

How other people affect our interpersonal space

May 24 2018



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Have you ever felt the urge to cross the road or move seats on a train after a conversation taking place nearby suddenly becomes aggressive? Well, for the first time a scientific study has shown how the size of your

interpersonal space changes depending on the tone and content of other people's conversations.

The research, carried out by academics from Anglia Ruskin University, University College London, Universidad Carlos III de Madrid and the Istituto Italiano di Tecnologia in Genoa, has been published by the journal *PLOS ONE*.

The experiment involved participants listening to two recorded conversations between two people, one aggressive and one neutral.

After listening to each conversation, the psychologists measured the comfortable level of that person's interpersonal space using a 'stop-distance' technique. This involved participants listening to a recording of footsteps walking towards them immediately after the conversations ended.

They were asked to stop the recording as soon as the footsteps were too close to them and they started to feel uncomfortable. By using the sound of footsteps rather than someone physically walking towards them, it removed any visual bias based on physical appearance.

After listening to the aggressive conversation the participants stopped the sound of the approaching footsteps further away from their body (on average 7 seconds away) compared to after listening to a neutral conversation (4.5 seconds away), implying that people want to distance themselves more from others immediately after hearing an ill-tempered conversation.

Co-author Dr. Flavia Cardini, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at Anglia Ruskin University, said: "Interpersonal space is the space we maintain between ourselves and others to feel comfortable. In this study, we showed for the first time that the tone of social interactions influences

the size of this space, even when we are not directly involved in the interaction.

"We found that the average size of someone's interpersonal [space](#) becomes larger after listening to an aggressive conversation taking place nearby. This is likely to be an attempt to maintain a safety zone around ourselves, and avoid any interaction or confrontation with those involved in the aggressive [conversation](#)."

More information: Eleonora Vagnoni et al, Listening to a conversation with aggressive content expands the interpersonal space, *PLOS ONE* (2018). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0192753](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0192753)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

Citation: How other people affect our interpersonal space (2018, May 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2018-05-people-affect-interpersonal-space.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.