PERSONAL SPACE:
AN OBJECTIVE MEASURE OF MARITAL QUALITY

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Personal space, a research area common to social psychology, is a dimension of interpersonal behavior potentially useful in assessing marital relationships. Personal space has been extensively researched and has been found to be smaller for husband-wife dyads than for same sex and opposite sex dyads (Hill, Blackman & Crane, 1982). The purpose of this study was to test the relevance of the personal space concept when applied to marital relationships. Positive results would yield preliminary data on an objective measure of marital quality.

METHOD

Subjects
Subjects were 24 married couples recruited primarily from clients (22) of practicum students.

Measures
The Marital Status Inventory (MSI) is a Guttman-type scale designed to evaluate a couple's divorce potential. Scores on this true-false inventory range from 0 to 14, with higher scores meaning greater instability (e.g., Crane & Mead, 1980).

The Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) is a widely used measure of a couple's marital adjustment and has been used to distinguish distressed from non-distressed couples (e.g., Birchler & Webb, 1977).

The Areas of Change (AOC) questionnaire yields an amount of conflict score (range 0 to 68) with 15 believed to discriminate distressed from non-distressed couples (Vincent, Weiss & Birchler, 1975).

The Couples' Stop-Distance Space Measure has been widely used in the study of personal space (e.g., Hill et al., 1982). This measure was taken by asking each couple to stand some distance apart and then approach each other and stop at "a comfortable conversation distance." The distance between the couple's closest toes was then measured. This measure is reliable and was recommended as the best measurement technique for personal space in a recent review of the field (Hayduck, 1978).

The Couples' Chair Placement Space Measure was taken by having the couple remove two chairs from a larger stack and place them on the floor. Then, the distance...
between the chairs was measured after the couple left the room. This measure has also been validated and widely used in personal space literature (e.g. Pedersen, 1973).

Procedure

As each couple arrived for testing, they were given the packet of instruments, shown to the assessment room, asked to take a seat and to complete the instruments independently. The stop-distance measure was taken non-randomly before (13 couples) and after testing (11), primarily to ease the overflow of couples in the waiting area.

RESULTS

The two measures of couples’ space were found to correlate with marital adjustment (MAT) in the expected direction (stop-distance \( r = -0.37, p < .01 \); chair distance \( r = -0.27, p < .05 \)). That is, the larger the space between the spouses, the lower the marital adjustment. In terms of the other dimensions of marriage, the results were mixed. The stop-distance measure correlated with the AOC \( (r = .43, p < .01) \) but not the MSI \( (r = .16) \). On the other hand, the chair placement measure correlated with the MSI \( (r = .35, p < .01) \) but not the AOC \( (r = -0.04) \).

The couples’ space measures were also tested to see if they could reliably differentiate between distressed and non-distressed couples. Two tests were conducted using previously established criterion measures. In the first test, couples were grouped using the commonly used 100 (couple mean) MAT-score criterion. In the second test, couples were grouped using the AOC score of 15 criterion. In both tests, the stop-distance measure was able to differentiate between distressed and non-distressed couples. The MAT-based test yielded a mean distance in inches of 9.79 (SD = 5.54) for non-distressed and 16.95 (SD = 9.47) for distressed \( (t(22) = -2.34, p < .05) \). The AOC-based test yielded similar results \( (9.40, SD = 4.44 \) and \( 18.39, SD = 9.84) \) respectively \( (t(22) = -3.08, p < .01) \). However, no difference in distance was found on the chair placement measure.

DISCUSSION

The concept of personal space appears to apply to marital relationships. Both measures of space correlated with the best-known measure of marital quality (the MAT) in the expected direction. That is, the distance between couples increases as marital quality decreases. This result is consistent with previous research on personal space, that space needs are smaller between dyads with greater liking (Hayduck, 1978). One would expect that couples who have high marital quality would sit and stand closer together than couples who have lower marital quality. The correlational results with the MAT tentatively support this hypothesis.

In terms of the other dimensions of marriage the results were mixed. The stop-distance measure was associated with the amount of conflict in the marriage and the chair placement with the couple’s divorce potential. These two space measures are probably measuring somewhat different aspects of marriage.

The argument that these two aspects of marriage are independent is strengthened by their relatively weak relationship \( (r = .35, p < .01) \). Given that only 12% of the variance in these measures (AOC & MAT) is shared, they seem to be relatively independent measures of different aspects of marriage. The same can be said for the space measures. The relationship between the two measures is consistent but not strong \( (r = .28, p < .05) \). This finding, similar to previous research (e.g., \( r = .30, \) Pedersen, 1973) lends support to Hayduck (1978) who asserts that personal space is not uniformly measured by the various assessment procedures. Rather, the personal space concept is multi-dimensional in nature, similar to the multi-dimensional nature of marital relationships.
In terms of the space measurements' ability to differentiate between distressed and non-distressed couples, the stop-distance measure seems to be a useful discriminator. In both cases where couples' classification was based on empirical criteria, the distance between spouses in the stop-distance measure was much larger for distressed than non-distressed couples. However, the chair placement measure was not able to differentiate these couples reliably. One possible explanation is that this sample was not highly divorce prone (MSI = 1.65, SD = 1.85). Additional studies with more divorce-prone couples would need to be done.

In terms of theoretical application, the personal space concept seems to logically apply to marital therapy concepts. For example, Berman and Lief (1975) in a psychodynamic conceptualization of marriage point to the importance of intimacy as a "struggle between their need for and fear of closeness" (p. 585) as a major contributor to marital distress. The personal space concept may be an operationalization of this intimacy issue. In other words, couples who space themselves further apart may be less intimate than others. Research in this area would, of course, be needed to substantiate this.

Overall, the results of this study are supportive of the value of applying the concept of personal space to marital research. The correlational results between the space and marital measures are not powerful, but seem to be consistent. However, one would not anticipate extremely high correlations since the space measures are still rather crude and are substantially different from the marital measures. Also, additional work in refining the personal space measures, studying the influence of subject characteristics (e.g., culture, intimacy level, etc.) and increasing sample size are no doubt necessary.

REFERENCES


