

SPATIAL EXTENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE FIELD OF CO-PRESENCE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS*

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ABSTRACT

A review of studies on the ways people perceive and behaviourally structure physical environments surrounding them suggests that: (a) the total extent of space within which people are aware of each other's presence and activity is fairly limited and seldom exceeds the range of 100 yards (91 meters); (b) such a space is internally structured and, most probably, is made of five concentrically nested zones representing the five basic degrees of sensory overlap of two or more co-present people.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we shall review results of a number of studies concerned with the spatial characteristics of this portion of man's environment within which people become aware of the presence of another person.

Investigations of the various ways and degrees by and to which an individual may become physically, socially and psychologically present to other persons are of major importance to a number of disciplines. It is so since all the key concepts which are adapted by both the behavioural and social sciences, such as "face-to-face interaction," "communication," "interpersonal perception," "social contagion," "involvement," "behaviour setting," "situation," "unobtrusiveness" and so forth, ultimately refer to a fundamental, yet a so far not very well delineated, concept of the *co-presence*. It is, in a way, a paradoxical situation. Despite their particular significance to the further development of human ethology, studies in crowding, methodology of naturalistic and unobtrusive psychological fieldwork, environmental design, as well as to the development of coenetics or the study of behavioural organization of face-to-face interaction, the ecological/behavioural/social/psychological aspects of the phenomenon of the state of co-presence tend to remain practically unexplored. While during the recent years a considerable amount of attention was

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directed to the study of interpersonal distance (Lett, et al., 1969), personal space (Sommer, 1969; Evans and Howard, 1973; Hayduk, 1978), territoriality and jurisdiction (Edney, 1974; Vine, 1975), spatial configuration of social encounters (Kendon, 1973, 1977; Deutsch, 1978; Ciolek, 1978A), or spatial factors in social interaction (Argyle, 1975; Patterson, 1978), surprisingly little is known about the ways people perceive, structure and react to the space which stretches beyond the range of their conversation distance or their personal space bubble. In what is going to follow, we are going to deal with some of the aspects of this much neglected issue.

2. PHYSICAL CONTEXT OF SOCIAL ENCOUNTERS

People in the course of their daily face-to-face interactions frequently operate in places which are delineated and bounded by walls, partitions, screens or other objects which typically are not penetrable to human senses. This means that a large proportion of interactions, both focused and unfocused (Goffman, 1963), takes place in relatively small and well bounded sites, such as rooms, corridors, foyers, staircases, buses, train-compartments, concert halls, churches and the like. These small or medium size spaces which are enclosed by walls, barriers and other physical features of the environment are referred to by a number of general terms: "local space" (Gibson, 1947), "proximate environment" (Sommer, 1966), "region" (Goffman, 1959), "room" (Doxiadis, 1976), and so forth. In each of these sites everybody is well within the range of the ordinary sensory processing of co-users of such a place. Therefore, people in dining rooms, in a taxi cab, in a lobby of a public building or in an elevator can be said to be in a *situation* or *social situation* which refers to the full spatial environment in which mutual monitoring takes place (Goffman, 1963).

The occasions on which individuals and groups operate in these small and clearly bounded proximate environments or regions are relatively simple in their basic structure and properties. First of all, from the point of view of any of the participants, the number of individuals participating in a given situation, as well as the raphe of their social identities, are clearly limited and easy to determine. Secondly, the overall degree to which all persons in a given place are physically present to each other's senses tends to remain fairly similar. Most of the users of a bounded place are within each other's hearing range and practically all of them are placed in such a way that they can see each other clearly and without special difficulties. Furthermore, the relatively small interpersonal spacing permits them "to be perceived in whatever they are doing, including their experiencing of others, and they are close enough to be perceived in this sensing of being perceived" (Goffman, 1963: 17). Finally, the

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