

EXERCISE 10.1

CONTINUED

You may have felt embarrassed or uncomfortable standing toe-to-toe with your partner in this exercise because you thought that your bodies were too close to each other. Being so near to another person is acceptable in an intimate relationship; but it is excessively near with people that you hardly know or do not know.

See the list below. Is there one about the appropriate distance that two strangers should maintain between their bodies when conversing? If so, whoever suggested it is either a shrewd observer or has already attended a course on anthropology or psychology. In fact, this instruction has to do with proxemics, a term first introduced by the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in 1963 to describe the distances between people as they interact and the forms of body spacing and posture that they unintentionally adopt. Proxemics is a pervasive feature of everyday life. It conditions how we stand in queues, sit on school benches, take seats on buses or the subway, orient our bodies in an elevator, find somewhere to sit in a cafeteria or a library. Hall (1966: 143ff) pointed out that social distance between people correlates closely with physical distance. He described four such distances:

- the **intimate distance** of embracing, touching or whispering (15–45 cm, 6–18 inches)
- the **personal distance** of interactions among good friends (45–120 cm, 1.5–4 feet)
- the **social distance** of interactions among acquaintances (1.2–3.5 m, 4–12 ft); and
- the **public distance** used for public speaking (over 3.5 m, 12 ft)

Hall showed that different cultures have different social rules on personal space. For instance, the relative distances tend to be smaller in Latin cultures, where people tend to be more comfortable when standing close to each other; in Nordic cultures the opposite is the case. Recognizing these cultural differences enhances cross-cultural understanding, and it helps eliminate the discomfort that people may feel when interpersonal distances are larger ('stand-offish') or smaller ('intrusive') than they are used to. The comfort of personal distances depends on other factors as well, such as the social situation, gender and individual preference. One can observe adolescents in the subway or street playfully pushing, punching and slapping each other while adults watch them disapprovingly; or again youths dancing the 'pogo,' a punk dance style where dancers occasionally collide, to the disapproval of onlookers. All these are varieties of proxemics.

Returning to the initial example, your list of instructions probably did not include the voice volume (loud, soft, etc.) that the Senegalese manager should use, nor how he should look at his English colleague. There are ways of looking, in fact, which are inappropriate for adults but acceptable for children. A child can stare at a person and the latter will be amused at such close attention. But if an adult stares fixedly at another person, this will be taken as an act of provocation or intimidation, as an attempted 'pick-up,' or even as sexual harassment. Indeed, as an ethical norm, a teacher in a classroom should constantly change the direction of his or her gaze, never letting it remain on one particular pupil or student for too long.

Why did you not make these suggestions (concerning distance, voice volume, and gaze)? Because they are social conventions so tacit and taken-for-granted that we do not even think of them. Yet they are perhaps more important than the somewhat more explicit social conventions that you have rightly indicated.

But there is more. You may have included 'shake hands' among your suggestions. Is the instruction sufficient as it stands? No it is not, because you have not specified *how* the Senegalese manager should shake hands with his English colleague. Should he give a strong handshake or a weak one? But how strong? How strong is strong? In these cases the *how* (the form) is as important as the *what* (the substance). The problem is that we know how to do these things automatically, unthinkingly; yet they do not come to mind when somebody asks us, and then we do not rightly know how to describe them. They are so tacit that they are unlikely to emerge in an interview and can only be grasped through observation.