

Introduction

Irrespective of any other situational properties, all face-to-face social encounters take place within an *intimate spatial context*—a *microecological* environment within which interactants are territorially located; spatially defined vis-à-vis one another as their interdepartment outcomes, evaluations, and experiences are geometrically anchored. They sit, they stand, they posture and slouch, they gesture and jiggle—all the while positioning and repositioning themselves, both molarly and molecularly within the horizontal and vertical coordinates of intimate or immediate space—spatially communicating social meanings about themselves, their partners, and the situation around them. In short, *all social activities are spatially located and variably structured*.

Thus the microecological or intimate spatial context is one of the few *universals* of face-to-face social conduct, while at the same time one of its subtlest variables. Further, it is a phenomenon that has received scant systematic analysis from sociologists, social psychologists, or social scientists in general. A major task then, must be an effort to review, organize, and define the field and its scattered literature, since microecology lacks the clarity of older, more institutional fields. As a result, the ensuing approach is both tentative and synthetic.

There appear to be at least three basic traditions in the relatively sparse social scientific literature on the subject (to be discussed at greater length below in Part Two). These are, (1) the *microgeographical*: distributional studies and prototheoretical statements of Robert Sommer and his colleagues; (2) the *proxemics*: space-as-communication orientation of Edward T. Hall; and (3) the *kinesics*: movement-of-the-body-as-communication tradition which starts scientifically with Darwin (1872), is carried on in the ethologists' concern with animal communication (Armstrong, 1965; Barnett, 1963), and among social scientists is most strongly associated with the writings of Ray L. Birdwhistell.

It is our contention that the three perspectives—microgeography, proxemics, and kinesics—are all logically, theoretically, and empirically dealing with the same basic phenomena: *the spacing and positioning of persons qua physical bodies as well as social actors*, ordinarily in copresence, and thus symbolically communicating or interacting with one another by virtue of their being "open" to the impressions presented (Goffman, 1956, 1963).

And since humans have the capacity for self-indication and the monitoring of their own acts, they may be in copresence with themselves alone, i.e., they may be audience to their own performances. Thus, we employ a social psychological perspective, more specifically one that is symbolically interactionist (Mead, 1934; Stone and Farberman, 1970), albeit bereft of verbalizations, the basic stuff of most analyses in this tradition.

In the pages below, the following organization will be used. Part One is an overview of microecology, a definition of the field and its relation to other areas of inquiry; Part Two examines the major divisions in the field, the types and styles of microecological investigation apparent in the literature; Part Three looks to an omission in the field, the lack of consideration of the vertical dimension in the conceptualizations of microecological organization; while Part Four offers a summarizing statement.

I: Overview

Concern for microecological spatial and body-position matters is confined not only to academics and other professionals such as social scientists, architects and designers, physiologists and physical educators (Cratty, 1967), or linguists interested in nonverbal communication, but is also a matter practically attended to by laymen.

Thus, among those persons who place and arrange furniture, it is often unarticulated, but a commonplace that this microecological patterning is an important determinant of interaction style and texture. Seating arrangements, for instance, can be structured to either facilitate or all but completely inhibit conversation, and to symbolically communicate deference, e.g., the place at the head of the table for the guest of honor and so on. Similarly, whether through systematic sociometric techniques (Gronlund, 1959) or through intuition born of classroom experience, teachers microecologically place students so as to maximize what are essentially interactional goals such as clique restriction or the homogeneous grouping of students.

Finally, as reported in a press dispatch from Reuters (*Victoria Daily Times*, October 25, 1967, p. 40):

A British security commission has advised Prime Minister Wilson to tighten security controls over typists in his own office.

The commission has investigated how a typist managed to pass secret papers to an admitted South African spy. . . .

*It [noted] that the 29-member staff of the typing pool should work in **square-shaped rooms rather than oblong ones**. This would make supervision easier and keep girls more under the eye of other workers (emphasis added).*

Notions about intimate space, then, run a gamut ranging from dinner parties through matters of national security, and are held by actors in the mundane world no less than by scholars whose job it is to analyze them.

Spatial considerations such as these tend toward what Garfinkel has called "background expectancies," those learned, taken-for-granted elements of actors' social worlds which are usually implicit. These are the assumptions that are often unrecognized or are articulated until violated or breached. They are part of the

socially-sanctioned-facts-of-life-in-society-that-any-bona-fide-member-knows depict such matters as family life, market organization, distributions of honor, competence, goodwill, income, motives among members, frequency, causes of, and remedies for trouble, and the presence of good and evil purposes behind the apparent workings of things (Garfinkel, 1967:76).

These notions of members of the culture about intimate space are, then, part of the world-taken-for-granted which is always impinging, but rarely interferes.

Specifically referring to gestures, but by implication to microecological factors more generally, Edward Sapir noted that in spite of the difficulties posed by a systematic, conscious analysis of the mundane, persons in their everyday/anyday life respond to such spatially-rooted experience

in accordance with an elaborate code that is written nowhere, known by none, but understood by all (in Mandlebaum, 1949:556).

Since social actors are located and positioned in space, and because such locations are invested with social meanings, to be so located and positioned is to communicate—to send or give-off spatial information which is socially interpreted and given meaning; and since it is social meaning, it is meanings into which the monitoring audience has been socialized. There is abundant evidence that such meanings are not universal (and thus possibly biologically determined) but culturally varied and dependent on socialization for their transmission and maintenance (see Hall, 1966:123–153).

However, as Hallowell has observed, though there is cross-cultural variation, still

the human individual is always provided with some culturally constituted means . . . which enable him to participate with his fellows in a world whose spatial attributes, are, in part conceptualized and expressed in common terms. Ontogenetically, self-orientation, object-orientation, and spatio-temporal orientation are concomitantly developed during the process of socialization (1955:184).

SPACE AND THE SELF

Not only are these orientations culturally learned, the products of socialization, they are also interdependent: definitions of self and others are spatially-based, both *physically* and *metaphorically*. In other words, part of our definitions of "who we are" depends on answers to the question of "where we are."

Just as actors and audiences locate and define themselves vis-à-vis one another within space, e.g., physically near or far and with reference to one another; so too they do this in terms of spatial metaphors such as close and distant relatives—an imagery drawn, in this case, from kinship diagrams which may be belied by actual residence or interaction patterns. In other words, just as there is an ecology of social space, so also there must be social psychology of such space.

As such, the pervasive character of microecological elements, both locationally and experientially, would warrant sociological inspection; but not only in terms of such readily observable factors as the spatial distribution and allocation of actors, their actions, and their audiences; but also as regards the participants' learned social meanings and interpretations of the space-related dimensions of interaction and their consequences for social conduct in encounters and for the selves and identities within them.

HUMAN ECOLOGY

Traditionally within the field of sociology, the formal study of space has been the province of human ecologists.

For most human ecologists investigative focus has been on such aggregate units as groups and collectivities, along with cities, their zones, land-use patterns, and other similar large-scale areal units. These studies, of what might be called *macroecology*, have had in common their dealing with *space as an objective factor—a physical property*, a geographical attribute, precisely measurable, and with such procedures automatically replicable, non-problematic in its meaning to actors located within it.

Although there is another less rigid perspective historically associated with human ecology (the "Chicago School" tradition associated with Robert Park and his students), its current followers seem less likely to identify themselves as ecologists *per se*, and are more likely to call themselves urban sociologists, students of community, and the like.

Conventional ecological studies have drawn their intellectual inspiration from the works of students of the ecology of plant and animal communities. Thus, they have frequently looked to "natural processes" analogous to or rooted in biology to give conceptual order to their explanations of ecological patterning, i.e., conflict, competition, and accommodation (see Park and Burgess, 1924:167–184, 504–733).

Furthermore, they have often tended towards a "spatial determinism" in their explanations of social phenomena. As Firey has summarized this tendency toward strict ecological operationalism and explanation:

*Since its emergence as a definite field of research, ecology has developed a number of distinct theories, each of which has tried to bring a conceptual order out of man's relationships with physical space. When these theories are subject to a careful analysis, their differences turn out to be, in large part, variations on a single conception of the society-space relationship. Briefly, this conception ascribes to space a determinant and invariant influence upon the distribution of human activities. **The socially relevant qualities of space are thought to reside in the very nature of space itself**, and the territorial patterns assumed by social activities are regarded as wholly determined by these qualities (1947:3, emphasis added; also see 1945).*

Alternative Views There is, however, another broad perspective on space: one that tends, at least historically, to be anthropological, speculative and philosophical, or both. This is a phenomenological view of social space as *problematic rather than simply physical and objective; as being subjective and experienced; emergent and invested with sociocultural meaning in the minds of members; learned, and thus potentially variable from person to person, group to group, and situation to situation.* Such a view is more sociological than that of the strict, operational ecologists, for it treats space as a social construction, a product of socialization; at the interpersonal level as a *relational dimension between social actors* rather than a simple point-to-point physical distance.

This latter, relativistic view of space has been advanced by writers as heterogeneous as the German physicist Ernst Mach (1906), the philosopher Cassirer (1953, 1957), the sociologists Hertz (1960) and Durkheim and Mauss (1963), and the anthropologists Hallowell (1955) and Levi-Strauss, who has argued that

space and time dimensions are not the same as the analogous ones used by other disciplines but consist of a social 'space' and a social 'time,' meaning that they have no properties outside those which derive from the properties of the social phenomena which 'furnish' them (1963:289).

Like the traditional ecologists, "subjectivist" students of spatial use also assume that such matters are patterned rather than random or ideosyncratic; but their assumption is that these patterns are based in cultural phenomena rather than the "natural," biological processes used in explanation by the strict human ecologists such as Hawley.

Among recent theoretical sociologists, perhaps the most forceful programmatic statement on the importance of conceiving space in terms of its meanings to social actors has been that of Sorokin (1943). This view is obviously antithetical to the operational macroecologists or classical human ecologists, at least that majority who reject completely the utility or validity

of subjectivistic data in favor of the objective data of large-scale units of physical space taken as non-problematic: aggregate demographic reports and the bookkeeping materials of economic geography.

Microecology: Towards a Definition Microecology on the other hand, as contrasted with strict traditional ecological practice, does not balk at non-objective conceptualizations of space. In fact its basic concern might be described as the study of the relationship between the two views of space: the physical-objective of coordinates and the relativistic-subjective of meanings—as these are interdependently manifested and experienced by spatially implicated actors in face-to-face or copresent social contact.

Such transactions take place in what may be called *microspace*: this defined as the bounded limits of naturally transmitted communication; that is, the spatial confines within which symbolic exchange between actors so located can take place without strain or artificial aid. These boundaries are set by visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory barriers, (especially the first)—e.g., sight restraints, sound levels, *inter alia*. Such limiting factors include the *physiological*, such as sensory acuity; the *physical-mechanical*, walls for instance; the *psychological*, e.g., cognitive engrossment (Goffman, 1961a:1–81), selective attention, inattention, and perception; and the *social*, that is the rules that define the parameters of social settings. Examples of this last include the conventions regulating eye-contact (Argyle, 1969:105–110). The paradigmatic case of a bounded microspace is a room or a walled establishment (Goffman, 1956:66); but it could be the bench seat of a bus, a table in a noisy cafeteria, or for two prospectors meeting on the desert, the limits of the horizon itself.

Along with the participants themselves, these spatial elements combine at the interpersonal level to form a microecological system of actors and audiences located (and moving) in microspace, and provide one of the sources for actors' definitions of self and others. *It is the fundamental task of microecology to seek out the functional relationships between microspace, social actors and their space-related conduct and experience within it, and the selves and identities so generated and maintained or altered.*

MICROECOLOGY AND ANIMAL SOCIOLOGY

Historically, the kind of research and theorizing that we have included under the rubric of microecology has drawn much of its general intellectual inspiration from the ethologists and naturalists who study the space-related communicative activities of infrahumans. Thus, the microecological literature by social scientists is well spotted with references to territoriality, flight and fight distance and the like, as well as citations to classic works in ethology and natural history.

This is at least partially due to the fact that of the three major contributors to the field to date, Sommer, Hall, and Birdwhistell, the latter two were