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978-0-521-31307-0 - Human Territorial Functioning: An Empirical, Evolutionary Perspective on Individual and Small Group Territorial Cognitions, Behaviors, and Consequences

Ralph B. Taylor

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INTRODUCTION

The present volume examines human territorial functioning, a closely linked constellation of place-specific, socially determined and influential cognitions, behaviors, and sentiments. Territorial functioning encompasses a class of environment–behavior transactions concerned with issues of personal and group identity, cohesiveness, control, access, and ecological management. This functioning applies largely to small groups, and the individuals in those groups, and is limited largely to small-scale, delimited spaces. The present chapter outlines the purposes of this book, sketches its major recurrent themes, and presents in capsule form a low-level theory, or model, of human territorial functioning. The materials to be covered in the various sections are also introduced.

Focus

The concept of human territorial functioning addresses the question: How do people “manage” the locations they own, occupy, or use for varying periods of time? Approaching this question is difficult, for two reasons.

Some problems

First, everyone knows something about territoriality, based on personal experience. Children at camp vie for the top bunks, siblings get upset and scream when a sister or brother enters their room unannounced,

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and in some households no one is allowed in the kitchen when dad is baking a cake. Frequently, territorial issues are resolved in the legal arena (see accompanying box). Further, territoriality is ensconced in our everyday lexicon with references to “turf battles” or phrases such as “a man’s home is his castle.” (But see Figure 1.1.) Movies may trade on everyday notions of how people are territorial, Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* of the early 1970’s or the more recent *The Warriors* being cases in point. In our experience, language, and media, territorial issues are ever-present. Consequently, whatever social scientists may have to say on the topic is constantly juxtaposed with this common or everyday knowledge.

“Free George Yant”

In 1984 or 1985, if you stopped at a truck stop along a major route in the United States, you may have seen some “FREE GEORGE YANT” flyers, soliciting donations. You probably wondered, Who is George Yant? George Yant is a landowner in Blackduck, Minnesota, who has been sentenced to five years in prison for chasing trespassers off his property.¹

On November 6, 1983, George Yant encountered two hunters on his land, two miles inside the boundaries of his property. In his area during hunting season it is not unusual for hunters to break fences, chop wood, and sometimes even shoot cattle and horses. This has been a source of considerable frustration to George Yant and other landowners. Yant, a trucker, raised horses and may, in the past, have had one killed by hunters. When he crossed paths with two hunters on November 6, he became upset. He marched them off his property, his rifle pointing at their backs. He also reportedly cursed and kicked them, and marched them half a mile down the road beyond his property before releasing them. Although Yant had never been arrested before, the judge, who was known for his stiff sentences, gave him five years in prison. The judge felt that although Yant may have been a peaceful, law-abiding citizen prior to the incident, on the day of the encounter “ ‘George Yant, like so many perpetrators of violent-person crimes, went berserk. He went headhunting.’ ”²

Second, territoriality is deemed relevant to a vast range of situations. Large-scale historical events, such as Napoleon’s extremely costly victory at Borodino and the victory of North Vietnam in the Vietnam War,

¹ Jailing of Minn. landowner outrages others tired of forgiving trespassers (November 22, 1984). *Baltimore Sun*, pp. 1A, 27A.

² *Ibid.*, p.-1A.

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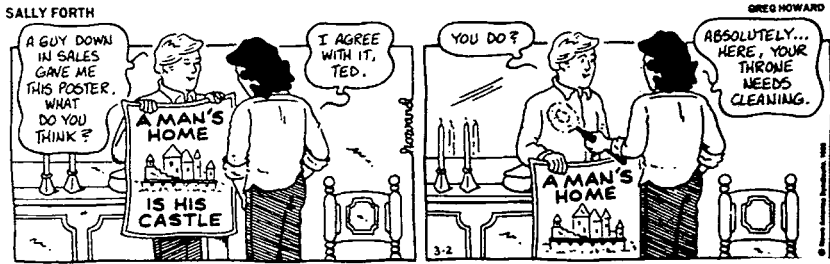


Figure 1.1. Although a man's home is his castle, such possession may have unanticipated consequences. Source: Sally Forth. Copyright © 1985 by News America Syndicate. Reprinted with permission of the publisher.

have been linked to human territoriality, as have less grandiose matters such as the seating arrangement in the boss's office, or the behavior of patrons in a gay bar. Such a broad-gauged application of the concept of human territoriality, spanning widely different levels of analysis, makes it difficult to determine exactly what territoriality *is*.

Empirical grounding

To surmount these difficulties the current volume takes an *empirical* approach. Findings from experiments, analyses, and observations in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and other social science fields are used as touchstones for formulating a perspective, definition, and understanding of human territorial functioning. Such empirical grounding is necessary to derive a clear-cut view of human territorial functioning, and helps us eschew the fuzzy or overgeneral conceptualizations that have predominated in the past.

A consequence of the grounded approach used in this volume is a treatment of human territorial functioning that is more restricted in scope than those offered by previous analysts. To be more specific, the evidence on territorial functioning is clear-cut only when considering individuals or small groups, rather than larger agglomerations such as neighborhoods, regions, or nation-states; and when the spatial focus is on specific, delimited, small-scale locations. These limitations may be a cause of consternation to some, but they are needed at this time. The evidence goes no further.

Perhaps more important, the restricted treatment of territorial functioning is warranted for an altogether different reason – for an evolutionary reason.

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Grounding in evolutionary approach

In the past 25 years debate has flourished concerning linkages between animal and human social behavior. Territorial functioning has been included as one relevant cluster of behaviors in the larger category of social behaviors. Further, there have been advances in thinking about the biological and cultural evolution of social behaviors, with concomitant insights into the social and spatial organization of protohominids and early humans. These inquiries underscore the small group basis of nonhuman and human territorial functioning. Consequently, from an evolutionary perspective, human territorial functioning can only be soundly discussed in relation to small groups, and the individuals that compose them. From this viewpoint, application to larger-scale units (regions, nation-states, etc.) is not warranted.

Thus, the purpose of the current volume is to develop and apply the concept of human territorial functioning which illuminates how and why people manage different kinds of spaces, and the consequences of that management or lack thereof. The use of the territorial concept is grounded in an evolutionary perspective, and in current, empirical social science findings.

Introduction of major themes

Throughout the volume several different themes will occur regularly. It is useful to apprise the reader of these early on. These themes do not represent specific hypotheses but rather general conclusions consistently suggested by the evidence.

1. *Territorial functioning is highly place specific.*

Territorial cognitions, sentiments, and behaviors are often specific to particular, small-scale, and delimited sites. Small shifts in spatial location may result in major changes in territorial cognitions or behaviors, or both. For example, as will be discussed in the material on the urban residential environment (Chapters 8 and 11), cognitions regarding the front yard, or even steps, are quite different from those regarding the public sidewalk in front. Consequently, two corollaries follow:

- a. *Territorial functioning varies markedly across sites; and*
- b. *Territorial functioning may play key roles in maintaining ongoing behavior patterns in particular settings or sites.*

Turning from the physical or geographical, to the social, two points are consistently supported:

- 2a. *Territorial functioning is socially structured or conditioned, and,*
- 2b. *Territorial functioning is socially influential or relevant.*

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In other words, territorial functioning is bound up in a pattern of systemlike influence with ongoing small group social parameters. Behaviors such as decorating or beautification may flow from, and at the same time reinforce, social cohesiveness among residents who live near one another, for example. Or, focusing on the “vertical” or power- and stratification-relevant dimensions of social transactions, territorial functioning of particular individuals in a group may emerge from existing stratification, and at the same time serve to reinforce these existing hierarchies.

3. *Consequently, the bases and consequences of territorial functioning are largely linked with small, face-to-face groups.*

Previous treatments of human territorial functioning have concentrated largely on its relevance to the “vertical” or power- and stratification-relevant dimensions of group interactions. Nonetheless, as the evidence will show, territorial functioning is *not* largely a competitive, individuocentric set of processes. Rather, it is a *group-based process*. It is as relevant to the “horizontal” or cohesiveness and solidarity dimensions of human interaction and sentiment as it is to the “vertical” ones. Further, it is relevant both to within-group relations and to between-group relations, for example, how members of a block club feel about each other and about members of another block club.

A corollary suggested by the preceding point is that

4. *there is an upper limit to the group sizes for which territorial functioning is relevant.*

Territorial functioning, being dependent upon and at the same time feeding into the social climate, cannot operate unless there are some minimal bonds of acquaintanceship or interaction among the members of the group in question. An issue to surface later will be whether or not territorial functioning applies to neighborhoods. I will argue that it does not, although it may easily apply to the smaller groups – corner gangs, block clubs, and so on – that are an important part of a neighborhood’s fabric.

At the other end of the scale we can ask, Does territorial functioning apply to individuals? Most certainly, particularly when those individuals are considered *in the context of* particular groups to which they belong, or individuals with whom they interact. The personological relevance of territorial functioning, for example, enhancement of personal identity, is mainly important from the perspective of that individual person as a member of a group, or in interaction with one or more others.

5. *The place-specific and socially linked characteristics of human territorial functioning are a product of our evolutionary heritage.*

The grounding of territorial functioning in specific, delimited locations, and its intimate intertwining with small group processes, are fea-

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tures of the system that were shaped in our environment of evolutionary adaptedness, when protohominids wandered the high savannas of East Africa, and also much later in the early years of cultural evolution. That is, the contours of the territorial processes we observe today are, in general terms, evolutionary carryovers, shaped by biological and, more important, cultural evolution.

This does *not* mean, however, that the *consequences* of territorial functioning are the same now as they were tens of thousands, or hundreds of thousands of years ago. It is a well-accepted axiom in evolutionary biology that behavioral systems can persist even after they no longer serve the “purposes” for which they initially evolved. As long as the system is not detrimental, causing it to be selected against, it can persist.

Further, to say that territorial functioning has an evolutionary basis does *not* mean that it is “wired” into our genes, nor does it mean that it is inextricably linked with aggression.

These then are some of the themes that will be developed, and will periodically resurface throughout the volume.

Capsule statement of approach and model

Chapter 5 presents a detailed model of human territorial functioning. The theoretical perspective is put forth as a causal model, suggesting how particular factors shape territorial functioning, and how this functioning, in turn, has certain consequences. Thus the model presents hypotheses linking three classes of concepts: antecedents, territorial functioning, and consequences. This section contains a brief overview of the approach to human territorial functioning, and an outline of the model used.

Working definition

Territorial functioning refers to an interlocked system of sentiments, cognitions, and behaviors that are highly place specific, socially and culturally determined and maintaining, and that represent a class of person–place transactions concerned with issues of setting management, maintenance, legibility, and expressiveness.

Territorial functioning spans both (1) purposive behaviors, explicitly concerned about setting management, maintenance, and so on, like putting up a “No Trespassing” sign, as well as (2) sentiments and cognitions that are nonpurposive but largely responsive to current conditions, such as feelings of annoyance toward people who loiter in the alley behind your house and throw beer cans into your yard. Midway

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between these purposive and passive components are elements of the system that, (3) although not directed at setting management, legibility, and so on, end up contributing to the local ecology. For example, a person who works hard at keeping his front yard neatly planted with geraniums, impatiens, and pansies may do this simply because he finds it fun and relaxing. Nonetheless, by contributing to the overall impression “given off” by the block, to other residents as well as passersby, the gardener is playing a key role in the local territorial dynamics. His behaviors have consequences for the local setting that were unintended. The person is contributing inadvertently. Likewise, persons who, merely out of convenience, throw mattresses and broken TVs into their backyards are unwittingly weakening the local territorial dynamic.

The consequences of territorial functioning are diverse; they vary depending upon which level of analysis we wish to focus on, and the specific site in question. Almost all of the consequences, however, are relevant to the immediate local sociophysical ecology. Intentional territorial behaviors seek to preserve or change the position of the individual or group within the immediate ecology; behaviors with unintended territorial consequences have this effect *ex post facto*, and territorial cognitions and sentiments reflect such positions. Stated differently, territorial behaviors can clarify and support the immediate local social order. It is worth reiterating that the spaces in question are extremely delimited, and thus the term “local” refers to small-scale spaces, ranging from chairs and portions of a room, on up to streetblocks or comparably sized areas.

Outline of model

The conceptual model developed more fully in Chapter 5 is outlined here. An abbreviated schematic of the model appears in Figure 1.2. It delineates several classes of factors that shape how a particular, delimited site is perceived and defined by the individuals in a group. The subjective definition of the site, or perception, is a shared one, analogous to social perceptions of a particular individual (e.g., a leader) that persons (e.g., members of a group) may share. This shared view of the site in turn shapes the particular behaviors, both intentionally and unintentionally territorial, that occur there.

When considering these behaviors we can choose one of two “lenses” through which to view them. We can either consider events from a group-based perspective, focusing on how the group acts *vis-à-vis* outsiders, or other groups. Or, we can focus internally on how the behaviors influence the dynamics of the group itself, and the individuals composing it.

On the outcome side, territorial behaviors indicate, for individuals

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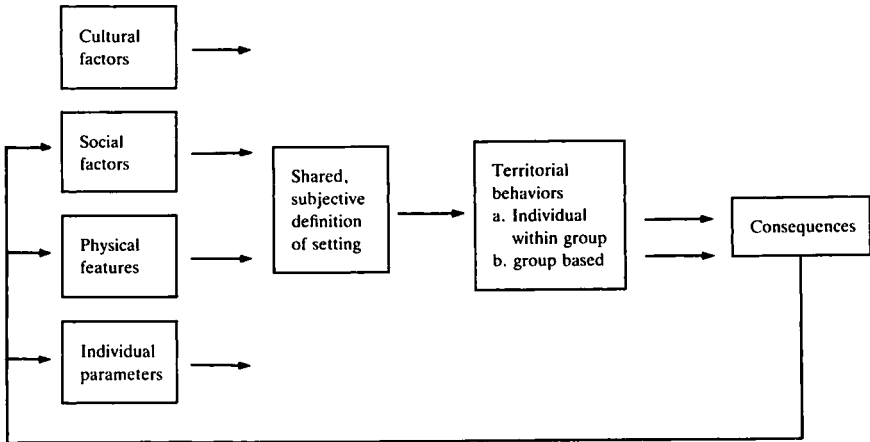


Figure 1.2. Capsule statement of conceptual model.

within groups, and for groups, relative positioning, involvement, and influence in the setting. These clarifications have *psychological*, *social psychological*, and *ecological* consequences. For example, they may help reduce stress, foster better ties among members of a group, and/or help the setting itself function more effectively.

Organization of the volume

Following the introduction, the remainder of the volume is organized into five parts.

Part I investigates the origins of human territorial functioning. Chapter 2 describes territorial systems operating in various nonhuman species, ranging from those evolutionarily furthest removed from humans, such as ants, to those most similar – primates. The purpose of these descriptions is to demonstrate, across a wide variety of species, that territorial systems (a) are not linked in any deterministic fashion with physical violence, (b) depend upon relations between individuals and the groups they constitute, (c) are highly context specific, operating in relationship to available resources, and (d) are “functional” in several different ways. Chapter 3 provides a specific model of the emergence of territoriality among humans. Chapter 4 explores the various explanations of human territorial systems that have been offered. Instinct-based, group selection-based, sociobiologic, and cultural evolutionary perspectives are reviewed. The latter is a particular extension of sociobiology. It considers

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how both genes and culture can work together to facilitate the evolution of functional social behaviors such as territoriality, and seems a particularly promising explanation for the initial emergence of human territorial functioning.

The reader may well wonder about the relevance of such material in a book primarily about humans in “modern” contexts. The discussion in Part I is needed, however, for two reasons. First, it provides a larger context or baseline against which human behaviors, sentiments, and cognitions can be assessed. It provides a larger framework for “making sense” out of the human patterns, explaining where such patterns are “coming from.” Second, the material is needed to counteract fallacious arguments that, even today, are accepted by many in part, perhaps, because these ideas fit well with some “everyday” notions about territorial functioning. Of course, those not interested in evolution or human–nonhuman linkages may skip Part I with no ill effects.

Part II includes two chapters detailing my conceptual approach to human territorial functioning. Chapter 5 defines territorial functioning and indicates how it overlaps with, but also differs from, related environment–behavior concepts such as attachment to place, personal space, and others. Links between territorial functioning and social, psychological, personal, and cultural factors are indicated. Connections between territorial functioning and the larger social order are noted.

Chapter 6 introduces two theoretical perspectives in psychology that nicely complement the territorial perspective being developed, and provide added insight into the consequences of territorial functioning. Dan Stokols’ place-specific analysis of how settings exacerbate or ameliorate stress is introduced. His analysis clarifies the means by which territorial functioning reduces stress.

The second theoretical perspective introduced is ecological psychology’s behavior setting theory. Ecological psychology, developed by Roger Barker and later refined by Allan Wicker and others, is concerned with identifying the extant “natural” units in the environment. These researchers succeeded in identifying such units and called them *behavior settings*. In the outdoor, residential environment I will argue that territorial functioning plays several roles in shaping and maintaining the functioning of these behavior settings.

The utility of these two perspectives can be stated differently. Throughout, as exemplified in the conceptual model presented in Chapter 5, my approach to human territoriality is functionalist, in the Parsonian sense. That is, I focus on how territoriality helps groups, and individuals in groups, get along. I do not wish to imply that conflict never comes into play. But without the territorial system there would

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be even *more* conflict. Relations within groups, and across groups, in particular settings, would be even more strife-torn without territorial functioning.

The functionalist perspective is complemented by the stress perspective. The latter is, in a way, the reverse of the former.

The focus on behavior settings moves us away from groups and individuals in groups to focus solely on the settings themselves, to consider what is happening “out there” in the environment, regardless of whom it is happening to, or why.

Part III is the empirical “heart” of the volume. The chapters progress from discussions of the most intimate, central, and prototypical territories, such as are found in the home, to the most public, least central, and least prototypical territories, such as are found in public spaces, like a seat on a train or in a library. The material is ordered using the concept of *centrality*. We start with settings where the person–setting links are of *high* centrality and progress to settings where it is *low*.

The concept of centrality refers to how critical a particular space is to the overall “lifespace” of the individual or group.³ *Centrality* focuses on the importance of the setting as a supportive context for daily functioning. Spaces whose loss is more upsetting to the individual or group, or where disruption has a more deleterious impact on healthy functioning, causing more stress, are more central locations. Centrality is not a characteristic of a place; it is an attribute of the *transactions* between an individual (or group) and a place: It is an aspect of person–place bonds. Thus, two people may feel differently about the centrality of a particular place. Nonetheless, across a broad range of spaces, many people may concur about the *relative* differences in centrality. This agreement is indicated in Figure 1.3.

Degree of centrality is chosen as the organizing framework for the empirical material because as we move from more central to less central settings there are shifts in the specific consequences of territorial functioning. More specifically, as we move from places where person–place transactions are of high centrality to places where they are lower, psychological consequences of territorial functioning lessen, and ecological consequences become more important. Further, such an organizing scheme highlights one of the major themes of the volume, namely, the place specificity of territorial functioning.

Chapter 7 examines territorial functioning in settings that are often highest on the centrality continuum (see Figure 1.3), that is, settings within the household. The empirical literature, albeit scant, reveals that territorial functioning within the household is shaped by the ongoing

³ Lewin, K. (1936). *Principles of topological psychology*. New York: McGraw-Hill.