

SPATIAL ARRANGEMENTS IN SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS: AN ATTEMPT AT A TAXONOMY

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People can often be seen to adopt and sustain various spatial-orientational arrangements with their immediate co-present neighbors. These arrangements are the means through which individuals establish a control over each other's actions and through which they define their mutual roles relative to one another and to their joint task for accomplishment of which they have assembled in a given place. In this paper we shall look at the ways in which a variety of possible spatial arrangements may be reduced to a manageable set of classes and categories. To this end we shall try to develop a notational system which may serve as a means for identification and description of various types of arrangements people adopt in the course of their face-to-face encounters.

Theoretically speaking, there are a very large number of possible spatial arrangements which can be established between people participating in an interactional event. Many factors influence the choice of an arrangement. There are operating, for example, such variables as the sex of people (Sommer 1959, Cook 1970, Baxter 1970, Pellegrini and Empey 1970, Jones 1971, Heshka and Nelson 1972, Thomas 1973, White 1975), their age (De Long 1970, Heshka and Nelson 1972, Jones and Aiello, 1973, Tennis and Kabbs 1975), cultural (Baxter 1970, Aiello and Jones 1971, Collet 1971, Hall 1974), and social background (Aiello and Jones 1971, Scherer 1974), appearance (Kleck et al. 1968, Kleck, 1969, Thomas 1973, Worthington 1974), personality traits (Sommer 1959, Leopold 1963, Williams 1971), degree of acquaintanceship (Willis 1966, Newton 1971, Heshka and Nelson 1972), interpersonal attitudes (Byrne et al. 1971, Sandler 1970, Aiello and Cooper 1972), social status discrepancies (Willis 1966, Lott and Sommer 1967, Dean et al. 1975, Jorgenson 1975), type of interaction (Sommer 1965, Norum et al. 1967, Sensenig et al. 1972) and so forth. Reviews of these studies can be found in Lett et al. 1969, Kendon 1973, Evans 1973 and Evans and Howard 1973. Furthermore, as Kendon (1976) has noted, the type of an arrangement selected will depend also on the number of participants in an encounter. This all means that a general taxonomy of placements and positioning can be an advantage if one is interested in the systematic study of spatial phenomena displayed in social gatherings.

One of the first attempts to specify the gamut

of spatial arrangements typical of face-to-face interactions was made by Sommer (1959) who identified some of the configurations used by people sitting and conversing at rectangular tables. He found that the probability that an interaction will occur was much greater for people sitting corner-to-corner than for those sitting in opposite, side-by-side, opposite-side or in distant-corner arrangements. Further additions to this list of seating arrangements were introduced by Sommer (1965) as a part of his studies on people's seating choices made while using round tables. This attempt to construct a category-list has proven to be very useful in work on all these situations where people's spatial relationships were pre-shaped by furniture which placed interacting neighbors in standardized angles of orientation. However, in order to cope with the analysis of less formalized configurations of free sitting or free standing people a somewhat more flexible set of descriptive categories had to be developed.

This task was accomplished by Hall in his paper on a system for the notation of proxemic behavior (1963). There, a nine category numerical taxonomy was suggested for coding spatial orientations characteristic of a dynamic, face-to-face exchanges. In Hall's scheme the code "zero" represented two individuals positioned vis-a-vis and values "one", "two" and "three" represented acute-angle, right-angle, open-angle arrangements accordingly. Number "four" designated a side-by-side configuration, while number "five" meant an open-angle arrangement in which people were oriented away from each other. Number "six" designated people standing at right angle to each other, one person facing away, and the other facing along the shoulders and the back of his partner. Number "seven" was used to describe people standing at an acute-angle to each other and facing opposite directions. Number "eight" referred to people standing wholly back-to-back.

In this way a great variety of arrangements were reduced to a manageable system and were given a reference symbol enabling quick identification. This notation system was meant to be used in conjunction with a notational scheme developed for description of interpersonal distances as well as with a scale representing postures, volume of voice and tactile, visual, olfactory and thermal interpersonal involvement. However, Hall's proxemic notation system came to be used in a way which was not anticipated by the inventor. It appears that though the suggested notation system was intended as a set of numerical labels for various two-person configurations, other researchers (Watson and Graves 1966, Watson 1970, Jones 1971, Aiello and Jones 1971, Jones and Aiello 1973, Aiello and Aiello, 1974, Shuter 1976) have used it as a set of values measuring spatial relationships. This has meant that arbitrarily assigned name-

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