

— A FIRST LOOK AT —
COMMUNICATION THEORY

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Proxemic Theory

of Edward Hall

Imagine that your first job after graduation is with a multinational oil company. Because of your analytical skills, lack of prejudice, and interpersonal flexibility, your boss has selected you to be part of a negotiating team sent to Saudi Arabia. After checking into your hotel room, you take a long, cool shower and then head for the lobby to meet your counterpart with the Arabian firm. After the first five minutes, you know it's going to be a long day.

Josef comes on way too strong. He stands so close that his face is only a foot away from yours. There's no letup in his penetrating gaze, and his voice is too loud. The smell of his breath is even more disconcerting, and you shudder at the feel of his hand on your arm. He strikes you suddenly as a pushy rug merchant. As for Josef, you quickly confirm his worst fears about Americans. He sees you as devious and aloof because you avert your eyes, deny him your breath, and cover up your natural body scent. Despite his overtures of friendship, you coldly back away and hold him at arm's length. He begins to picture you as an Ugly American. He thinks it'll be a long day too.

DISTANCE, THE HIDDEN DIMENSION

If anthropologist Edward Hall had been sitting in the lobby, he would have given a knowing smile at the comical and, yet, tragic scene of the advancing Arab and the retreating American. While teaching at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, Hall introduced the term *proxemics* to designate "the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture."³⁰ You'll recall from the introduction to the section on messages that Whorf's hypothesis of linguistic relativity claims that language shapes our perception of reality. Hall believes space speaks to us just as loudly as words.

That doesn't mean we listen. Hall entitled his book about distance *The Hidden Dimension* because he's convinced that most spatial interpretation is outside of our awareness. Since we don't even think about it, we never question the rightness of our actions. We learn tacit dos and don'ts by observation of others rather than through systematic instruction. In fact most people are un-

able to verbalize the cultural norms that dictate their proxemic behavior. As the anthropological adage goes, "We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the fish." It usually takes an outside observer to spot our unquestioned cultural practices. A less-than-sensitive American once asked an Indonesian about the Balinese funeral custom of placing fresh fruit on a grave. "When does your aunt climb out of her grave to eat the banana?" he asked with a smirk. "At the same time your uncle comes up to smell the flowers," was the matter-of-fact reply.

THE HUMAN ANIMAL'S USE OF SPACE

As an anthropologist and consultant on cross-cultural interaction, Hall would claim that the way you and your Saudi host perceive distance is culturally conditioned. The Arab encodes his spatial language in a Middle Eastern dialect; you handle distance with a Yankee accent. But since Hall believes all cultures are rooted in a common biology, he uses studies of animal behavior to discover how humans will act. For instance, animals are territorial. Some mark their space with urine to stake a claim for privacy. Hall says people use furniture, walls, and fences to accomplish the same purpose.

He maintains that animals respond in two distinct ways when they feel threatened—flight or fight. Distance is the critical factor. Beasts are unconcerned with potential intruders that remain outside an imaginary ring which marks the zone of threat. Cross that unseen line, and the animal will flee. There's an inner circle of space that the animal will defend against all interlopers. If by speed or guile an intruder manages to penetrate that perimeter of defense before being noticed, most creatures will instinctively attack.

People also have boundaries that mark their personal space. It's as if we walk around in an invisible bubble. Those with whom we are intimate may enter into the sphere without harm to either party. Invasion by others causes distress. Because of our animal nature, we all have a zone of personal space, but the area of personal space differs greatly from culture to culture.

Hall describes Arabs as a "contact" people whose ego is deep within the body. To touch another is no offense. He claims that there are no Arabic words for privacy or rape. Josef meant no disrespect; he was merely making an unconscious adjustment to establish an interpersonal distance that his culture held as proper. Hall also regards Latins and Southern Europeans as living in a contact culture.

The United States is a "noncontact" culture. According to Hall our ego extends approximately a foot and a half out from our body. We feel an aversion to casual touch and resent spatial intrusion. Given our cultural background, a retreat in the hotel lobby seems like the right move. Asians and Northern Europeans share our distaste for indiscriminate contact. Hall's bottom line advice for the international traveler is a corollary of an old adage: When in Rome, stand as the Romans stand.

RESEARCH WITH A RULER: PEOPLE SPACING IN AMERICA

Hall has made a first attempt to determine the limits of American proxemic zones. He categorizes distance as intimate, personal, social, or public. Since we aren't born with a built-in yardstick, he also details how we use our sense receptors to gauge the space between us. Not surprisingly, the boundaries fall at points of sensory shift. He acknowledges that he did his research on a small group of friends who were upper-middle-class Eastern professionals, so you'll want to take care not to consider his results the final word. Unfortunately, continued reiteration of his classification system makes it seem that these distances are set in stone. They're not.

Intimate Distance (0 to 18 inches). This is the distance of playful wrestling and lovemaking. Enforced closeness in crowded elevators doesn't count; Hall is talking about the voluntarily selected gap between people who are drawn to each other. At this close range, vision is distorted and any vocalization is a whisper, moan, or grunt. Our main ways of judging the intervening space are through body heat, smell, and touch.

As is true with gravity, Hall believes that "the influence of two bodies on each other is inversely proportional not only to the square of the distance but possibly even the cube of the distance between them."³¹ Although it's pure speculation, he postulates a mutual chemical impact when our thermal spheres overlap. This would mean that there are times when we're directly wired to another person's emotions, our feelings changing in sync to match his or her mood.

Personal Distance (18 inches to 4 feet). Consider these words written by W. H. Auden in "Prologue: The Birth of Architecture."

Some thirty inches from my nose
 The frontier of my Person goes,
 And all the untilled air between
 Is private *pagus* or demesne.
 Stranger, unless with bedroom eyes
 I beckon you to fraternize,
 Beware of rudely crossing it:
 I have no gun, but I can spit.³²

Although Hall agrees with the sentiment, he thinks Auden was one foot off. Eighteen inches marks the outer edge of our territorial bubble and the beginning of personal space. Here we lose the sense of body heat and all but the most powerful odors. Eyesight begins to focus, and vocalization comes into play. Although only ritualized touch is typical, the other person is still at arm's length, available to be grasped, held, or shoved away. Where a person stands within this range shows the closeness of the relationship.

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Social Distance (4 to 10 feet). This is the zone of impersonal transaction. We now have to rely solely on what we can see and hear. By the middle of the range, the eye can focus on an entire face. When the distance is more than eight feet, it's OK to ignore another's presence and it's easy to disengage from a conversation.

Public Distance (10 feet to infinity). Once you're this far out, you can no longer pick up subtle nuances of meaning from the face or tone of voice. The eye can take in the whole body at a glance. It's the distance of the lecture hall, mass meetings, and interactions with powerful figures until such time as they bid you to come closer.

CROSS-CULTURAL SUPPORT FOR PROXEMIC VARIATION

Those who judge the validity of Hall's proxemic theory by the rigor and vigor of his reported research usually relegate it to the category of idle speculation. He conducted one study involving simulated job interviews with working-class urban blacks, Hispanics, and middle-class whites, but the uneven results had more to do with eye contact than interpersonal distance.

He does offer an elaborate system of proxemic notation for others to use in research. These measures include posture, the extent to which the people are facing each other, distance, touch, eye contact, thermal heat, smell, and vocal loudness. The conceptual logic of the list is unclear. The first four are obvious proxemic indicators, while the last four seem to be ways of either gauging distance or compensating for inappropriate spacing.

Although Hall's support for his theory consists mainly of intriguing personal stories of cross-cultural encounters, other scholars have systematically put his ideas to the test. Purdue University anthropologist Michael Watson investigated the validity of Hall's distinction between contact and noncontact cultures. He observed the conversations between pairs of international students from the same country. Just as Hall claimed, Arab, Latin American, French, Italian, and Turkish students gave evidence of being contact people. They touched more, positioned themselves closer, faced more directly, and held mutual gaze longer than noncontact nationals. The latter group included pairs from Germany, England, Norway, Japan, Southeast Asia, India, Pakistan, and the United States. Consistent with Hall's theory, neither group could verbalize the cultural rules that guided their behavior. They just did it.

A NONVERBAL SYSTEM HELD IN EQUILIBRIUM

Early proxemic researchers quickly discovered that it's foolish to treat space as a nonverbal factor that stands on its own. Even if you and Josef shared the same cultural background, appropriate conversational distance in the hotel lobby would change on a sliding scale depending on your sex, perceived status, topic of conversation, surrounding noise, and so forth. We'll look at two subsequent proxemic theories that treat distance as part of an integrated system. Oxford University social psychologist Michael Argyle's equilibrium theory pulls together common-sense observations, whereas Judee Burgoon's nonverbal expectancy violations model comes up with some surprising predictions.

Equilibrium theory starts with the notion that any relationship can be plotted on a scale showing the degree of intimacy. Take your association with your instructor in this communications course. You might have already developed a warm friendship or a mutual complementary bond as between an eager student and a respected mentor. It is also possible that you've never spoken to each other and don't particularly care to start now. Chances are the situation is somewhere in between—that you know and like each other moderately well. What-

ever the approach-avoidance ratio, the theory suggests you will adjust your nonverbal actions to maintain that degree of intimacy.

Distance and eye contact are a case in point. Argyle claims that the two are used to counterbalance each other in a subconscious attempt to preserve the status quo. Perhaps alphabetically assigned seating has relegated you to a seat in the back of the room. The location doesn't reflect the closeness you may feel, so you work to reestablish equilibrium by riveting your eyes on the instructor. Or maybe you are seated at a distance too close for comfort. Letting your gaze slide away can restore a proper sense of balance.

Have you ever wondered why twenty adults squeezed into an elevator find the progression of indicator lights above the door so fascinating? By looking up we avoid having to exchange even a momentary glance with the other riders. Turning around to face the people behind us would precipitate a mutual rise in pulse rate and blood pressure. Argyle includes topic intimacy (weather versus personal fears) and facial expression (frown versus smile) as additional communication tools we have to keep a relationship at the desired "temperature."

DOING THE UNEXPECTED

Unlike Hall, University of Arizona communications professor Judee Burgoon doesn't regard departure from proxemic norms as necessarily harmful to a relationship. Her nonverbal expectancy violations model predicts that in some cases, breaking the rules will even help the offender reach a communication goal. She begins with the same assumption as Hall—that there's a culturally appropriate distance at which one should interact. Perhaps at your school the normal student-professor discussion occurs at a distance of three feet. Burgoon reminds us that within a given culture there are wide individual differences. If you've noticed that your instructor has shown a tendency to back off from close contact, you'll want to take that into account as you contemplate your moves.

In order to figure out the anticipated interaction distance, you have to factor in both the norms of society and your professor's idiosyncrasies. Of course just because that's what someone expects doesn't mean you're going to act that way. What will happen if you don't?

Minor deviations will tend to get lost in the shuffle of competing nonverbal cues. If noticed, they can be easily dismissed by the professor as having no significance. But when the distance you choose doesn't even come close to the one forecasted, the expectancy violations will cause arousal and distraction. Instead of concentrating on what you say, the teacher will start wondering about the nature of your relationship. This could be good news or bad news depending on whether your presence is seen as in positive or negative terms. If you come across as a person who is unattractive and with little to offer, the spotlight on your relationship is going to detract from your purpose. The best advice Burgoon has to offer is, "Don't do it." Stifle your deviant tendencies, and do your best to conform to the spatial expectations.

It's a different story if your instructor likes you. When the violation is in the direction of unexpected nearness, it comes as a pleasant surprise. Because you're nice to be near, physical closeness is translated into a psychological closeness which fosters greater understanding, trust, attitude change, and the other positive payoffs you seek through communication.

Burgoon is less certain about how a violation that creates a wider gap than normal can work to your benefit. But she notes that distance violations are highly ambiguous. When we notice that a person has taken up a position further away than we anticipated, we search the social context for clues that will help us understand what it means. At first blush the unexpected void is disconcerting. But if it's accompanied by words and smiles that take the sting out of the space, the valued rule breaker becomes even more valued. It's surprising that standing too far away can turn out well, but, after ten years of testing and refining her theory, Burgoon is convinced that for rewarding relationships, a distance either too close or too far is better than spacing that's "just right."

CRITIQUE: A THEORY OF DISTANCE THAT COMES UP SHORT

Hall's system of proxemics has value in that it calls attention to a previously ignored channel of communication. Consciousness-raising springs from good theory. Unfortunately, it also arises from bizarre statements that are long on certainty but short on support. Hall's critics are quick to point out the unscientific nature of his claims. Their list of charges includes these:

Sweeping generalizations—dividing the world into contact and noncontact people.

Cultural stereotypes—Arabs have no sense of a private zone outside their bodies.

Unsubstantiated claims—the chemical influence of one body on another is inversely proportional to the square of the distance separating them.

Conceptual confusion—a vague blend of cultural and biological determinism.

Some or all of Hall's assertions may be true. But the shotgun way in which he fires them off without solid evidence to back them up makes him seem like a cultural gunslinger from the American West who shoots first and asks questions later.

If Hall's critics are less than enthusiastic about the details of his proxemic theory, they have to admire its impact. At a time when nonverbal communication theory remains in short supply, his ideas capture the imagination of a wide audience and continue to generate a large body of proxemic research. Others may disagree with him on his starting point, method, and conclusion, but they can't avoid his terminology. It was Hall who staked out the territory.

A SECOND LOOK

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30 Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y., 1966, p. 1.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 121.

32 W. H. Auden, "Prologue: The Birth of Architecture," *About the House*, Random House, New York, 1966, p. 14.