



## Bursting the Bubble: Problematising the ‘Personal’ in Personal Space

PRACHI SAXENA  
St.Xavier’s College  
Mumbai  
India

### **Abstract:**

*This paper revisits the popular notion of personal space and places it in a sociological context by looking at the construction of personal space in reflexivity, along with applying ideas of dramaturgy and socialisation. It looks at personal space as not only socially constructed but also seeks to tease out a more nuanced understanding of how socialisation would work as a mental process by taking the axiom of a cognitive linguistic theory and applying it to discourse studies. This paper ultimately seeks to sensitise one to the hierarchical hangover, along with the gendered and normalised construct, which is perpetuated through the construction of one’s personal space.*

**Key words:** Deconstruction, Interactions, mental space theory, Personal Space

### **Introduction**

The concept of space has now been extended from mere actual space to a more constructed, abstract understanding of it. Such a perspective allows us to look at (social) space as “a (social) product [...] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of

domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it.” (Lefebvre 1991, 26)

This analytical view of space will provide the frame within which this largely ‘understood’ concept of personal space will be challenged and deconstructed. But it will not aim to reconfigure, as it defeats the purpose of this exercise.

Sommer (1969) defined personal space as the “area with invisible boundaries surrounding a person's body into which intruders may not come”, this definition has till now set the tone for research on personal space: it serves the basic need for protecting oneself from intruders. It is a good starting point as it is this functionalist understanding of personal space that will be critiqued by being looked at from the lens of different theories. To conclude the paper the reason for such shifting ideas for understanding personal space will be seen in analysing how this ‘invisible space’ serves as not only a tool of thought and of action but also of control, that perpetuates a hierarchic hangover.

In interpersonal interactions a mutual understanding of cues either verbal or non-verbal are essential in encoding and decoding any communication. The ‘frame’ of a situation is as much understood by physical characteristics as it from the normative interpersonal distances being displayed. You understand the frame of a ‘classroom’ from not only the presence of say benches but more so from way the space has been constructed by the people in it. That is, say the act of the teacher delivering a lecture in front of a group: The differences in standing versus sitting though can be explained from the functional concept of surveillance, it also serves the purpose of showing the student ‘his place’ and to encroach this normative social distance is to encroach the relationship that is being displayed. So if a student came up to the front and stood next to the teacher it would lead to discomfort on part of the teacher whose space is encroached upon, and interestingly even an observer would be discomfited.

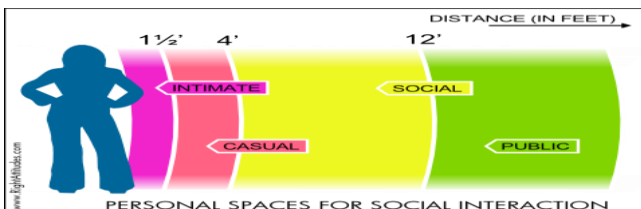
The question of 'why there is discomfort', in psychological terms seeks to look at the individual's reaction to the 'invasion' of one's personal space. This conception implies that the individual has agency and a self that 'feels' so because the person actually has a zone around him within which he is 'comfortable' or his 'self' is protected. But a sociological understanding would note that this space around oneself differs almost uniformly from culture to culture (and more so from situation to situation) and thus, would require one to look at societal processes (like socialization) that leads to this uniformity of perception.

It seems that the implications of cultural variation in perceptions of personal space or rather invasion of personal space have though noted, been largely ignored. Thus, Goffman and Symbolic Interactionism's understanding of forming the self can be useful in analysing the concept of 'personal space' and how it is manipulated.

### A. Dramaturgy

Goffman's work in postulating the self-as-performer is an effective foil for the argument that the 'personal space' is nothing but a construction, whose rules must be adhered to fulfil our roles. In the Goffman reader Ann Bremann explains the role perspective as follows: "Role, then, is the basic unit of socialization. **It is through roles that tasks in society are allocated and arrangements made to enforce their performance** [emphasis added]."

One such arrangement is the belief in 'zones' of interpersonal interaction.



Thus applying a Goffmanian understanding, the variety of roles we play already have assigned these distances and the act of complying to these distances is not as much a product of maintaining our own “comfort bubble” but rather constructing or constantly modifying our bubble to meet the standards of the situationally defined role.

## **B. Symbolic Interactionism**

Applying Symbolic Interactionism’s perspective, the ‘self’ (without defining which a role cannot be assumed) is the product of the process in which “one does respond to that which he addresses to another and where that response of his own becomes a part of his conduct, where he not only hears himself but responds to himself” (Mead 1934). This helps in understanding how the bubble is seen much as a part of the ‘personal’. Also, “The individual experiences himself as (an object), not directly, but only indirectly from the particular standpoints of other members of the same social group.” This understanding of self is termed by Mead as reflexivity. For Mead, reflexivity consists of viewing oneself from the standpoint of the other, and this is the essence of the self-ing process. Thus, he further compounds the understanding of ‘roles’ by refuting the existence of a self as a whole outside of interactions. It is an interesting perspective to look at construction of one’s personal space as well.

For example, the cues a person would assume to be indications of sexual interest from the opposite sex usually include non verbal gestures (leaning, touching the arm) that within that cultural context are accepted between two mutually attracted individuals. These gestures usually employ tentative ‘violations’ of intimate space, which if advances are accepted then become the situation based context where in now the gestures become the norms to the role. The self is now understood in relation to the Other. Thus personal space,

expands and contracts as the 'self-ing' process determines the self and the appropriate behaviour correspondingly.

### **C. Foucault**

Foucault further problematizes the extent to which these manipulations are coming from established institutions versus say 'micro systems' that we interact with in daily life. Therefore, the way the principal might position his desk between himself and a defaulting student, whilst removing the very desk while interacting with a donor gives cues appropriate to his understanding of what the situation demands. We also manipulate people, in our daily lives, on the basis of personal space, like a hugging our parent when it becomes apparent that a scolding is coming our way. By invading our parent's personal space we are sending the cue attached to the zone invaded (thus a more intimate zone). This invasion is tempered by our gendered understanding of the relationships and thus we will more readily employ this decoy with our mother than fathers. Thus linking back to Goffman's premise that "There is a relation between person and role. But the relationship answers to the interactive system—to the frame—in which the role is performed and the self of the performer glimpsed."

Thus the 'frame' that is socially constructed is also gendered, hegemonised, and can be rendered to interpretation.

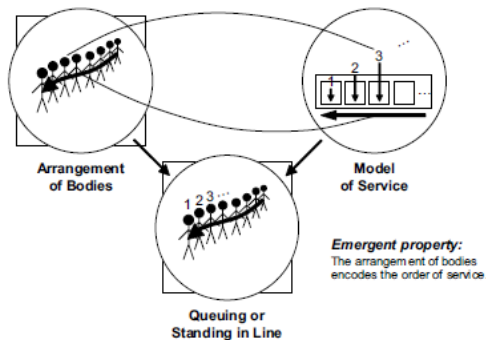
### **D. Mental Space Theory**

Having problematized the existence of a personal space as an actual area around oneself that would lead to actual discomfort vis a vis perceived discomfort as – "this is what I should feel". It is important to notice that this space need not be true or real or actual in any way outside the cognizer's (or cognizers') understanding. It simply marks the point from which the meaning construction extends. *Truth* is not an issue

– people’s understanding is. This is the basic premise for Mental space theory.

Robert Williams, in ‘Guided conceptualisation: Mental space in instructional discourse’ takes the blended Mental space theory and applies it to instructional discourse by adding a third key concept of an anchored blend. Essentially this framework is an elaboration of mental space theory called Conceptual integration theory describes how mental spaces are linked with one another to form integrated networks. These networks produce blended mental spaces that integrate content from diverse inputs, often in novel ways. The creative power of conceptual blending provides a dynamic mechanism for constructing meaning moment-to-moment in specific contexts. In an anchored blend, the physical world fixes a constellation of conceptual elements so that we can reason about them without losing track of their intervening relations.

A simple example discussed by Hutchins (2005) is the cultural practice of queuing or standing in line. Say we happen upon a place where some people are standing in single file. Materially, this is an arrangement of bodies in the spatial environment. To understand this as an instance of queuing or standing in line, we construct a blended mental space.



One input to this blend is the perceptual scene – bodies in space – while the other is a “cultural model” intersubjectively shared by members of our society. The cultural model is appropriated by us through socialisation, thus through

the example we also see how input from our cultural background influences are perception.

The cultural aspect is very important. Consider this blog post by an American blogger on his experience in Germany: “I am quietly standing in line with what I consider an appropriate distance from the person in front of me, only to find that soon two more individuals insinuate themselves in the gap! As though I wasn’t even standing in line! Beware global-trotters, when in Rome do as roman’s do, even at the cost of discomfort to oneself.”

Thus, it is clear why such altercations arise. The input from his mental space specified the distance one should maintain whereas a German’s mental space of standing in line need not have the same distance. This sensitivity would help in reconsidering the belief that the personal space is not only an apt indicator of social distance between people through the mere observation of the physical distance but is also innately ‘personal’ and has attached to it many other aspects like ‘privacy’, ‘respect’ and so on. ‘Personal’ space, it would seem is quite a public construction.

## **Conclusion**

Now having shown that Personal space is a construction and also that it is an interpretation. Let’s shift focus to the problem this poses. Issues arise when one takes these research finding and interpretations and extrapolates them to real life. Take for example Sommer’s iconic studies and his conclusion at the end of one paper: “Of the normal Ss only the females chose to sit alongside the decoy. The males overwhelmingly preferred the chair opposite the decoy. This result parallels the observation that females in our culture will often be seen holding hands or kissing other females, whereas these behaviors are uncommon for males.”

Foucault in 'friends as a way of life', problematizes this abject understanding of 'normal' male behaviour vis a vis the 'abnormal' homosexual one. He points to behaviour in army camps where men are as comfortable around each other as homosexuals only it isn't seen as inappropriate behaviour then, in fact the total institution allows for such behaviour and intimacy. The point of note here is that the male is as 'innately' able to interact with other males as females but it is societal constraints and norms that guide this behaviour.

There are also other interpretations taken from personal space. One very common one is that of higher status equals more personal space and vice versa. The teacher-student example can also be seen from this perspective which now clearly shows that a teacher reiterates his/her 'higher' status, precisely through the act of expecting more of a distance from the other. This primitive understanding of higher status is equal to more space is translated in today's everyday construction of 'appropriate' behaviour in a situation by us. Thus a high culture performance like opera will be seen by people who are allowed their personal space where as a rock concert dare not allow for it lest it be associated with that which it once protested against.

India's categorisation as a culture who has no notion of personal space is not only a false assumption, it also comes from the colonial reading of the Indian culture- We 'shit in the fields' so we have no notion of privacy and as an extension a developed enough concept of personal space. I call it false because taking the example of Appadurai and his analysis of the work of the NGO Alliance, one sees how they are addressing this very need for privacy through exhibitions on 'shit management' where the slum dwellers speak of the embarrassment they face at having to defecate in public opposing the long held notion that poor uncouth Indian's don't have any notion of 'proper behaviour'. It's time we remove the colonial optic through which we see our own culture.



And stop celebrating when a kind word is thrown our way such as through the dichotomous understanding where in less personal space equals less civilised/developed, but is also a culture which is closer and warmer. By giving two sides one forgets to take affront at the narrowed stereotyping of one's culture. At one time, there was a status differential in 'who' used to set the norms for personal space, but more and more today it is an internalised hegemony that allows the norms to propagate without any questioning of their origin. What one assumes to be 'personal' is in reality a very public construction and thus has repercussions in treatment of others. Hence, there is a need to sensitise oneself of this fact and the processes that underlie it.

Personal Space as one can see is a fascinating area to deconstruct because it clearly shows how even an idea of an 'invisible space' can lead to manipulation, control and form our thoughts and reactions. It also functions on a different level because it is one area already clearly defined as a 'space' and yet little work within sociology and anthropology has gone into seeing its influence, its dynamics and its very real repercussions. It's an area hitherto unquestioned, taken for granted as a fundamental right and such assumptions are perpetuated by research in other fields which deal with interpersonal interactions in larger group dynamics. And thus, the onus lies on anthropology, who with its plethora of expertise on cultural group dynamics, is an apt candidate to take up this questioning and uncovering as a cross-cultural endeavour.

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**Blog:**

<http://amandapoverseas.wordpress.com/tag/culture-of-germany/>

**NOTE:** R. de Ceccaty, J. Danet, and J. Le Bitoux conducted the interview with Foucault for the French magazine *Gai Pied*. It appeared in April 1981. The text that appears here, translated by John Johnston, has been amended.