

A LINE ON LIFE

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Knock Before Entering

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Why are we supposed to knock before entering someone else's room? Is it merely to be polite? Although knocking involves politeness, it is related to a much deeper, more fundamental concept – territory.

A **territory** is an area or place that is controlled by a person or a group. It is *central* to their daily lives. Typically, it has specific boundaries or markers (doors, fences, signs, and others).

Depending on how central this territory is to their lives, it can be classified as primary or secondary.

Primary territories tend to be used consistently and exclusively by those who possess them (home, office, clubhouse, locker, bedroom). These territories contribute to the *identity* of the occupants. Often this identity is expressed by printing their name on the territory ("*Joe's Bar and Grill*," "*Offices of Smith and Jones*," "*The Garcia Residence*"). This even includes gangs spray-painting their names on walls to designate their "*turf*."

In contrast, **secondary territories** are occupied less frequently and contribute less to the person's identity (a classroom seat, a hotel room, a specific table in a restaurant, a particular park bench). Although many people use these places, when that person or group is present, they claim first privilege to use that territory. (After a class has met for several weeks, try sitting in someone else's seat. It is very likely that the person who usually sits there will ask you to move.)

Allowing others to control their territories is one way to reduce potential conflicts.

The definition of territory includes the assumption that you *control* the way things are done in your territory. Entering someone else's territory without permission threatens that control. On a larger scale, governments go to war, because they believe that their territories have been violated. This is the main reason for the conflicts between the American Indians and the United States government, the Irish and the English in Ireland, the Jews and Arabs in Israel, the Navajo and Hopi in Arizona, among countless others.

At a more personal level, conflicts can be just as extreme. Gang members may fight, because members of a rival gang have crossed-over ("*invaded*") their turf. Similar territorial conflicts occur in the office and at home, although they may not reach the point of physical combat.

A worker's office or desk is usually respected by subordinates and fellow workers. However, a problem may occur with the boss, who may own the whole building including the worker's office. Therefore, the boss may believe he has the right to enter the worker's office whenever he wants. In contrast, the worker is likely to see this as an "*invasion*" – threatening his feelings of identity and control. The worker might not act in an openly hostile manner, because the boss has much more power. However, later the worker probably will be much *less cooperative* – especially when the boss needs a favor.

Knocking before you enter allows others to maintain control over their territory. However, some bosses knock and walk right in – before they get a reply. Even though they knock before entering, they are acting as if the worker's permission is not necessary. This threatens the worker's feeling of control and generates a hostile attitude.

A similar situation exists in homes. The parents own or rent their homes. Therefore, they consider it their territory. If a child – especially an adolescent – has her own bedroom, she will also consider it as her territory. Like the boss at work – to reduce potential conflict and hostility – parents would be wiser to *knock before entering*.
