

Territoriality



This term 'territory' refers to fixed spaces that in some way belong to a person or group. The difference between territory and personal spaces is that whilst the latter moves with the person, the former does not. Altman (1975) distinguishes between three types of territory to which a person or group may lay claim (see Table 1).

Type of territory	Explanation	Examples
Primary	Used almost exclusively by the individual or group, usually in the long term.	A person's or family's domicile (e.g. house, flat or room within shared premises).
Secondary	Used regularly by the individual or group, but shared with others.	A person's favourite seat in a library; a group of friends' preferred table in a canteen.
Tertiary	Shared spaces to which everyone has right of access and use.	Parks, waiting rooms

Territories, then, differ with respect to the amount of control the individual or group can expect to exert over them. Consequentially, a person's response to having their territory invaded depends on what type of territory it is. On entering a train station, you would probably sit wherever a seat was available (although in keeping with Western notions of personal space, you might not choose to sit next to a stranger if a more distant seat was available; see above). If you found a stranger sitting in 'your' seat in a classroom or canteen you might feel slightly miffed, but choose to sit elsewhere. However, if you found a stranger sitting in your living room, in the absence of an immediate explanation, you would probably be quite alarmed.

Territorial Behaviour

You may be familiar with the idea that many animal species protect their territories by the use of scent markers to delineate boundaries and that, if their territory is invaded, may act aggressively to drive out the invader. This example may be extended by analogy to human beings, who also tend to mark out the boundaries of their territory and act in various ways to discourage others from entering them. However, it should be remembered that human territorial behaviour is controlled to a much greater degree by socialisation and hence will exhibit considerable variation between people and between different societies.

Claiming Territory

In many cases, people mark their claim to territory by delineating its boundaries in physical ways. In primary territories,

such as a domicile, the boundary markers are frequently physical barriers. Fences, walls, gates and lockable doors and windows physically impede others from entering the territory and allow the owner to control who has access to it, for example, by choosing when to unlock and open the door.

Try This...

Thinking about your own life, identify some examples of primary, secondary and tertiary territory. How do or would you feel if each type of territory is invaded by someone else? How do or would you respond to such invasions? Note down your observations in the form of a table.

However, not all boundary markers are physical barriers to access. People may

instead erect symbolic barriers, such as a low fence, which, whilst it would not impede access to most people, acts as a sign that the space beyond is owned by and hence that access is restricted. Alternately, people may extensively personalise the spaces within their primary territory. In the UK, many front gardens are a good example of this. Even where there is no boundary fence or wall, many people physically modify the space within by means of lawns, flowerbeds and so on, presumably to convey the message that this is their space and that trespassers are unwelcome. Research supports this basic idea, as it has been found that primary territories are typically the most heavily personalised, followed by secondary territories, where some personalisation occurs (e.g. the graffiti used by some street gangs to deter members of rival groups), and finally tertiary territories, where what little personalisation occurs is usually temporary in nature (Altman, 1975). Becker (1973) studied territorial behaviour in a library. The strongest sign of territoriality was the physical presence of a person at a table: newcomers tended not to select tables at which someone was already sitting. However, they also tended to avoid tables where someone else had left personal possessions (books, clothing etc.). These items appear to have acted as markers of temporary 'ownership' of a table. Becker found that the more such markers present, the less likely a table was to be occupied by a newcomer. However, physical markers are not the only way of claiming territory, such claims can also be indicated by behaviour. Touching an object seems to convey to others (at least temporary) possession. Truscott (1977) observed that people eating in restaurants would touch their plates in order to prevent them being removed by a waiter. Similarly, Werner et al (1981) found that touching a publicly accessible object acted as a deterrent to others from approaching it. The object in question was a 'Space Invaders' game in an amusement arcade. A confederate either stood close to the machine or stood

touching it (not the controls). Werner et al found that new players were significantly less likely to approach and play the game when the confederate was touching it.

Responses to Territorial Invasion

The way in which people respond to invasions of territory depends primarily on which type of territory it is. Because of the personal nature of primary territories and the apparent requirement for control over them, the commonest responses to invasion are actions intended to remove the invader from the territory. According to Schmidt (1976) invaders of primary territory tend to be challenged more quickly, and defenders of primary territory will adopt aggressive responses more quickly. In many societies, aggressive responses to 'home invasion' are sanctioned by law. English law allows a householder to use 'reasonable force' to defend their primary territory (although the definition of 'reasonable' is somewhat ambiguous and may be left to a jury to decide). In the US, there is considerable variation between states with some (e.g. Florida) authorising the use of deadly force against burglars. Invasions of secondary and tertiary territories are far less likely to result in aggressive defensive behaviour. Because invasions of territory lead to heightened autonomic arousal (in a similar way to invasions of personal space; see above) and people are generally motivated to reduce excessive arousal, most people respond to invasions of secondary and tertiary territory simply by moving away (Cassidy, 1997).

Functions of territory

So far it has been established that almost everyone has a zone of personal space, which dictates the distance they prefer from others, and a range of territories over which they exert varying degrees of control. There is considerable variation between individuals, social groups and cultures in the extent of personal space and territory, but people generally attempt to defend themselves against its invasion. The obvious question to ask is,

'why?' This section discusses two different outlooks on the function of territory. The socio-biological perspective argues that human territoriality is part of our evolutionary heritage whereas the social-cognitive approach suggests that territoriality is largely a learned phenomenon whose purpose is to impose order on our surroundings.

Socio-biological Perspective

Socio-biologists believe that many types of human behaviour are paralleled in non-human animals. Since humans have evolved in response to many of the same pressures as other species, they argue that careful study of animal behaviour can shed light on the reasons behind similar examples in humans (this type of theorising results in **functional evolutionary explanations**). Since territoriality can be observed in many species besides humans, it may be that human territoriality is an evolved feature that serves similar purposes. The main function of territoriality in animals seems to be control over resources. An animal requires a certain level of resources to survive, breed and raise young. Since a given area of terrain can only provide a finite level of resources, there is an evolutionary advantage in an animal establishing and maintaining exclusive control over an area large enough to provide sufficient resources to sustain it (Ardrey, 1966). Territorial behaviours in such animals typically include:

- Marking out territorial boundaries using, for example, scent
- Detecting intrusions into territory (e.g. by patrolling borders)
- Responding to intruders in such a way as to remove them from the territory (e.g. by aggressive displays).

These features are observable in many animal species including chimpanzees, to which human beings are genetically close. These are also features of human territoriality (although admittedly, few humans use scent to mark territorial

boundaries). However, whilst there are some attractive similarities between human and animal behaviour, when it comes to specific details the analogy tends to break down. Many animals establish territory to ensure adequate access to food and mates. Humans build houses to protect territory, but it would be difficult to argue that their territory serves similar functions. After all, in the West, food is gathered from locations such as shops that may be many miles from the home territory. And when a person discovers that they have been burgled their concerns do not typically focus on whether the refrigerator has been raided. Similarly, whilst various species delineate territorial boundaries by means of scent, humans do so with artificial constructions such as walls, fences and, as we have seen, books, bags, clothing and so on. Furthermore, humans are much more flexible than other animals when it comes to allowing others access to their primary territory. Generally, territorial animals act in a hostile manner to conspecifics that enter their territory, except under very specific circumstances (e.g. mating). People, on the other hand, regularly invite strangers into their territory to carry out repairs, read the meter, sell insurance and so on. What appears to be important is that such strangers have a socially negotiated permission to enter the territory, something it is difficult to account for in simple evolutionary terms. Finally, infringements of territory amongst various animal species are typically met with ritualised aggressive displays whereas humans (in most cases) avoid aggression. A hostile response is by no means guaranteed even if the person's primary territory has been invaded. For these reasons, it seems unlikely that territoriality in humans serves precisely the same function as in other animals. One the other hand, territoriality is apparent in all people, regardless of culture, which is often taken to indicate some sort of innate basis. It may be that the *origin* of human territoriality is evolutionary. However, its function in humans has been modified by learning. This is the view taken by the social-cognitive perspective.

Social-cognitive Perspective

The cognitive approach to psychology is based on the assumption that, in order to impose order and predictability on a complex and unpredictable world, we simplify it. Simplification is achieved via abstracted mental models. A social-cognitive perspective on territoriality would suggest that the division of the world into primary, secondary and tertiary territories is one such mental model, used by people to generate expectations about, understand and predict the behaviour of others (Edney, 1975). Because we have control over our primary territory, we can predict what is likely to happen there. Similarly, knowing that a particular area is somebody else's territory gives us information about how to behave there. Territory can also convey information about a person's role or status. Imagine an organisation in which most employees share desks in an open plan workspace but the managing director has a private office. Here, the differential allocation of territory sends a clear message both to employees and visitors about the relative status of individuals within the organisation.

The markers used to delineate territory can also convey important information. As was discussed above, people tend to mark out their primary territory by personalising it. The ways in which territory is personalised often reflect a person's personality, interests or self-perceptions (Taylor et al, 1997). In the office I share with colleagues, people have marked out their territories in different ways. One desk is very neat, carefully delineated by file drawers and in-trays. Its neighbour is rather more chaotic, plastered with humorous postcards, the desk crowded with novelty objects and toys. The present author's experience of the individuals that occupy these areas is that the differences between their desks are indicative of the different ways in which they prefer to present themselves in the workplace. One presents himself as a very professional and highly organised employee, the other as slightly maverick and a bit of a joker. A stranger coming

into the office for the first time might draw similar conclusions from inspection of their respective territories.

Try This...

Carry out a small-scale observational study of primary and/or secondary territories. You might do this by looking at rooms in a shared living space, different people's areas in a shared working environment or front gardens in the same street. Try to identify how people have erected physical and symbolic barriers and modified the spaces within. You may also wish to speculate on what messages the owner of the territory wishes to convey to others through these personalisations. Be sure you act in an ethical way and respect the privacy of the people whose territories you are observing.

