About FAQ View: Standard Blog

Contact Suggest a Topic Write for ITotD

February 15, 2007

Proxemics

The study of personal space

Guest Article by Morgen Jahnke

Before we

embarked on Ads by Goooooogle

Advertise on this site

our recent trip to Indonesia, we did as much research as we

could to

Cross-Cultural Training

prepare Web tools and class based learning for business

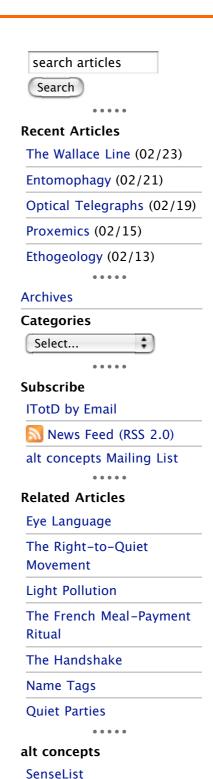
ourselves for executives

what we would www.tmaworld.com

encounter.
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 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



NEW! The Geeky Gourmet

02/24/2007 11:43 PM

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.

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 these distances vary from culture to culture. While those from lesspopulated 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 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 lifeI Am Joe's Blog

Recently on SenseList

Seven TV Shows That Died an Untimely Death

Six and Three-Quarters Ways to Run Windows on a Mac

32 Edible Insect Foods You Can Buy Online

Six (or More) Names for the Day Before Lent Begins

Recently on The Geeky

Gourmet

Cookie decorating: Secrets of the pros

Eggettes

Brushed Stainless-Steel Cream Whipper

Thanksgiving Post Round-Up

Buy ITotD Merchandise



Meta

W3C XHTML 1.1 (BLOGWISE

» Blogs that link here

🤩 Technorati



Ads by Google

Corporate Culture

Promoting ethical behavior and accountability in business. www.OCEG.org/

Farnham Castle

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

Learn More:

For links and additional resources on this topic, skip ahead to the More Information section.

Permalink • Email this Article • •

Bookmark this article at: del.icio.us • Digg • Fark • Netscape •

reddit • Yahoo! MyWeb

German Cultural Center

Language Classes, Museum, Library, Music, Cinema, Arts & Hall Rental Ads by Gooooogle

Cross-cultural training

Learn skills in culture, teams, pro management, leadership

Advertise on thi

Categories: Mind & Body, Society & Culture

Tags: proxemics, personal space

Audio

All Interesting Thing of the Day articles are also available as downloadable audio recordings (podcasts). Our free RSS feed includes one podcast per week. Paid subscribers get a special feed that features podcasts of every article, plus access to a page where any previous recording can be downloaded. As a bonus, subscribers can also opt to receive the full text of every article by email. Sign Up Now!

PODCAST

Download MP3 Audio Version of This Article (05:00;

4.59 MB)

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.

Ads by Google **Hall Evans** Study Japanese Japanese Jobs <u>Japan</u>

Virtual Tip Jar

Did you find this article interesting, entertaining, or useful? If so, please consider donating a few dollars to the author to support the ongoing development of Interesting Thing of the Day. [Donate via: PayPal | Other/More Information]

Cross Cultural Training & Briefing Intercultural Training for Business www.interculturaltraining.co.uk

Cultural Consulting

Cultures & Languages spell results for your company! www.hansaone.com

Communication issues

Greater productivity Read Cut to the Chase www.stuartlevine.com

Free Ethics Webinar

"Ethical Actions that Matter: Elements of and Ethics Culture" www.workingvalues.com

Advertise on this site



© 2007 alt concepts, inc.

