already someone sitting on the couch. Immediately when I sat down I felt an extreme awkwardness. I wanted to get up and move. The person sitting on the couch knew me, and they looked at me and asked, "Did I need something". I explained to them, how I was working on my ethnography project, and I wanted to try sitting in the middle seat before it was over. We engaged in a conversation for about 20 minutes about personal space.

Observable Points from Session on December 3

The biggest point that I took away from our conversation is just how ingrained behavioral norms are in our society. The person told me that even when we are at home with the people we love we still maintain a level of space. They recalled how when they are at home watching TV on their couch everyone has a bit of space between one another. One of their roommates sits on the couch, and the other two sit on single chairs. Which is similar to the experience that occurs at my house, when we are in the living room, the middle spot in our house is never used.

Conclusion

Personal space does play a significant role in American society. In fact, it plays a bigger role that I anticipated for it to have. Personal space is ingrained into our society even if we are unconsciously aware of it. It is a skill that is first taught to us at our most impressionable age, when the personal bubble is introduced. Then it is actively

maintained in personal interactions by trying to give people a level of respect by refusing to enter into their personal zone. If we do try to venture out of this norm, we feel a sense of dread as if we were doing something wrong, something of which I became aware of when I sat in the middle seat on my last session. The notion of personal space is even maintained through our personal lives when even in our homes we keep a level of physical space between us and our loved ones. Although we are actively spacing ourselves out, we are not distancing ourselves from one another. Even when students choose to sit in front of their classes they still interact with other students. The findings from this ethnographic study show that personal space is not mutually exclusive with being rude or uncaring. On the contrary, it is how Americans show their respect to one another.

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