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Proxemics

The study of personal space

Before we embarked on our recent trip to Indonesia, we did as much research as we could to prepare ourselves for what we would encounter.

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Along with other social customs, such as forms of greeting and what is considered appropriate to wear, we learned that the idea of [personal space](#) is very different in Indonesia. In addition to tropical heat, large bugs, and infectious diseases, I thought of this as just another challenge to be faced as part of our adventure.

I wasn't prepared for how much this difference would affect me. We did experience searing heat, spiders the size of coasters, and a few bouts of minor illness, but surprisingly these [discomforts paled in comparison](#) to our discomfort in navigating crowded streets and markets. It wasn't just the huge numbers of people in a small space that got to us, because we have faced similar situations in the large North American cities

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have faced similar situations in the large North American cities we've lived in. It was partly the way people frequently came into close proximity even when there was plenty of space around and there was therefore no need to do so. In addition, we couldn't remain invisible; even people who kept their distance were constantly asking us to buy something or just *noticing* us. While for these folks there was nothing out of the ordinary in these interactions, some instinct in us registered these approaches as invasive.

Don't Stand So Close To Me

In 1966 anthropologist [Edward T. Hall](#) coined the term *proxemics* to describe the study of how people perceive the proximity of others. Hall's work was inspired by an animal study conducted by German zoologist [Heini Hediger](#), who found that animals maintained various boundaries depending on whether they were preparing to escape, to attack, to communicate with members of another species, or relating to a member of their own species.

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Based on these insights, and after conducting his own research, [Edward Hall](#) developed the idea of a set of expanding circles,

called *reaction bubbles*, that described how humans manage the space around them. The innermost circle he identified as Intimate space, reserved for those we are closest to, and usually measuring 6 to 18 inches (15 to 45cm) in radius. The next level up he dubbed Personal space, the distance we are comfortable maintaining with close friends, about 1.5 to 4 feet (0.5 to 1.2m). He used the term Social space to indicate our preferred proximity to acquaintances, about 5–12 feet (1.5–3.6m), and Public space for the distance we need for public speaking, 12–25 feet or more (3.6–7.6m).

This sounds very specific, but Hall himself acknowledged that

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these distances vary from culture to culture. While those from less-populated countries, or countries where individualism and privacy are highly valued, are more comfortable with larger spaces between themselves and others, in other cultures maintaining what is considered excessive distance can be perceived as rude or unfriendly.

Ignorance is Bliss

Because in certain situations it is not always possible to keep our preferred distance from others—for example in crowded subway cars or elevators—we learn coping mechanisms to deal with our discomfort. Psychologists observe that individuals in these circumstances often avoid eye contact as a way to minimize the forced intimacy of close quarters. Another strategy we employ, according to psychologist Robert Sommer, is to dehumanize those around us, imagining them as inanimate objects in our personal space instead of the more anxiety-producing fellow creatures they are.

- I think these strategies are in play in most large cities and in other situations where it's is too threatening to
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acknowledge the close presence of others. My own discomfort is assuaged by passing others anonymously on a crowded sidewalk, or keeping to myself in a cramped airplane cabin. Of course, the illusion of space is shattered when I'm approached on the street, or when the passenger behind me starts kicking my chair. At these moments I feel my blood pressure rise, my stomach clench, and my temper grow short. While this reaction might be appropriate in truly life-threatening situations, nothing is at stake most of the time. Maybe knowing that I am responding only to a perceived threat to my safety will help me to remain calm the next time this happens. Then again, maybe not. —Morgen Jahnke



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More Information about Proxemics...

Wikipedia gives a good summary of [proxemics](#) and [personal space](#), as does [this recent article](#) from The New York Times.

Robert Sommer's book [Personal Space: The Behavioral Basis of Design](#) is available from Amazon.com.

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