

Title : Breaching Experiment: Personal Space on the Subway

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Definition of the breaching experiment

- A breaching experiment is a sociological method used to expose the underlying social norms that govern our daily behavior.
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- It involves purposefully violating these norms to see how people react.
- Developed by sociologist Harold Garfinkel as part of ethnomethodology.

Impacts

On Daily behaviors

- People actively avoid sitting near strangers unless absolutely necessary.
- Social norms allow us to navigate crowded spaces with minimal tension.
- This respect for personal space becomes second nature and is passed down culturally.
- Shows how norms regulate emotional boundaries in public life.

On community health

Emotional Wellbeing:

- Norm violations can trigger anxiety or stress, especially in confined spaces.

Psychological Response:

- Feelings of unease can build up when space is invaded, even unintentionally
- Important for designing safer, more considerate public spaces.

Research question and hypothesis

Research question : How do individual react differently when others go against their social norms ?

Hypothesis : I were to break through our daily social norms individuals start feeling confused, awkward and controversial

Site description

- Location : NYC Subway — Queens (F Train)
- Time : - 9am at 169th street station
- 1 pm at forest hills station
- Conditions : Subway trains were nearly empty (intentionally chosen for clearer reaction)

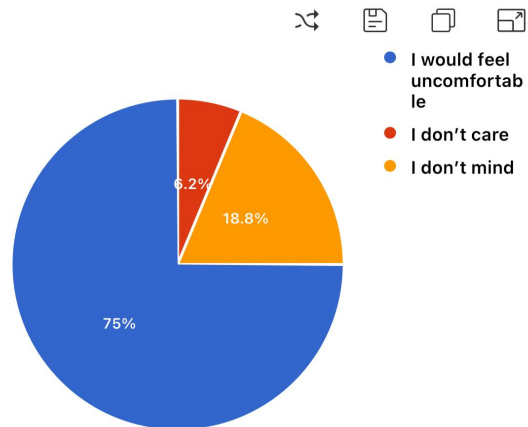
Breach involved sitting directly next to a stranger when multiple empty seats were available

Historical & Sociological context

- Stanley Milgram (1970): Found that people in cities develop mechanisms to reduce interaction (e.g., avoiding eye contact).
- Erving Goffman: Introduced the concept of “civil inattention,” where individuals pretend not to notice each other in public as a sign of respect.
- Harold Garfinkel: Breaching experiments help reveal how we uphold order in everyday life through unwritten rules.

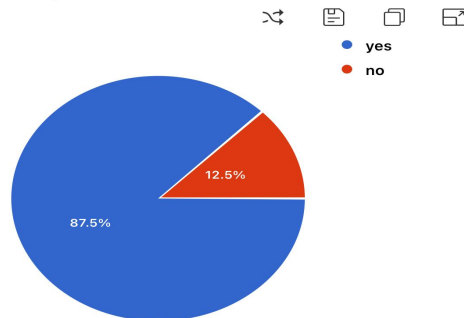
How would you feel if someone sat next to you on an empty train

16 Responses



Would you prefer a person dressed formally sitting next to you on an empty train instead someone homeless

16 Responses



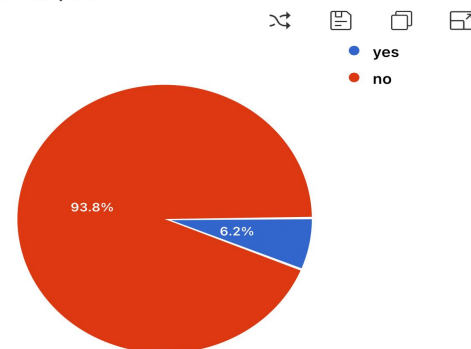
Why would you feel uncomfortable if someone sat next to you on an empty train and why does his status matter

16 Responses

- Yes I would feel uncomfortable. His status matte...
- I feel uncomfortable in general but status matte...
- Because it's suspicious why would they leave t...
- In fear of him doing something to me trying...
- Because i judge a book by its cover so the mor...
- Yes because why did he choose to sit next to...
- Dont care
- Yes because with homeless people they have a b...
- I would feel uncomfortable because they could'v...
- I would be scared if they try to pull something f...
- It's sort of the culture of NYC, so them sitting ne...
- bl don't really mind who sits next to me on a trai...
- the person could have picked other seat in t...

Would you sit close to someone on the train regarding other empty seats

16 Responses



Reaction observed

Physical discomfort

- One participant got up and moved to another seat.
- Others visibly shifted away from me or crossed their arms.

Non verbal discomfort

- Side glances at surrounding seats
- Raised eyebrows, tightening posture
- Avoiding eye contact or fidgeting
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Future Research directions

1) How do responses vary by changing :

- Age group (e.g., older vs. younger riders)/ race and gender
- Cultural background (some cultures value closeness more than others)

2) Compare empty vs. crowded conditions:

- Are people more tolerant during rush hour?
- Does discomfort increase when personal space is available but ignored?

Conclusion

- Breaking social norms like personal space boundaries leads to visible discomfort.
- People's reactions reflect strong, unspoken expectations of behavior in public.
- This experiment confirms how etiquette and social rules maintain order without enforcement.
- Even in informal settings, these norms are deeply embedded in our daily lives.

References

- Goffman, E. (1963). Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings. Free Press.
- Milgram, S. (1970). The Experience of Living in Cities. Science, 167(3924), 1461–1468.
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). Studies in Ethnomethodology. Prentice-Hall.
- New York City Transit Authority. (n.d.). Subway Map and Service Information.
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