

Evaluation of hall's theory of proxemics



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Discussion

The spatial zone theory, or proxemics, was coined by Edward T Hall, and is defined as the way humans and animals use space in two dimensions: distance and territoriality. His theory describes how people and animals perceive, use, and interpret distance, and correlates how people use physical distance based on emotional states and situational context. Proxemics, a form of nonverbal communication, used in conjunction with verbal communication, send the message of how people feel towards a person, or a situation.

In *The Hidden Dimension*, Hall describes four spatial zones to describe nonverbal communication he observed specifically in Americans: The intimate distance is six to eighteen inches, and it is noted that “ the head is seen as enlarged in size, and its features are distorted”, (Hall, 1966, p. 117). Next, personal distance is one and half to two and a half feet, and at this distance hands can easily grab extremities; keeping someone at “ arm’s length”. Social distance, four to seven feet, is the distance that is most common in business encounters or social gatherings. Lastly, public distance is twelve to twenty-five feet, and is a common distance held between a speaker and the audience.

The territorial aspect of Hall’s theory describes how humans and animals use space to mark ownership of areas and possessions. There are three different types of territory: Primary, Secondary, and public. Primary territory can be a person’s house and yard, and commonly property lines are acknowledged. Secondary territory are spaces that don’t belong to a person, but are

associated with that person, like a classroom or work office. Lastly, public territory are streets, parks, or a space that is open to anyone.

Proxemic research has opened the door for a number of new areas of research. Two varying theories about how space is used in communication that were inspired by Hall's work are: The Equilibrium Theory, and Expectancy Violation Model. The Equilibrium Theory, developed by Michael Argyle, states that people adjust their physical proximity to reach a shared level of intimacy in communication. The Expectancy Violation Model, proposed by Judee Burgoon, analyzed an individual's expectations of personal distance, and how a intrusion of personal space violates the expectations of another. Michael Argyle, previously mentioned as the developer of the Equilibrium theory, applied proxemics in the studies of his theory. He uses these two theories in conjunction to explain how mutual gaze and proxemics are inversely related.

Although Hall's theory of spatial zones is based on American behavior, that doesn't mean he didn't spend time studying other cultures, as different cultures have different unstated rules about personal space. He was the first to discuss high-context cultures and low-context cultures: Low-context cultures, individualistic cultures, rely on explicitly stated social rules, and oppositely, high-context cultures rely heavily on unspoken context of a situation. Firstly, he did some research on other low-context cultures, like Germany and England. Hall found that while greeting gestures were very similar to America, consisting of minimal body contact, Americans preferred to keep more space between themselves and the person they are speaking to, Hall, 1966, p. In High Context cultures, collectivist cultures, Hall found <https://assignbuster.com/evaluation-of-halls-theory-of-proxemics/>

that Arabic in Arabic countries, the right to personal space in a public area doesn't exist. He noted that when talking to some of his Arabic friends, they were confused at the concept of a person's right to having personal space in a public setting, (Hall, 1966, p. 156).

Hall has been criticized for making generalizations about low-context, and high-context cultures, as his studies weren't considered broad enough. Further research has found that there are many more factors that can affect spatial awareness, such as gender, age, and even the climate. In an article published in the Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, interpersonal distances were analyzed over almost nine-thousand participants from 42 different countries. Findings concluded that not only culture, but age, gender, and the climate in a given region produces variations in proximity. The findings suggest that warmer climates induced closer social proximity, and that women, the elderly, and people in colder climate preferred a larger distance in social proximity. It was also found that gender especially affected a larger social proximity in collectivist cultures, (Sorokowska, et al, 2017).

In modern society, it isn't always possible to respect another person's personal domain, for example, crowded public transit or crowded urban communities. Although these situations can be uncomfortable, they are accepted as part of everyday life. Cultures with a high population density are used to close proximity in everyday, like previously mentioned about the unstated lack of a person's right to personal space in public in Arabic countries.

With the prevalence of advanced technology in modern society, it is interesting to note the new avenues of testing the theory of proxemics. In an article published in the Journal of Environmental Psychology in 2016, the use of Immersive Virtual Reality was used to determine comfortable distance between the participants and a virtual avatar. The virtual avatars used consisted of stationary and moving children, and adults of both male and female genders. The findings parallel most theories of the effect on gender in social proximity; increased distance in females, and decreased distance in males. Additionally, children took on a larger proximity than adults. (Iachini, T., Coello, Y., Frassinetti, F., Senese, V., Galante, F., & Ruggiero, G. , 2016).

Hall's theory of Proxemics is an important aspect of everyday communication that happens mostly without one's knowledge. To become more competent in communication it is vital to be able to read and express nonverbal cues, as they can say a lot about a person's feelings; it is how people communicate comfort or discomfort, and assertion of dominance, among other things. It is especially important in intercultural communication, as everyone has a different innate sense of how to perceive space based on their culture. Observing another person's level of proximity in any interaction can reveal a lot about how the person is feeling in that situation, and being able to sense these nonverbals cues can be incredibly valuable to making the other feel comfortable and leave a good impression.

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