

THE EXPERIENCE OF CROWDING IN REAL-LIFE ENVIRONMENTS: AN ACTION ORIENTED APPROACH

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Abstract

Based on reflection of the factual relationship of social and environmental psychology an attempt is made to explore the basic dimensions in the experience of crowded situations by use of multidimensional scaling method. Descriptions of 105 real-life crowding situations are analyzed according to cognitive, affective and behavioural responses. A representative sample of 15 situations is subjected to a multidimensional scaling procedure, the result of which is a two-dimensional solution representing the experience of crowding: one dimension focusing on rather objective situational parameters indicating interference of action, the other reflecting individual effects of environmental load.

Introduction

Recent endeavours have been made to introduce a "systemic" perspective into social psychology. A variation of this new perspective is the attempt to integrate the physical and social environment into the analysis of social behavior. Another variation consists in the definition of human beings as information processing systems by using the "man as computer" metaphor. Investigating the diverse paths information takes on its way through the system became the main perspective (Neisser, 1967). The first variation corresponds to a renewed interest in environmental or ecological aspects, the second to the general cognitivist trend in psychology during the last decades. Whereas the cognitivist perspective influenced the development of social psychology to such an extent that for some time it became almost completely cognitive social psychology (especially in the U.S.), the environmental perspective did not so much influence social psychology itself but led to an exodus of social psychologists out of classical social psychology to the newly found subdiscipline "environmental psychology". Thus many of the "founders" of environmental psychology have a social psychological background.

Both perspectives, cognitive and environmental - if superficially viewed - seem to be closely related because of their common system theoretic orientation, documented by the same inflationary use of terms from computer technology like "feedback", "networks", "circuits", "control", etc.. However, if one observes the actual research more closely the superficiality of their relationship is immediately unmasked. Whereas the environmental variation uses concepts of a range so far unknown in psychology and connects these mostly with simple descriptive studies, thus often reducing the relation of theory and empirical research to mere plausibility judgements, the cognitive variation reduces behavior to cognitive processes and the environment to its representation in people's heads. What is more or less lost in both variations is the social character of human behavior. The environmental psychologists became preoccupied with the influence of the physical environment on behavior, thereby ignoring to a large extent the social quality of physical features of the environment. On the other hand, the cognitivists in social psychology became preoccupied with social cognition thereby ignoring the behavioural

dimension of social life. The development described is especially regretful considering the close relationship between environmental and social aspects in the early days of social psychology. Lewin considered the integration of the environment into the explanation of behavior only natural and when he advocated an "ecological psychology" he did not mean psychological investigation of cognitive processes about social entities (as in cognitive social psychology), but investigation of behavioral processes in social situations. He also advocated a very direct correspondence of theory and empirical research, which is only too often missing in the work of environmental psychologists.

One area of research which always was concerned with the relation of persons to certain physical and social features of their environment, and which is therefore typically situated in the borderzone between environmental and social psychology, is crowding research. Crowding research is concerned with the analysis of the influence of spatial and/or social density on human affective, cognitive and behavioral responses.

Though being concerned with this relation per se, the above mentioned development in social psychology was also reflected in the development of crowding research. Here again very broad, mostly descriptive theoretical models, supported by only minimal empirical evidence can be found on one side (eg Altman, 1975) and reduction of the crowding phenomenon to crowding as just a subjective, experiential category (eg Stokols, 1972) can be found on the other. Defining crowding as a subjective experience greatly facilitated the output of literally a flood of empirical investigations in the 1970s, because detecting variables that for some reason or other enhance the feeling of being crowded was easy and their selection for empirical research was not limited by any theoretical restrictions. The number of empirical crowding studies has declined during the last years. This decline was accompanied by diverse attempts to explain theoretically the crowding phenomenon, which in our view have thus not been too successful. This lack of success seems to be a result of the atheoretical character of former crowding research, which makes it very hard to formulate theoretical assumptions that are compatible with the diversity of existing empirical findings, and also a result of the exaggerated selectivity of theoretical explanations that focus on only one or a few aspects of crowding and its situational antecedents.

The crowding literature offers numerous suggestions as to what the stimulus conditions producing crowdedness might be. We have started to construct a frame model with the objective of integrating the different objective as well as subjective aspects of the crowding phenomenon. This model, which cannot be described in detail here (a), is based on the psychological Handlungs-theory (b). According to this conceptualization,

- excessive stimulation,
- minimized interaction distances,
- scarce resources,
- presence of other people, and
- behavioral constraint

are identified to be the main stimulus conditions for the induction of crowdedness. The magnitude of crowdedness is a function of the relevance of these conditions for the ongoing "Handlung". "Handlungs-interference" and "Handlungs-aggravation" are supposed to be the processes mediating between the objective situational factors and the subjective experience.

(a) A comprehensive description of the model can be found in Schultz-Gambard (1985) and Schultz-Gambard & Hommel (1986).

(b) The German term "Handlung" is preferred to the English term "action" here, because Handlung has several implications which are missing in the case of "action". "Handlung" means a goal-directed and meaningful action pattern, which is hierarchically structured.

Factors which objectively hamper the execution of the ongoing Handlung so that it has either to be modified or a completely new Handlung has to be started are defined as interfering factors, whereas those factors are called aggravating factors that cause additional cognitive or affective processes within the person, which enlarge the costs of Handlungs-regulation.

In light of the growing interest in the subjective side of the crowding phenomenon it seems strange that research which actually tried to analyze empirically the conceptual dimensions of crowdedness, that is how people rather than crowding theorists construe the experience of being crowded, remained scarce. Reference can only be given to three relevant publications: Schopler et al (1979), Stockdale et al (1979) and Montano & Adamopoulos (1984).

All three studies are based on a collection of spontaneously described, naturally occurring crowding situations. This pool of situations was reduced to a smaller number of typical crowding situations, that were then rated on some kind of criterion (eg similarity), the results of which were subjected to some kind of data reduction technique (either multidimensional scaling methods or factor analysis). Using a multidimensional scaling technique Schopler et al identified three dimensions as the main crowding dimensions: "Physical-Psychological", "Familiar-Unfamiliar" and "Resultant Stress". Using a slightly different scaling method with different subjects Stockdale et al preferred a four dimensional solution: "Interpersonal Overload/Interference", "Alienation", "Anger vs. Claustrophobia/Helplessness" and "Stress (in a very general sense)". Based on factor analysis Montano & Adamopoulos differentiated between affective, situational and behavioral factors and identified as the main affective factors: "Negative Reaction towards Others", "Negative Reaction towards the Situation" and "Positive Affect".

Though certainly interesting and enlightening, the results of these studies appear to be not so very conclusive in their predicatory power and rather hard to integrate with existing theoretical and empirical findings. Impressed by the methodological elegance of the studies of Schopler and Stockdale, we therefore conducted a new study in order to find out, if with a few methodological modifications, dimensions could be found that first were more in accord with actual experience of crowding and second were possibly more compatible with known crowding theory.

Method and Results

We chose a multidimensional scaling technique, because:

- 1 this method is constructed explicitly to identify conceptual dimensions, dimensions that people employ to discriminate among a set of any kind of stimuli;
- 2 the collection as well as the computation of data effectively rules out influence of the results by the preconceptions of the researcher;
- 3 the stimulus material can be generated from the real life background of the respondents themselves, and
- 4 the dimensions obtained must not be necessarily in the awareness of the respondents, so one is able to uncover factors relevant for behavior about which people could not report adequately themselves (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). This last argument might be especially important in environmental stress research.

The study consisted of four phases. The first phase involved the collection of the crowding situation pool. Out of this pool a limited number of typical situations were

generated in phase two and these situations were rated on a number of scales that had been used to measure the subjective experience of crowding situations before. Out of this data a matrix representing the perceived similarity of the stimuli was constructed in phase three. This matrix was used as input to multidimensional scaling procedure. In phase four the dimensions found were described by use of multiple regression analyses.

Collection of the situation pool

In order to gain an ecologically valid sample of situations people feel crowded in, 105 female and male subjects (students, medium age 26) were asked to think of a situation in their life, in which they felt crowded and that was typical for their experience of feeling crowded and then to describe the features of that situation in as much detail as possible.

Construction of typical crowding situations

First, all original descriptions were subjected to a schematic classification procedure in order to find out what types of situations were represented in this sample and to what extent. After a couple of situations without reference to either crowding or density were eliminated, the remaining situations were tested for redundancy and combined when possible. The process of superimposing the situations on each other was continued until they were reduced to 15 distinct typical crowding situations. These situations were rated by two samples of 38 males subjects each (c) and according to their affective, physiological and behavioral reactions in such situations on 35 scales. The scales had proven to be useful in crowding research before. All were 6-point scales ranging from "very much" (0) to "not at all" (5).

Multidimensional scaling

The procedure used was the nonparametric multidimensional scaling procedure (Minissa). Input into the multidimensional scaling procedure was a matrix of similarities between the situations. This similarity matrix was constructed out of the raw data by computing the similarities of the individual ratings into distances by use of the Euclidian distance measure.

Results from the analyses of the crowding situations

The original pool of 105 crowding situations was coded by several experts according to a category system that reflected the situational and behavioral features of crowding situations as mentioned in the crowding literature. The frequencies are presented in Table 1.

According to the obtained descriptions

- the most common crowding situations are situated more in secondary than in primary indoor environments.
- persons are active and voluntary participants in the situations.
- situations are rather familiar but definitely evaluated negatively.

(c) One sample consisted of male recruits of the German Army, the other of male undergraduate students. Both samples were similar in age range but different in social status and educational level. Sex was held constant because this factor has proven to be a moderator variable for the experience of crowding in crowding research before (eg Stockdale, 1978; Sundstrom, 1978). The data of both samples were independently subjected to the same multidimensional scaling procedure. Since the multidimensional solutions obtained were almost identical, the results of only one solution (recruits) will be reported in the following.

- loss of situational control does not seem to be an overall important feature of the situations.
- the experience of being crowded is generally caused by other people in the situation and only to a lesser extent by any neutral situational features.
- all of the before mentioned theoretically derived antecedent conditions seem to be present in the onset of crowding: interference, excessive stimulation, resource scarcity, short interaction distances with a little less importance given to thwartings from the mere presence of other people.
- most common coping behaviors are physical withdrawal and active attempts to change the stressful crowding conditions. Other coping behaviors eg to concentrate on one's specific task, to withdraw psychologically, to coordinate or to reduce one's expectations - seem to apply more to certain specific situations.

Table 1
Characterization of the situation pool*

<u>Categories:</u> *Situational parameters*	Percentage of situations falling in either category		Not mentioned
Personal/Neutral Crowding	69.7	11.1	19.2
Short/Long Duration	77.8	17.2	5.0
Familiar/Unfamiliar	53.5	33.3	13.2
Expected/Not Expected	36.4	40.4	23.2
Regular/Not Regular	25.3	33.3	41.4
Staying Voluntarily/Involuntarily	80.8	14.1	5.1
Active/Passive Participation	56.6	18.2	25.2
Withdrawal Possible/Impossible	62.6	29.3	8.1
Involved/Not Involved	52.5	41.4	6.1
Control/No Control	63.6	32.3	4.1
Negative/Positive Evaluation	89.9	8.1	2.0
Primary/Secondary Territorium	12.1	86.9	1.0
Density/No Density	74.7	25.3	-
Indoors/Outdoors	74.7	21.2	4.1
Antecedent Crowding Conditions	Explicitly mentioned	Implicitly mentioned	Not mentioned
Interference	58.6	8.1	33.3
Excessive Stimulation	53.5	8.1	38.4
Resource Scarcity	58.6	10.1	31.3
Short Social Distances	60.6	8.1	23.3
Presence of other people	47.5	7.1	45.4
Coping Behaviors	Explicitly mentioned	Implicitly mentioned	Not mentioned
Assertiveness Behavior	23.2	39.4	37.4
Concentration/Attention	29.3	18.2	52.5
Psychological Withdrawal	18.2	21.2	60.6
Physical Withdrawal	18.2	62.6	19.2
Coordination with other people	34.3	19.2	46.5
Reduced Expectations	42.4	9.1	48.5

* in percent, based on the spontaneous answers to the question about a "typical crowding situation".

Results from the multidimensional scaling procedure

The original 105 situational descriptions were reduced to 15 distinct typical crowding situations through the procedure mentioned before. These situations are listed in an abbreviated form in Table 2.

Table 2
Set of Stimulus Descriptions in Abbreviated Form

- 1 Aggressive Encounter
 - by strangers on a back street, irritative because unusual, situation unleaveable.
- 2 Elevator
 - unwanted and unexpected meeting in the confined space of an elevator.
- 3 Examination
 - direct confrontation with many examiners.
- 4 Tram
 - tramway ride with many passengers, constraint of behavior, hot and noisy, unwanted bodily contact.
- 5 Party
 - isolated among strangers at a private party.
- 6 Traffic Jam
 - stuck in a traffic jam, stop and go, time urgency, hot and bad air.
- 7 Barracks
 - strange roommates in a small room, no privacy.
- 8 Soccer Game
 - crowded sports stadium, provocation of potentially dangerous incidents.
- 9 Store
 - crowded departmental store, constrained behavior, noisy.
- 10 Pub
 - crowded little pub, noisy, talking impossible, isolated despite bodily contact.
- 11 Pool
 - many people, uneasy to swim, not feeling constrained but disliking the bodily contact.
- 12 Cave
 - unfamiliar situation, many people crawling through a narrow space.
13. Crowded Residence
 - many people in a small apartment, difficult to concentrate, no privacy.
14. New Residence
 - first evening in new renewed residence, living alone for the first time.
- 15 Exhibition
 - many people in small rooms, behavior constrained, noisy and bad air.

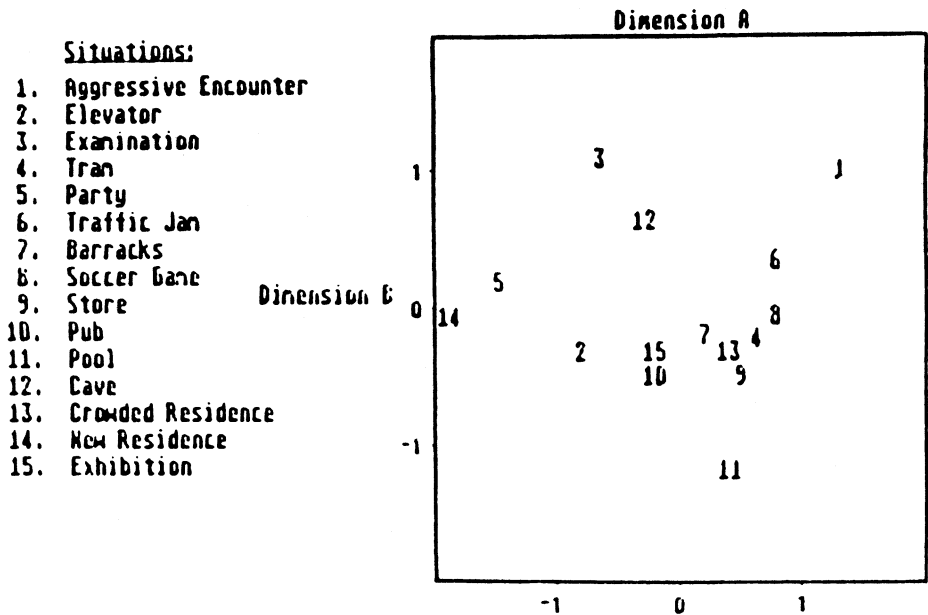
Ratings of these situations were obtained on 35 scales as mentioned before and these ratings were converted into a similarity matrix of the situations that served as input into a multidimensional scaling procedure (Minissa).

Minissa solutions were computed for up to four dimensions. According to the stress values (Table 3) as measures of the goodness to fit between solutions and data, and according to the explanatory power of the different solutions, the two dimensional solution proved to be best. This solution pictures the situations as being located on a plane, grouped in the manner shown in Figure 1.

Table 3
Results of MINISSA Solutions

Dimensions	Stress
1	.19300
2	.06681
3	.03404
4	.01778

Figure 1
Dimension B plotted against Dimension A



In order to interpret the meaning of the obtained dimensions the coordinate values of the dimensions were correlated with the mean values of the before mentioned rating scales and those scales that proved to discriminate best between the two dimensions, were selected as input into multiple regression analyses. Criterion was a highly significant correlation with one dimension in accord with a nonsignificant correlation with the other dimension. In the multiple regression analyses the dimensions served as dependent variables and the scales as predictors. As best solutions the combinations predictors were identified, in Table 4.

As best predictors of Dimension A the following combination of items was identified:

"Crowdedness", "Anger", "Behavioral constraint", "Feeling confined by other people" and "Personal interference". A multiple correlation of .9823 (explained variance 98%) could be obtained.

This dimension implies some sort of "Social Interference", whereby the relevant feature seems to be the interruption of present ongoing Handlungen. The interference is caused by social agents. It is a social act. The resulting anger remains restricted to the difficulties to execute the Handlung. Other accompanying strong affects cannot be found.

Table 4
Results of the Multiple Regression Analyses with two Dimensions found by MINISSA
Procedure as Criteria and Item Means as Predictors

DIMENSION A		R	R	Beta	Corr. with Criteria
Step	Item				
1	Personal interference	.9458	.8945	-.0413	-.9458
2	Feeling Confined by other People	.9551	.9122	-.1560	-.9408
3	Anger	.9808	.9620	-.3243	-.9282
4	Crowdedness	.9882	.9765	-.3397	-.8939
5	Behavioral constraint	.9911	.9823	-.1659	-.8748
DIMENSION B					
Step	Item	R	R	Beta	Corr. with Criteria
1	Overload	.7964	.6342	-.3813	-.7964
2	Uneasiness	.8493	.7214	-.4119	-.8230
3	Beating Heart	.8635	.7457	-.0038	-.7987
4	Uncertainty	.8795	.7735	-.6106	-.7485
5	Anxiousness	.8930	.7975	.4270	-.7153

As best predictors of Dimension B a combination of the items "Uncertainty", "Anxiousness", "Uneasiness", "Overload" and "Beating Heart" could be identified. A multiple correlation of .8930 and almost 80% explained variance were obtained.

This dimension implies a rather diffuse kind of negative affective state, defined by feelings ranging from uncertainty to anxiousness, accompanied by a physiological reaction that reflect these feelings: beating heart. The dimensional focus is localized in the person. No behavioral interference is described, but an emotional load. A weak relation to situational variables indicates a state of "overload".

Discussion

The main concern of our study was to identify the central dimensions underlying the experience of crowding. The two dimensions found are, in our opinion, both an adequate

reflection of the data obtained and also meaningful from a theoretical point of view. Apart from the results of the regression analyses the identity of the two dimensions is also reflected in the spatial ordering of the situations. So the magnitude of interference and constraint is smallest in the situation "New Apartment" and reaches its maximum in the situation "Aggressive Encounter". Medium degrees of interference can be found in a couple of typical ordinary day to day density situations like "Department Store", "Tram", or "Pub".

The social character of the interference in Dimension A seems to be focussed only on the mere constraining character of other people's presence. Other features of the aggregations of people, like the meaning of a group, its cohesion or dynamics, seem to be rather unimportant (otherwise, eg the situation "Examination", in which the other people have a very distinct meaning, should have obtained a higher value on this dimension). More important than their meaning seems to be the blocking or constraining quality of other people in the situation, which is very much in accord with our Handlungs-theoretical assumptions. If one looks closer at the descriptions of the situations, one will find that the other people do not have to be participants in any objective blockage of action in order to be constraining. Just the anticipation of interference or even their mere presence (indicating only potential interference) will suffice to arouse stress and anger in certain situations.

This exemplifies the subjective character of the dimension, because there is no simple correlation between objective situational conditions and subjectively experienced crowdedness. Nevertheless, the ordering of situations demonstrates that the magnitude of negative experience increases in those situations that can be assumed to have high interference potential.

Density situations can be annoying not just because there are many people in the situation, but because of the higher probability of Handlungs-interferences (which is highly connected with number of other people, but also with the type of individual Handlung and its relation to collective action patterns). In our study this can be demonstrated by a comparison of the different values of "Party" and "Traffic Jam". Though the absolute density figures are certainly higher in the "Party" situation, the interference potential is higher in the "Traffic" situation, which is reflected in the higher value of this situation on Dimension A.

The second dimension found is much less oriented towards objective situational features. Whereas Dimension A can be said to reflect the relation between external conditions and ongoing Handlung and its affordances, Dimension B is more focused on the effects of the external conditions on the cognitive and affective state of the person. This is also demonstrated by the ordering of situations on this dimension, where "Swimming pool" got the minimum, and "Examination" the maximum value. The dimension seems to reflect a comparison of situational demands and personal possibilities or capabilities to meet them. Whereas the focus of attention of the person perceiving the situation can be pictured to be outwardly directed for Dimension A, it is more inwardly directed for Dimension B. Whereas Dimension A is focussed on the estimation of how good the situational properties allow for the execution of an intended Handlung, Dimension B is focussed on the estimation if and how well the person assumes to be able to meet the situational demands. Therefore, both dimensions are certainly not independent. Both reflect two different aspects of the same situational quality.

The magnitude of values on Dimension B corresponds inversely to the commonness of the situations. It also varies with the biosocial importance of the situation for the individuals; as can be seen in the magnitude of difference between the "Pool" situation (which is quite common and certainly not very important) and the "Aggressive Encounter" or "Examination" situations, which should be both rather uncommon and certainly of vital

importance to the person.

One can also notice that there is a set of commonplace crowding situations ("Department Store", "Tram" and others), that seem to be very similar to each other in terms of experiential quality, that is they invoke very similar experiences in people. These situations reach medium values on both dimensions, with slightly higher values on Dimension A. Apparently the typical crowding situations in our daily lives are characterized by the presence of both experiential dimensions in moderate degrees. The situations exhibit a significant interference potential and arouse feelings of uneasiness and being overloaded. Apparently the interference dimension seems to be of a little higher importance to characterize a "crowding" situation.

Certainly the dimensions found cannot be regarded as proof of the theoretical assumptions presented at the beginning of this chapter. However, they seem to be quite compatible with these assumptions. At least there is one dimension reflecting the subjective representation of the relation of *Handlung* and environmental conditions and another dimension that reflects the effects of environmental load on the individual.

Obviously our results differ from those of Stockdale et al (1979), and Schopler et al (1979). In our opinion, this is due to two variations in minor but important methodological details. Schopler et al and Stockdale et al both obtained direct similarity ratings of the situations on a pair-comparison base from their subjects and used these as input into a multidimensional scaling procedure. We used similarities of affective responses as input into MINISSA, which we computed out of the ratings of the situations and which directly reflect the experiences of the subjects. The theoretical basis for the procedure employed by Schopler et al and Stockdale et al, is the assumption that a fixed number of certain stable cognitive categories, reflecting the basic experiential dimensions of people, underlie all similarity ratings. However, this need not be the case. If one uses stimuli as complex as these situational descriptions one runs the danger that the similarity ratings can be based on changing and rather superficial categories which might not reflect any basic dimensions. This danger is not present in our procedure, because the computation of the similarity measures is based only on statements of how the people experience the different situations.

The second variation concerns the items used for the interpretation of the dimensions. Whereas Stockdale et al used only measures of affective reactions and Schopler et al measures of both affective reactions and perceived situational features, we used measures of affective, physiological and behavioral reactions and measures of environmental evaluations as predictors in the multiple regression analyses. Thus Stockdale et al are able to identify dimensions like "Interpersonal Overload" and "Stress plus negative affective/behavioral Response" which approximate our Dimensions A and B (without their conceptual distinctiveness) but also generate remnant-dimensions like "Claustrophobic/Helpless/Angry". The dimensions of Schopler et al are more in accord with our dimensions. Their "Physical/Psychological" dimension resembles our Dimension A, and their dimension "Familiar/Unfamiliar" and "Resultant Stress" describe different, but functionally similar aspects of Dimension B.

Though the dimensions we found are quite compatible with the theoretical framework mentioned before, the findings demonstrate the limitations of a purely *Handlungs*-theoretical approach. Dimension B does not correspond with the intentional, planned instrumental behavior, which a *Handlungs*-theoretical approach suggests. Certainly, also, all kinds of cognitions, emotions and affective reactions could be defined to be part of a *Handlung* or a *Handlung* itself, which would be sufficient to integrate Dimension B. However, by doing this, valuable information and theoretical distinction would be lost, because the difference between Dimensions A and B would thus be blurred.

Whereas Dimension A is clearly focussed on the instrumental aspects of Handlung, Dimension B is more focussed on existential maintenance. Assuming that living systems have two basic functions, namely progression or development and maintenance of the system, A can be considered to correspond to the first and B to the second function. This does not mean a reintroduction of the unfortunate distinction between cognition and action, or feeling and behavior, or body and mind. Our findings merely imply that explaining the experience of crowding as only a result of an impairment of the instrumental aspects of ongoing Handlung is not sufficient, but has to be completed by an impairment of biosocial maintenance aspects. This can also be inferred from the ordering of the situations, where situations high in Dimension B embody some danger for the persons involved. Thus, when experiencing a situation such as crowding, not only the situational potential for interferences of Handlung is evaluated but also the potential for an endangerment of physical or social or psychological integrity. In the light of our results crowding should neither be conceptualized in only response terms (Stokols, 1972) nor only in stimulus terms (Freedman, 1975), but should be conceptualized as a relation with two aspects: a Handlungs-environment and a system maintenance aspect.

This has direct implications for application. When planners take into account the physical features of certain environments, eg apartment buildings, shops and stores, recreational areas, they have always to do this in relation to the preferred action patterns and the maintenance needs of the users or inhabitants. Because this task is often complicated due to the possible high variety of user groups or the lack of distinctly predictable action patterns, one answer of psychologists to design problems was "flexibility", which was neither a surprise nor any help to the planner (see Evans, 1979). We think that our approach offers at least some clear hints to designers where to aim their attention, when crowding could become a problem. Schultz-Gambard and Hommel (1986) have made some suggestions about how psychologists could act as planning consultants on the bases of systematizations of crowding research findings.

The two dimensions obtained can certainly not be regarded as the only universally valid solutions. Though empirically obtained and carefully constructed on the basis of more than 100 different crowding situations the situation pool does necessarily not encompass all possible crowding situations. Furthermore, there is a methodologically preimposed arbitrariness in the execution and interpretation of the regression analyses. It is certainly necessary to try to replicate the findings by other independent studies. We have already conducted one such study in which we allowed for the rating of individually experienced single density situations that can later be combined to standard situations. We hope to present results of this study in the near future.

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