

Proxemic Zones:

The Implications of Interaction Distance

It seems that everyone in a lift looks at the numbers on the panel, not at one another. In close proximity, if people cannot move, they reduce eye contact. On a commonsense level, we know that this is one of the ways in which people protect their personal space.

Anthropologist Edward T. Hall coined the term proxemics for the systematic study of the causes and effects of personal space requirements. Interaction distance, which is one important attribute of personal space, is defined by Darwyn E. Linder, a psychology professor at Arizona State University, as "...the straight line distance between two parties to a social interaction" (1974, p. 1). Hall (1969) theorizes that interaction distance has profound meanings and consequences in interpersonal relations. In this regard, we are similar to other animals. The distances that humans and nonhuman animals maintain from members of their own species generally tell us a great deal about status, relationships, and probable conduct. The dynamics of interaction distance have profound implications for communication and behaviour in organizations.

Interaction Distances

The Swiss animal psychologist H. Hediger (1950, 1955, 1961) believes that the manner in which animals divide their territories serves both communicative and survival functions. Hediger attempts to classify interaction distances in nonhuman species. He defines flight distance as the point at which an animal flees from a potential predator, critical distance as the zone between flight distance and the distance at which a cornered animal will fight to defend its territory, social distance as the average spacing maintained in groupings of the species, and individual distance as the boundary within which "non-contact" species will take action to eject an intruder.

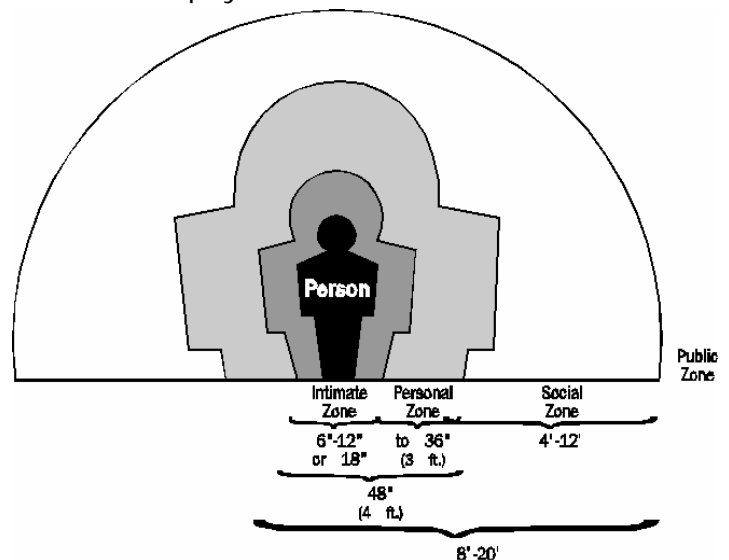
Building on Hediger's work, Hall (1959, 1969) speculates that humans exhibit some of the same conventions regarding space that had been observed in other animals. Hall notes that Hediger's flight and critical distances were relatively less important determinants of human territoriality, but that social and individual distances play a major role in the organization of human interactions.

In *The Silent Language* (1959), Hall classifies eight human interaction distances, which he subsequently simplifies to "close" and "far" phases of four distances. In his classification scheme, the degree of expressed or desired intimacy is inversely related to the physical distance between people. That is, the more intimacy that is desired, the less distance is desired; the less intimacy that is desired, the more space is desired.

Thus, the theory of proxemic zones delineates the social significance of the space surrounding a person's body. Each person perceptually structures his or her own spatial field into several zones of varying intensities. The presence

of another individual within one of these zones has certain effects on the attitudes and actions of the "owner" of the territory.

The figure illustrates the four principal proxemic zones.



Intimate Zone

The range of the intimate zone is defined by one's culture. In Western culture, particularly for middleclass Americans, the intimate zone typically extends six to twelve inches outward from the body, perhaps as much as eighteen inches. It usually is reserved for personal friendships or sexual intimacy. The owner of the territory may react to an unauthorized intrusion into this zone with defensive feelings, avoidance behaviour, and, sometimes, even with hostility.

Personal Zone

For Americans, the personal zone extends outward from the edge of the intimate zone to about an arm's length, approximately thirty-six inches beyond the intimate zone, or from twelve to forty-eight inches beyond the body. This probably explains the American figure of speech "keeping him at arm's length." In some cultures, notably Mediterranean, the personal zone is smaller than this. For a Greek or an Italian, a friend standing at a distance of an arm's length would seem too distant for comfortable interaction. Entrance into an individual's personal zone usually is by invitation only.

Social Zone

From the edge of the personal zone, an individual's social zone extends outward to a distance determined by his or her environment. In American culture, the social zone tends to extend eight to twenty feet beyond the body. In a quiet office, the social zone might extend four to twelve feet beyond the personal zone. In a noisy or crowded situation, the social zone might be as short as six to eight feet beyond the personal zone. When a person becomes aware of another individual within the social zone, he or she generally feels inclined to interact with that person in some way.

Public Zone

The public zone extends indefinitely outward from the edge of the individual's social zone. People within a person's public zone usually do not exert significant influence on the person's nonverbal behaviour. They are perceived as undifferentiated aspects of the environment, usually requiring no special attention from the individual.

The following table describes the close and far phases of Hall's four distances:

Distance	Close Phase	Distant Phase
Intimate	Contact - 6 inches. Amorous and physically aggressive behaviours occur at this distance.	6 - 18 inches. Touching and hushed or whispered communications occur at this distance.
Personal	18 - 30 inches. Personal companions, spouses, or those communicating at a crowded social event assume this distance.	30 - 48 inches. Informal discourses between acquaintances and companions occur at this distance.
Social	4 - 7 feet. Informal, impersonal business interactions occur at this distance.	7 - 12 feet. Formal business (e.g., interviews or negotiations) is transacted at this distance.
Public	12- 25 feet. Speeches and other formal, one-way communications occur this distance.	25 feet or more. Very formal ceremonies and performances, designed to preclude two-way discourse, occur at this distance.

Inferences from Interaction Distances

Hall (1969) speculates that interaction distance serves a communicative function, in the sense that the distances people adopt for their interactions give others clues about intended messages or the feelings

being expressed in the relationship. Research in social psychology has largely substantiated Hall's theory.

In one experiment, Kenneth B. Little (1965) attributed various kinds of relationships among the people represented by cardboard cut-outs and then asked his subjects to place the cut-outs in an arrangement. In another experiment, Little asked his subjects to position live female actors, whose relationships with each other had been described at varying levels of friendship. In both experiments, physical proximity of assignment varied in accordance with the subjects' information about the intimacy of the relationships. If the subjects thought that a pair of actresses or cardboard cut-outs had a more intimate relationship than another pair, they placed them physically closer together than they placed members of the emotionally remote pair.

Several experimental studies suggest that adopting particular interaction distances might be one of the ways in which humans express their degree of attraction and liking for others, in spite of their lack of conscious attention to the possibility that the distance conveys a message. Albert Mehrabian (1968), a psychologist at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that interaction distance (along with eye contact, body orientation, and body relaxation) was indicative of a communicator's liking for another person. Mehrabian asked different communicators to imagine that they were addressing people whom they either "liked intensely, liked moderately, neither liked nor disliked, disliked moderately, or disliked intensely." Although he avoided telling the communicators he used as subjects how close to approach, Mehrabian found that the more likable the addressee was supposed to be, the closer the subjects moved toward that person. (This was true whether the subjects were approaching someone of the same or opposite sex and was equally true for male and female subjects.) Donn Byrne, Glen Baskett, and Louis Hodges (1971) found that females chose closer adjacent seating and males chose closer face-to-face seating when the experimenters informed them that the target persons had attitudes similar to their own. Not surprisingly, two other studies show that people stand closer to friends and acquaintances than to strangers (Little, 1965; Willis, 1966). A person's desire for approval was shown to decrease interaction distance in still another study (Rosenfeld, 1965).

Leadership methods and influence attempts also can determine how closely humans will approach each other. Mehrabian and Williams (1969) instructed communicators to adopt different levels of intended persuasiveness for a communication and found that smaller interaction distances are adopted for higher persuasive intent.

Interaction distance may reveal true feelings about immutable characteristics, even when the people interacting may be reluctant to admit their feelings to themselves. In polite American society, it generally is inappropriate to express disdain or dislike for another person with a handicap or other stigmatising identification. Sociologist Erving Goffman, in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), intimates that powerful societal norms cause people to inflate the rankings they give when asked to rate the attractiveness of a handicapped person. However, Goffman cites research that suggests that non-stigmatised people betray their concealed uneasiness by maintaining a larger than normal distance when interacting with a person who allegedly possesses a stigma such as epilepsy (Kleck, 1968).

Temporary conditions of the communication target also may affect interaction distance. Leipold (1963) observed that students whose stress level had been elevated by the news that they were doing poorly in a course placed their chairs farther away from a person with whom they were to discuss their academic progress than did non-stressed students.

Cultural Differences

Hall (1969) observes that the distances adopted in day-to-day interactions may be culturally determined. If Hall is correct, this phenomenon could have profound implications for international commerce and diplomacy. A business person from the United States or Europe, where the interaction distance appears to be relatively large, may seem cold, distant, and aloof to colleagues from Middle Eastern and East Asian cultures, where the interaction distance is smaller. Meanwhile, the Western person may feel that the Eastern person is being overly aggressive. If the intercultural encounter occurs while both parties are standing, the pair is liable to do an odd little dance across the room, in which the Westerner backs up while the Easterner advances. Unless one or both parties are sensitive to this intercultural difference, both parties are likely to feel sufficiently uncomfortable to undermine the purpose of the meeting.

Applications of Knowledge About Interaction Distance

Research suggests that purposeful manipulation of the distance adopted during interactions can create (desired or undesired) emotional, attitudinal, or behavioural effects in others.

Robert Sommer, a psychologist at the University of California, Davis, has written extensively on the architectural design implications of proxemics. For example, Sommer's (1967) research provides support for his expressive contact theory of classroom ecology. Generally, he has found that participation in classroom discussion increases as a function of

decreased distance and increased opportunity for contact between instructor and student. Students in front row centre seats of classrooms conventionally arranged in rows participated more than did students who were seated at the sides of the rooms. When classrooms are arranged in horseshoes rather than rows, more students are directly in contact with the instructor and more participation occurs. The implications of these findings for training, education, and management communication are obvious.

Several physiological and social phenomena suggest that purposely decreasing interaction distance can be somewhat emotionally arousing. Eye contact decreases as conversants' are brought closer together (Argyle and Dean, 1965). Galvanic skin response (GSR)—the changes in electrical conductivity of skin brought about by the variability of pallor or other sweating—increases as a person is approached. (According to McBride, King, and James (1965), the increase of GSR occurs most rapidly when the approach is frontal, less rapidly when it is from the side, and least rapidly when it is from the rear.)

Body Language

The idea of body language (kinesics) is very closely connected with the concept of proxemic zones. People's nonverbal messages—posture, gestures, movements, sounds, etc.—usually will express their attitudes toward the presence of others within their spatial zones. For example, they may react to an uninvited intrusion into their personal zones by backing away, turning aside, avoiding eye contact, or appearing to be preoccupied with some distraction. Two people who are engaged in a stand up conversation often will turn so that the fronts of their bodies form a right angle. This enables them to control the level of personal involvement quite precisely.

If stranger A is placed within the personal zone of individual B, B usually will adjust his body configuration. For example, on a crowded bus, rider B probably will keep his face and torso oriented away from intruding stranger A. Rider B may preoccupy himself with anything from reading a book to picking imaginary lint from his sleeve. His nonverbal signals say to intruder A, "I accept your presence, but I do not intend to interact with you in any significant way." The intruding person probably will transmit many of the same signals. If the two should decide to engage in conversation, their nonverbal signals are likely to change, reflecting their increased relaxation and acceptance of more involvement.

Perhaps the most interesting study of body language centres on two person and small group interactions within the social zone. This is the space in which a great deal of business is transacted. It is also the zone

in which casual social interactions occur. People in a business conference usually are within social distance of one another. However, participants who are sitting side by side might share their personal zones while they confer quietly on some topic or other. The side by side geometry makes the proximity acceptable. At a family gathering or a quiet party in someone's living room, people also will be within social distance of one another.

Use of the Theories

The study of kinesics and proxemics offers abundant resources for interpreting nonverbal signals between people who are interacting at a social distance. General body position, posture, movements, gestures, and small mannerisms can be observed and interpreted to gain knowledge about the feelings and attitudes of individuals. This knowledge can be used to facilitate one's own communication with others. By adopting certain nonverbal patterns, one can help others to relax, open up to communication, and increase empathy. One also can compare the nonverbal messages of others with their verbal statements to determine whether they are holding back, concealing information, or trying to mislead.

One can observe individuals and make some assessment of their general patterns of relating to others on physical terms. However, it is important to include factors such as the presence of a large number of people, the general physical environment, the noise level, the social setting, and the physical peculiarities of the individuals involved. For example, when a short person is interacting with a tall person, the short person's personal zone might be larger than it would be if he or she were dealing with someone of the same height. Many tall people are unaware that a difference in height intimidates some shorter individuals, causing them to seek a larger personal zone from which to interact.

It should be remembered that the four proxemic zones represent attitudinal and behavioural regions, rather than measurable aspects of the human body. In this regard, they should not be considered universal or invariable for any one individual. Each person's behaviour is shaped by many factors other than proxemic zones.