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Out of the Ooze

STRESS

Why Are We So Territorial?

Here's why we need to have places that belong to us.

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Reviewed by Davia Sills



KEY POINTS

- All societies have laws and customs that acknowledge the importance of human territorial behavior.
- Our feeling of ownership over places generally increases with time.
- Territorial behavior is a key way of regulating privacy and communicating identity.
- Territorial behavior is essential for organizing social life.



All societies have some way of recognizing private spaces and punishing those who do not respect the boundaries of these spaces, and this has been

Ancient Romans even had a deity named “Terminus,” who was the god of land boundaries. “Termini Stones” had his likeness carved on them, and they were used to separate fields and to define ownership boundaries. Anyone who tampered with these stones was punished harshly according to both civil and religious laws.

Today, many of our most popular spectator sports reflect our inherent orientation toward territoriality. Football, soccer, basketball, and hockey all require the successful defense of territory (the goal) against invasions by opponents, and the language used to describe the action in these sports (e.g., possession, stealing, control, offsides, neutral zone) makes the connection between sports and territory explicit. Even in baseball, teams battle for control of the base paths, with the most important area of the diamond referred to as “home.”

Why is territorial thinking so strong in our lives?

Feelings of Ownership Increase With Time

Research consistently shows that people develop a sense of ownership over places where they spend a lot of time, and the intensity of our feelings increases with the time we spend there.

This can be equally true in public and private spaces. For example, [one study](#) reported that when a person seated at a table in a university snack bar for five minutes or less was approached by a stranger who asked them to move, they invariably complied and often offered an apology as well.

Another study examined differences between people who displayed aggressively territorial markers on their property, such as signs (e.g., "no trespassing," "beware of dog") or fences, and those who did not. It was found that individuals who displayed aggressively territorial markers had lived in their homes longer than homeowners who did not exhibit such forceful territoriality, that they planned to live there long into the future, and that they even answered the doorbell more quickly!

Territories Help Us Preserve and Manage Privacy

One of the main functions of territorial behavior for humans is the preservation of privacy. Having a place where we can control who has access to us and when is essential for normal day-to-day functioning, and a lack of such control can be quite dispiriting and stressful.

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self is **an important stage in the development of children**, and there is evidence that one's **attachment to territories intensifies with age**.

Territories Communicate Personal Identity

Territories allow people to manage and communicate their sense of who they are. When we move into a new office, house, or apartment, often the first things unpacked and displayed are highly personal possessions or decorations associated with the permanent places in our lives, and there is evidence that this personalization of our new digs may predict success and longevity there. **Studies of college dormitory room decorations** have found that students who left school before the end of their first year were less likely to decorate their walls than students who stayed in school and that they were also more likely to use decorations that reflected a connection with their personal lives away from the university, such as pictures of family or girlfriends and boyfriends back home.

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they decorate their living spaces.

Territoriality Organizes Day-to-Day Life

Territoriality also plays a crucial role in organizing everyday social life. Without coherent ownership and control over various spaces, human interaction would be chaotic. Territories clarify social roles, regulate interaction, and minimize conflict. Clear territorial rules decrease aggressive behavior between **individuals** as well as between **street gangs**.

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Research on pairs of sailors living in small, isolated rooms found that the pairs who established clear territories during the first day or two of the study performed better while working, showed less stress, and were able to endure isolation longer. Less territorial pairs were disorganized and could not tolerate the isolation for as long.

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In summary, there could not be a functional society without territorial behavior. Strangers could wander freely into your bedroom and bathroom, evict you from seats in public places, and drive your car whenever they chose. Fences would not exist, burglary would not be a crime, and locksmiths would become an endangered species. You would have no legal right to inherit your parents' possessions, and there would be no sure way to locate people whom you wanted to find.



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