

A Prolegomena to a Statistical Phenomenology or Phenomenometrics of the Couch; or An Investigation of the Experience of Sitting on the Couch; or What the Distance between Two People Sitting on a Couch Says about Their Relationship; and Other Thoughts

C. Sean Burns, University of Missouri

30 October 2012

slide:
twitter
info

1 What is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is the branch of philosophy, originally developed by Edmund Husserl, that deals with the essence of objects in relation to how we perceive those objects. How phenomenon appears to us has a direct relationship to how we perceive it, and we can only know the thing *in and of itself* if we are able to bracket those preconceived notions, put them away on a shelf somewhere, close the door on the shelf, forget about it for a while, then look, again, at the object in question with newness, with pure consciousness.

slide:
section
1 page

slide:
edmund
husserl
picture

2 A Brief History of the Couch and What it Symbolizes

What is a couch? The couch dates back thousands of years to the Arabians, who used it as a sort of throne. It was considered an elite piece of furniture until the industrial revolution became widespread and the lowly, leveling bourgeois were able to afford one for their new living rooms in their new suburbs.

slide:
section
2 page

The couch has played a prominent role in 20th century history, especially in relation to its ubiquitous counterpart, the television, and later, the remote control, but also to potato chips, hence the term, “couch potato”.

The couch is a symbol of many things, oftentimes these things are conflicting. The couch is a symbol of newly budding romance. It is a symbol of the destruction of the libido. The couch is a symbol of community. It is a symbol of isolation. The couch is a symbol of relaxation. It is a symbol of sloth. Some couches are comfortable. Some are not.

3 Couch Sitting: A Phenomenometrics of Relationships

How two people sit on a couch in quantitative relation to each other *unconceals* much truth about the relationship between these two people. A standard couch yields approximately 6.5 feet of sitting space. The standard couch will hold three standard people (Love-seats hold two standard people and are the subject of another essay entitled, “Love-seats: An Inquiry into the Modern Art of Crossing Legs”, see Burns, *Journal of Ottoman Research and Development*, August 28, 2002, Volume III, Issue 16).

slide:
section
3 page

The average width of a modern American male is 18 inches or about 1.5 feet, not including arm space. The average width of a modern American female is 14 inches, just two inches past a foot, not including arm space. Arm space for men adds another 7.3 inches resulting in a total average width of 25.3 inches, and for women arm space adds an extra 5.7 inches providing an average span of 19.7 inches.

slide:
dis-
claimer
page

There are generally three cushions on the standard couch. Given that the standard couch is 6.5 feet wide, in sitting space, and given that the standard couch holds three people, this provides $(6.5 / 3)$ feet, or 2.17 feet per person, or 26.0 inches. If the standard American male possesses a span of 25.3 inches, this standard American male will have a difference of 26.0 and 25.3 inches of room to spare. If the standard American male sits centered on the cushion territory he occupies, this will provide him with 0.35 inches on either side for sitting room adjustment. More space will be allowed if the standard American male sits on either the far left of the couch or far right of the couch, allowing the standard American male to lean into the arm-rest and provide additional space between him and the centered sitting standard American male/female. For the standard American female, the average room for adjustment for a centered sitting position is the difference of 26.0 and 19.7, or 3.34 inches on either side.

To understand the relationship between two people sitting on a couch together, one must analyze the difference in space, preferably by feet, oftentimes by inches, between the two people sitting on the couch together. (There is a separate analysis of how three people sit on a standard three seater couch, but that is the subject of another essay entitled, “How Three People Sit on a Couch Says about Them, or A Comparison between a Three People Sitted Couch and Three Card Monty, a.k.a., Follow the Lady or also Find the Lady,” see Burns, (2004), *Journal of Advanced Furniture Design*, II(4)). In this analysis, we will take as granted that each male and each female measures the standard American width/span as defined above.

It is not debatable that if two people, of either sex (male/male, female/male, male/female, female/female) sit on opposite sides (respectively: +/- 27.14 inches apart, +/- 33 inches apart, -/+ 33 inches apart, -/+ 38.6 inches apart) of the couch, then these two people are not in a romantic relationship, unless, that is, they are undergoing a spat and if they are undergoing a spat, they are alone, or only in the presence of “comfortable” company, that is, company they are comfortable having a spat in front of, for example, their children. If they are having a spat but they are in the presence of formal company, they will sit much more closely too each other (up to +/- 7.0 inches apart depending on cushion centering and arm-rest leaning), not being comfortable revealing their

spat, at least directly, to this “uncomfortable” company. The reason for this is because of our Puritan heritage, a heritage that urges us to repress our feelings and feel ashamed of outwardly displays of emotion and/or an inclination towards secrecy and privacy.

Consequently, if two people sit on opposite sides of the couch, several possibilities emerge:

- They do not know each other and have just recently been introduced;
- They know each other, they are of either sex, and they are comfortable with each other, but one of them wants to extend their legs out into the empty space between them;
- The middle cushion is missing and so they have no choice but to sit at either ends.

Furthermore, it is not debatable, studies have shown, that if two people are sitting side by side, but with the standard space between them, as defined above, then the relationship between these two people are of one of the following natures:

- They know each other and are friends of some intimacy, whether physical or not;
- They have been married a long time and no longer share any intimacy between each other but for the purpose of appearances and convention, they sit side by side;
- One of the end cushions from the couch is missing (or damaged or wet) and they have no choice but to sit side by side.

It is truly not necessary to explore the romantic positions. This obviously implies that two people, of either sex, sit extremely close together on the couch, ignoring any space between them, touching each other, leg to leg, arm to arm, and so forth. Studies have shown that this is oftentimes a situation that occurs between two people sharing a new romance. This kind of sitting usually fades after a year in the relationship.

4 Future Research Areas

Let me for a moment step away from *phenomenometrics* and discuss some methodological considerations.

slide:
section
4 page

4.1 The Ottoman: Introducing Game Theoretical Dynamics

An additional line of inquiry involves the application of game theory to the study of couch sitting dynamics. This is normally modeled in controlled, experimental situations by introducing an Ottoman, with dimensions not greater than 2 by 2 feet, to a scenario where two people are sharing a couch. The introduction of an Ottoman to the scene drastically changes the dynamics of two people sitting on a couch together. One of three outcomes will emerge:

slide:
section
4.1 page

- One of the sitters will take an aggressive role and will preemptively take possession of the Ottoman for her or his own personal use;
- Each of the sitters will share the Ottoman by each placing a single foot on it or;
- Both, out of a sense decorum and respect, will ignore the Ottoman and leave it unused.

These are the noted standard events. There are other more rare events that may occur in certain types of situations. These events are of an explicit socio-biological nature and reveal the tendency towards alpha-male behavior often observed in various gorilla colonies. We often exclude these events as outliers, as they are, fortunately, rare and brutal.

Despite the outliers, *couch theorists* generally hold the above outcomes constant as they alter other parts of the game dynamic, such as the strategies and the payoffs. As such, the popular game models these theorists apply include the *footrest dilemma* and the *coin in the cushion hunt*.

4.2 The Couch vs. the Sofa: History and Future Trends

slide:
section
4.2 page

For those of you who may be interested in *couch science*, there are several lines of research to pursue. *Couchomatics*, for example, studies the intersection of couch and technology use. Objects under investigation include the use of television remote controls while sitting on a couch, alone or with others, the use of game controllers in similar situations, and so forth.

Additionally you could also pursue *sofa science*, a sister field. There was a point in time when *couch* and *sofa* science were one and the same thing, but about thirty years ago a bright young researcher found a statistically significant difference between *couch sitting behavior* and *sofa sitting behavior* among couples in long-term relationships. Specifically, couches tend to have less cushion and a more upright back while sofas tend to have more cushion and are made out of softer material. Sofas, therefore, promoted individual relaxation but at a cost of too much sloth, which damaged interpersonal relations with the significant others. Unfortunately, this difference resulted in different lines of inquiry, different fields of research, and eventually, different academic departments. Despite that, collaboration among researchers in these two fields is increasing and recent findings suggest fresh insights about *sitting behavior* in general.

5 Conclusion

slide:
section
5 page

What does phenomenology say, in quantitative fashion, about the couch and its role in American culture? We have seen that the couch and how people sit on it says a manifold of things about the relationship between those people, the types of people these people are, whether they have character, where they are from. In fact, the couch is so packed with preconceived notions, notions so ingrained in our minds, that it is a most difficult activity to bracket how we sit on the couch with each other and look at the couch from a stance of pure, numerical consciousness.

However, it can be done. One of the ways bracketing our experience of the couch can be accomplished is by challenging the static notions

we have inherited of the couch and also by disregarding social norms such as the proper distance between two people no matter what type of relationship they share with each other. By simply sitting in close proximity with a complete stranger, the sheer force of discomfort will so alter one's experience of couch dynamics, that one will take a step closer to being able to bracket these experiences and look at the couch anew. The key is to keep present in the mind the role of the couch in such engagement and always keep a can of pepper spray ready in case things undesirably get out of hand.

6 Disclaimer

The use of the U.S. Customary Units (feet, inches) to delineate the measurements above is not the preferred measurement system. The preferred measurement system is the International System of Units, which uses the Metric System. Unfortunately, the preferred system could not be used due to lack of resources to convert the Americo-centric scientific data. Funds have been unavailable for some time now. If you are interested in contributing to the Movement for Metric Measurements, please visit <http://www.mmmetric.com>.

slide:
Ques-
tions
and
Answers
Slide