Cultural Use of Proxemics & Implications for Culturally Sensitive Counselling

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Communication is an essential part of being a human and our survival as a species. Through communication, we can create and maintain relationships as well as create communities, languages, and cultures. The word communication originates from the Latin word *communicare* meaning to impart or transmit something such that it is made common, and this can include knowledge, information, or diseases (Ferraro et al., 2018). Communication is often thought of in verbal or written forms as these are the most evident when interacting with individuals from cultures that differ from our own. Trying to communicate with an individual who speaks and writes in a different language than our own comes with barriers to understanding and communicating. Even with the use of translators, cultural contexts can be lost in the translation process. This is evident even under the scrutiny of academia as highlighted in an article that a lack of balance on semantic and cultural levels have resulted in such losses in Arabic literature (Al-Masri, 2009). However, the form of communication which makes up most of the messages sent and received by humans (up to 70%) is nonverbal communication which, like language, must be learned and its meaning and use may vary greatly from one culture to another (Ferraro et al., 2018). While nonverbal communication has many forms, this paper will focus on proxemics and cultural differences that have been observed within the use of proxemics. This paper will explore Edward Hall's contributions to the understanding of proxemics in cultural contexts and the implications for effective and multicultural sensitive counselling services.

Proxemics

Nonverbal communication, as noted, can include many forms, some of which are eye contact, facial expressions, touching, smells, kinesics, and proxemics. Hall coined the term *proxemics*, which he defined as the way space is perceived and used by people including how we organize spaces and how we orient ourselves to one another (Ferraro et al., 2018). Hall also outlines three fundamental aspects of proxemics which include distance, space, and modes of behaviour and perception.

Distance

Within the aspect of distance, he outlined four types of distances. Intimate distance being closest to the individual (between 0-1.5 feet) is reserved for intimate family and friends and is mainly used for nonverbal communication. Personal distance, often called the "Bubble" (between 1.5 and 3 feet) and is usually reserved for well known people which can vary greatly depending on a culture and its norms (Angus, 2012). Social distance (between 4 and 11 feet) is often for general gatherings or general interactions with individuals who are not very well known. Finally, (between 12 and 25 feet) what Hall referred to as public distance, requires loud and clear voice levels and where only public interactions are possible (Angus, 2012). It is important to note that generally, much of Hall's proxemic research was done with subjects that shared the same American culture as him. He notes this himself within his work and highlights how he has never been fully certain to his levels of correctness when interpreting observed behaviour of different cultures (Hall et al., 1968). Thus, Hall understood that while Americans may have four categories of informal distances, other cultures may have very different patterns (Baldassare & Feller, 1975).

Space

In his work Hall distinguishes the human use of space into three categories: fixed features (building, room, and city layouts), semifixed features (preorganized but moveable features of a room), and informal space (private/interpersonal space for interaction) (Baldassare & Feller, 1975). Hall ultimately thought of proxemic behaviour as another form of culturally elaborated communication which led humans to both structure and experience space in different ways. He believed these schemas were internalized and learned early in life through enculturation which became evident in the cultural and subcultural observable variations in human proxemic behaviour (Baldassare & Feller, 1975).

Modes of Behaviour

Finally, Hall devised a notation/observation system to standardize and record differences in micro cultural events such as modes of behaviour and perception (Hall, 1963). This included eight dimensions of function for proxemic behaviour which are, in order; postural (sex identifiers and posture), sociofugal/sociopetal axis (spatial orientations that push or pull people together), kinesthetic factors (distance between individuals), touch code (manner of touching), retinal

combinations (eye contact with reference to space), thermal code (heat transmitted), olfaction code (smells/odours), and voice loudness scale (Hall, 1963). These differences in micro cultural events are important aspects of cultural uses of proxemics, such differences allow researchers to distinguish between micro aspects of proxemic behaviour displayed by various cultures. By devising a notation system to record and standardize differences in micro cultural events it allows for a deeper understanding of the differences and contexts in which cultures employ the use of proxemics. If researchers are unable to distinguish between differences in micro cultural events when observing proxemic behaviours, then academia will continue to see a loss of cultural context in translation and observation of other cultures.

Classification of Cultures

Hall went on to propose a cultural framework in which he believed all cultures could be classified into based on the styles in which they communicate. He distinguished between two categories for which a culture could fall somewhere on the spectrum of, high-context and low-context (Wurtz, 2005). Hall understood that meaning and context were bound together and thus, to understand meaning, one must also look at context. This means that cultural contexts had direct impacts on the meaning of various forms of communication (Wurtz, 2005).

High-Context

Characterized by group value orientation (collectivism), indirect verbal interaction, and contextual nonverbal styles of communication, high-context cultures observe the totality of the context and believe in a connectedness of all things (past and present) (Government of Canada, 2021). High-Context cultures are also more likely to use indirect, nonconfrontational, and vague language in times of conflict and are more likely to be active listeners within a conversation using a greater emphasis on nonverbal forms of communication (LaPensee & Lewis, 2013). East Asian (Japanese) and Indigenous cultures would both fall into the category of high-context cultures based on the observed behaviours regarding their styles of communication (Government of Canada, 2021). In essence, high-context cultures are often perceived as passive in their communication as they often listen, use minimal eye contact, and emphasize non-verbal forms of communication. When communicating with low-context cultures they may possibly be perceived as being passive, rude, or uninterested due to the observed differences in their behaviours and communication.

Low-Context

Characterized by individual value orientation (individualism), direct verbal interaction, and individualistic nonverbal styles of communication, they break down information into segments. High-Context cultures are more likely to be direct, confrontational, use explicit approach when experiencing conflict and communicate in ways that are consistent with their feelings (Wurtz, 2005). North American (Canadian/American) cultures would fall into the category of low-context cultures based on the observed behaviours of communication (Government of Canada, 2021). Thus, high-context cultures can be considered assertive and active in their communication due to them usually being direct, confrontational, and utilizing direct eye contact. When communicating with high-context cultures it is possible that they may be perceived as being aggressive or rude due to how they are often direct and assertive.

Implications for Counselling

Hall made great contributions to the aspect of proxemics and nonverbal communications. He explicitly understood that culture had a direct influence on the use of communication and specifically on the use of proxemics which have been explored. With an understanding of how culture influences our communication there are ways in which professionals such as counsellors can improve services to clients with diverse cultural backgrounds. Though brief, this section will recommend some practices and future research to provide more competent and sensitive cultural counselling practises with a focus on the use of proxemics.

Room Size & Spacing

In (Ferraro et al., 2018) work which describes Hall's proposed four distinct types of distance (specifically regarding American culture) it highlights how differing cultures may have varying patterns of usage regarding distance and especially personal distance. This may have implications for use in the size of the room in which counselling is taking place. Being aware of cultural differences in the use of distance could prove to be a more welcoming environment. One article examines cultural differences in personal space and found that individuals with East Asian cultures maintain larger interpersonal distances then American cultures (Sicorello et al., 2018). Having a

larger room with varying seating options available may be beneficial to cultures like East Asian cultures which, as discussed, could be categorized as a high-context culture (same as indigenous cultures). When working with diverse clientele, especially those differing from oneself it is important for counsellors to consider room sizing and spacing to provide a comfortable setting for sessions to take place in. Providing a more comfortable setting may increase client satisfaction and retention.

Seating Arrangements

When considering cultural differences in proxemics (which both Hall and this paper have highlighted) it may be beneficial for counsellors to consider having multiple choices for seating arrangements readily available to clients. For high-context groups where eye contact is often limited it would likely be beneficial to allow for seating arrangements where direct eye contact is not required. One seating arrangement promoted by (Harris, 1998), who is a professor in communication studies, is cooperative seating where each individual sits on a corner (90-degree angle) from one another, so that they can choose to look straight ahead or look at one another. Alternatively, Harris recommends modified cooperative seating where individuals sit side by side. Both seating arrangements promote cooperation and allow the individuals to focus forward instead of using direct eye contact which would likely be very beneficial for high-context groups.

Research Recommendations

Research in the field of nonverbal communication is growing rapidly, but there still lies some caveats such as the limited focus on proxemics opposed to other forms of nonverbal behaviour. Another glaring issue is the homogenization of cultural groups in current research. Many of the Asian cultures are grouped into geographical locations and many of the indigenous groups are often grouped into one large category. This leads to vast generalizations of such peoples and takes away distinctions that could and should be made between them and their different use of nonverbal communication. Including members of the group as research members would help with problems of doubt in interpretation which Hall experienced within his own work.

Conclusion

Hall was influential in his work in describing, notating, and classifying of cultures based on their communication styles, particularly nonverbal proxemics and he highlighted how culture played a great role in how/why one may differ in the use of such aspects. However, he greatly homogenized cultures and, while doing so, ultimately lost some context and differences. This highlights the need for practises that are culturally competent and sensitive. Academia needs to be more culturally aware in all aspects of communication and that should start with more comprehensive research. If we are unable to adapt and provide culturally competent services such as counselling, we will continue to see statistics like how over 50% of minority-culture clients who begin counselling terminate after one session, compared to about 30% of majority-culture clients (Gladding & Alderson, 2019). More culturally sensitive and inclusive research is thus required so that cultural differences in all forms of communication can be better understood and interpreted. Such future advances in research would likely result in great improvements in counselling services available for individuals from all cultures.

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