What ‘personal space’ looks like around the world

How close is too close? Depends on where you live.
Appropriate distance, in feet, for a...

Source: Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology
TIM MEKO/THE WASHINGTON POST

If you’ve traveled even a little bit, you’ve surely had the experience of
sharing a public space with someone (or many someones) who wants to stand closer to you than you’d allow your partner most of the time. (I often had this experience at the ATMs in Baku, Azerbaijan, where crowding has replaced queuing.)

It’s because personal space — how close we stand to our colleagues, our friends, strangers — varies widely between countries. Sociologists have studied the whys and hows, and they’ve come up with some theories about why these social norms exist. Temperature tends to affect how people define personal space. So do gender and age.

But, they think, our personal boundaries have a lot to do with where we grow up. These researchers sort the world into “contact cultures” (South America, the Middle East, Southern Europe) and “non-contact cultures” (Northern Europe, North America, Asia). In non-contact cultures, people stand farther apart and touch less.

Now, a new study offers even more insight into what people from different countries expect from each other. In it, researchers looked at 9,000 people in 42 countries to understand exactly how personal space is defined in different countries. To do that, they handed each subject a graph showing two figures.
The image that researchers showed subjects. Courtesy of the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology

Then they told each subject: Imagine you’re person A. How close should person B stand to you? Does that change if the person is a close friend? A colleague?

Today's WorldView

What's most important from where the world meets Washington

After they conducted the surveys, they averaged the results for each of the three categories.
They found that people in Argentina and other South American countries do, in general, require less personal space than people from Asia. In some places, strangers were encouraged to stay away, but friends could crowd in close. In Romania, for example, strangers are supposed to keep their distance. But friends can creep close. In Saudi Arabia, people stand farther from their friends than Argentinians do with strangers. Hungarians want loved ones and strangers at arms length, or at least 75 centimeters.

Cultures share some commonalities. Women preferred more personal space from strangers than men in almost all of the countries studied. People living in warmer places tended to keep less distance than those in colder climes. And the older you are, the farther away you stand.

These insights are interesting, experts say, because they help us understand social roles. “Cultural space tells us a lot,” Kathryn Sorrells, a
professor at California State University at Northridge, told NPR. “It tells us a lot about the nature of a relationship. . . . So if someone comes more into your personal space than you are used to, you can often feel like, ‘What's happening here?’ And it’s easy to misread what someone is actually communicating if you only come from your cultural perspective.”