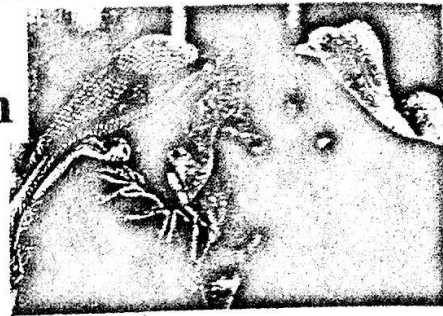


USING SOCIOLOGY

Space: The Hidden Dimension



In his study of space, The Hidden Dimension, Edward T. Hall found that an understanding of the amount of space people need around them in different societies can lead to a better understanding of intercultural relations. By examining different people's needs for space, it is possible to reveal hidden cultural frames that determine the way they act and live. More specifically, Hall has discovered how a comprehension of space may help to explain why, after more than two thousand years of contact, Westerners and Arabs still do not understand each other. The following is only a brief excerpt from Hall's work dealing with space, but it gives some idea of how differing cultural patterns make it harder for people to understand and therefore to interact successfully with one another. As people begin to learn and understand more about these divergent cultural patterns, both from firsthand experience and from researchers like Hall, interactions on personal, business, and political levels may be facilitated and enhanced.

Americans follow an unwritten rule concerning public behavior. As soon as an individual stops or is seated in a public place, a small, invisible sphere of privacy that is considered inviolate swells around the person. The size will vary with the degree of crowding, the age, sex, and importance of the person, and the general surroundings. Anyone who enters this zone and stays there is intruding. In order to overcome this personal-space barrier, a person who intrudes for a specific purpose, will usually acknowledge the intrusion by beginning with a phrase like "Pardon me, but can you tell me . . . ?"

On the other hand, pushing and shoving in public places is a characteristic of Middle Eastern culture, a characteristic that, unlike the attitude in Western cultures, is not considered a rude behavior. For the Arab, there is no such thing as an intrusion of space in public. Occupying a given spot does not give you

any special rights to that area at all. If, for example, person A is standing on a street corner and person B wants that spot, it is perfectly all right for person B to try to make person A uncomfortable enough to move.

Another silent source of friction between Americans and Arabs concerns the manners and rights of the road. In general, we tend to defer to the bigger, more powerful, and faster vehicle. Pedestrians walking along a road may be annoyed by a speeding car but will still step aside. They know that because they are moving they do not have the right to the space around them that they may have if they were standing still.

It appears that the reverse is true with Arabs, who apparently take on rights to space as they move. For someone else to move into a space an Arab is also moving into is a violation of the Arab's rights. Though it may be irritating to Americans when someone cuts them off on the highway, it is also a very common behavior. Such an act is infuriating to an Arab. In fact, it is Americans' treatment of moving space that makes the Arabs call them aggressive and pushy.

Arabs have a completely different set of assumptions regarding the body and the rights associated with it than do Westerners. Certainly the Arab tendency to shove and push one another in public and to feel and pinch women in public conveyances would not be tolerated by Westerners. Arabs do not have any concept of a private zone outside the body. In the Western world, the person is synonymous with an individual inside a skin, and in many places the skin and even the clothes are inviolate. You need permission to touch if you are strangers. For the Arab, however, the location of the person in relation to the body is quite different. The person exists somewhere down inside the body, protected from touch. Touching the

The use of personal space between these two Arab men would make most Americans feel uncomfortable.

outside of the body—skin and clothes—is not really touching the person.

Although Arabs do not mind being crowded by people, they hate to be hemmed in by walls. They avoid partitions because they do not like to be alone. When searching for a home, Arabs look for plenty of unobstructed space in which to move around. Because physical privacy is relatively unknown in the Arab world, their way to be alone with their thoughts is simply to stop talking. To the Arab, if you are not with people, you are deprived of life. Arab behavior in regard to their own real estate is apparently an extension of, and consistent with, their approach to the body.

The sense of smell occupies a prominent place in Middle Eastern life. To the Arab, good smells are pleasing and a way of being involved with each other. To smell one's friends is desirable and to deny them your breath is interpreted as an act of shame. So it is that Americans, trained as they are not to breathe in people's faces, automatically communicate shame to the Arabs.

These few simple observations of Hall's, if applied by those Westerners and Arabs who come into regular contact, should help dispel some of the discomfort or even disgust that often results when people from divergent cultures are forced to interact.

Source: Excerpted and adapted from Edward T. Hall, *The Hidden Dimension* (New York: Doubleday, 1966). □