

# Proxemics

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss a particular form of nonverbal communication that can be impacted by culture. The particular areas of focus include:

1. Proxemics as a Communication Style
  - a. Polite Conversational Distance
  - b. Use of Physical Space

## 1. Proxemics as a Communication Style

**Proxemics** is a communication style that uses space and positioning as a symbol for communicating.

We all use space and positioning to send messages, but we don't often think about it because it's just the natural way we operate within our culture.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Proxemics**

The communication style which uses space and positioning as a symbol.

#### **1a. Polite Conversational Distance**

Polite conversational distance is one way proxemics presents itself.

#### **IN CONTEXT**

In the United States, people like personal space. Typically when talking to someone, unless it's someone like a family member with whom you have a close relationship, you probably want to stand a little bit farther from the person because that's what feels right to you.

However, there are cultures in which that polite conversational distance, even with strangers, is a lot closer.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** If you're talking to someone from a culture in which a closer conversational distance feels normal, you might feel like your space is being impinged upon, and thus try to move away. You might be interpreted by this person as being very impolite and cold, or disinterested, whereas you may be perceiving the other person as being aggressive by moving into your personal space.

Neither interpretation is universally correct; we react instantaneously to these signals of space and positioning because the way we do things in our culture feels so normal to us, causing us to instantly form an impression of the other person.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Polite Conversational Distance

The amount of space between individuals a culture perceives as "correct" in a variety of relational contexts.

#### 1b. Use of Physical Space

This concept of space and positioning can go beyond polite conversational distance. Even something like how we use space in an office (e.g. doors open or doors closed) can differ between cultures. Let's look at some additional contextual examples in the United States.

#### IN CONTEXT

Managers will often have their office doors open; it's considered the open door policy. When you walk by, you might peek your head in and ask if you could come in to talk. In fact, even the phrase "behind closed doors" sends a message in this culture as being the opposite of an open and more relaxed environment.

In other cultures, the doors are kept closed as a sign of being serious and focused on work. In these cultures, you would always have the door closed as opposed to open.

We can even see proxemics in the way people might sit and speak in a meeting.

#### IN CONTEXT

In certain meetings, it's customary for a speaker to stand, perhaps in the front of the room, as a more formal way of presenting. However, it can also be considered normal for speakers to be sitting around a table; they may still have a sense of authority, depending upon the context. In other cultures, whether and where a speaker is standing up or sitting down has more significance.



#### BIG IDEA

Proxemics, the style of communicating that comes simply through the way we use space and position ourselves can vary between cultures. Therefore, it's important to be aware of these differences because they could lead to miscommunication or escalate a conflict if you send a signal that you did not intend.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned about **proxemics as a communication style** involving the way we use space when communicating with others. This can come into play in a variety of ways, such as conversational distance, or positioning within and use of physical space. You now understand that it's important to be aware that proxemics can differ depending on the culture. This awareness can help to avoid the misunderstandings and conflicts that can result from these communicational differences. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.



## TERMS TO KNOW

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### **Proxemics**

The communication style which uses space and positioning as a symbol.