

# Sociology Shortcuts

## C1. Proxemics Theory

**Proxemics theory** - originally developed by **Hall** (1966) - is the study of the various ways people understand and use **space** in a cultural context.

As such it's an interesting and informative way to both illustrate the idea of **cultural learning** and show the inter-relationship between basic cultural concepts such as:

- **Socialisation.**
- **Roles.**
- **Norms.**
- **Social status.**
- **Values.**

**Hall** argued different cultures create different ways of "seeing space", with the most familiar and easily accessible example for our purpose being the idea of **personal space**. This is defined in terms of an area (or "bubble") that surrounds each of us and which varies:

1. **Between cultures:** in England or the United States, for example, people generally like to maintain a greater sense of personal distance from others than they do in countries like France or Brazil.

2. **Within cultures:** this involves gender differences in our society. Two women talking to each other tend to maintain less personal space between them than two men talking.



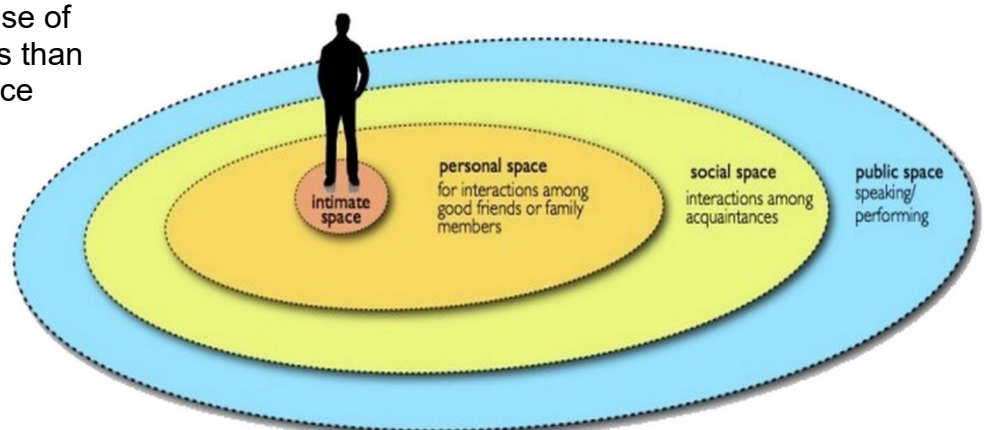
This concept of personal space can be further refined in terms of what Hall calls three different types of space.

**Intimate space** is a very small space around the individual entry into which is by "invitation only". We may comfortably invite *very* close friends, family members or our doctor into this space.

**Social and consultative spaces:** areas where we feel comfortable carrying-out routine social interactions with friends, acquaintances and strangers.

**Public space** is an impersonal area filled with relatively anonymous interactions (making sure you don't bump into people when walking down the street, for example).

Intimate - and to some extent social - space is sometimes called *owned space* because we consider it "our property", entry into which is regulated in various ways - something we can relate to different roles, values and norms using **Hall's** classic example...



## Strangers Waiting for a Train



When waiting for a train at a railway station we frequently play the **role** of *stranger* to other people also waiting for the train to arrive.

In this situation the role, as with any other role we play, is surrounded by certain **values**. The idea, for example, we should not behave towards strangers as if they were our closest friend in the world. In this particular example one of the values we bring to bear is that of **privacy** and, more specifically, the notion of **personal space** as a way of maintaining privacy. When playing the role of stranger we value the cultural concept of privacy, both for our own purposes and those of others.

In other words, we understand that privacy is an important concept in our culture and we should not act in ways that invade - uninvited - the privacy of others (just as we expect them not to invade our privacy).

One way this value is expressed is through various norms that apply in particular situations. In this instance, one norm that reflects the role of stranger and the value of privacy is that we do not sit too close to strangers; we do not, in short, invade their personal space.

### Deviance and Defensible Space

Just as individuals organise space, the same is true of societies generally and this idea has been applied to the idea of managing physical space as a way of controlling some forms of **crime**.

**Newman's** (1996) concept of **defensible space** argued a mix of '*real and symbolic barriers, strongly defined areas of influence and improved opportunities for surveillance*' could be used to deter crime.

*Alleygate* projects, for example, limit access to 'outsiders' on housing estates - locked gates to which only residents have the key stop potential offenders gaining access to houses and making their escape through a maze of alleys.



**CCTV surveillance** has also become a familiar sight in many towns, cities and individual

### Experimenting with Personal Space

Using a relatively closed environment such as your school or college library.

- Observe and record the responses of students whose personal space you deliberately invade (for example, by standing too close to someone). How do people of the same and opposite sex react?
- Observe and record how people try to protect their personal space. How are props (books and bags) used to prevent uninvited people sitting next to them?

Using masking tape, place an X on the floor. Ask one student volunteer to stand on it. Individually, get other students to slowly approach this student until the volunteer tells them to "stop" when the approaching person is close enough that they start to feel uncomfortable. Measure the distance between the two students. Repeat with a variety of volunteers and approaches from different directions (behind, to the side)

What conclusions can be drawn from this exercise?