

Riding Rules

Elevators — No Talking, No Looking

By JOAN SWEENEY,
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A woman got on an elevator in a downtown Los Angeles office building recently. Curious about how the three people already in the elevator would react, she continued to face them.

The trio, obviously uneasy, unconsciously moved closer to the elevator's back wall. Their gaze darted nervously between the floor-display panel over the door and the woman.

"The ultimate egregious faux pas a person can commit in an elevator is to face the back," explained Phoenix psychologist Layne Longfellow, who lectures on psychological contracts — behavioral conventions that are never articulated — such as riding elevators.

Not Told How to Behave

"Everyone knows how you're supposed to behave on an elevator but nobody has ever been told how," Longfellow said.

The convention calls for getting on the elevator, turning to face the door with hands in front or at the sides, avoiding eye contact with other passengers usually by staring up at the panel above the door that ticks off the passing floors, refraining from talking including suspending conversations with companions or conversing in a very low voice and avoiding touching other passengers.

But facing the back as the woman in the downtown elevator did violates this contract, Longfellow said, so other passengers' behavior becomes governed by a desire to keep the violator in check.

"Everybody allocates as much space as possible to the lunatic who's facing the wrong way," Longfellow said. "If you'll do something so outrageous as to stand backwards and look at them, God knows what else you would do."

Reveals How People Adapt

Few researchers delve seriously into what might be called "elevator etiquette." But the subject does reveal something of how man adapts to the challenges and spaces dealt to him in modern urban life. Some social scientists have come up with theories about



Dr. Longfellow

elevator behavior based on proxemics (the study of how people space themselves) and intimacy.

For example, elevators make it hard to keep the unwritten social commandment, thou shalt not violate another's personal space.

"In public, we maintain an invisible bubble of social distance around us," Bernard Grofman, professor of social psychology and political science at the University of California, Irvine, explained. "You don't cross into another's personal space, but that's very difficult in a crowded elevator.

"What happens in elevators is people try to act as if they occupy no space at all," he said. "That's why you see people in elevators literally shrinking, hunching over, putting elbows in close to bodies, putting hands down and avoiding hand gestures.

"These are all signs to other individuals that we're not threatening them or trying to invade their personal space," he continued. "But if we happen to do so, it's only because of circumstances beyond our control."

"Generally, the four corners of an elevator are taken first. When a fifth person gets on, he will usually stand in the center.

"When the sixth person gets on you can watch the shuffle start," Longfellow said. "People don't quite know what to do with the sixth person. Then another set of rules comes into play governing body contact."

In an uncrowded elevator, men will often stand with hands folded in front or women will hold their purses in front.

"As it gets more crowded you can see hands unfold and come down to the sides," Longfellow said, "because if you have your hands folded in front of you in a really crowded elevator, there's no telling where your knuckles might end up. So out of respect for the privacy of other people you unfold them and put them at side."

The status, sex and even color of fellow passengers' clothes can affect the unconscious allocation of space, according to Robert Sommer, psychology professor and former head of the psychology department at UC Davis.

High-status individuals are accorded more space, he said. "If the president of the company gets on, he'll be given more space."

And studies have shown that men leave more space between themselves and other men than women do with other women.

"Men get more uncomfortable than women with close proximity to the same sex," he said.

But "the situation is erratic when the sexes are mixed and much more unpredictable," he said. A woman, however, will generally move closer to other women in the elevator than to a man unless she knows the man.

People also tend to put more space between themselves and others wearing bright colors, Sommer said, explaining, "it's too much stimulation."

Elevators also threaten unwanted intimacy.

"You're in a very small, very tight space," Longfellow said. "People are really concerned about being that close to someone they don't know."

To try to avoid intimacy, passengers avoid eye contact.

"Eye contact, especially in American