cultures? Can you think of examples of how tactile communication differs among members of co-cultures? What type of communication problems might arise when people with different touching orientations interact?

7. How does physical appearance affect first impressions during interaction? How are expectations of physical appearance related to the informal-formal dimension of culture?
8. How does immediacy affect interpersonal interaction? What differences in behaviors would you expect from high- and low-contact cultures? In what way would violations of immediacy expectations affect intercultural communication?
9. How is the degree of individualism within cultures manifested in nonverbal behavior?

from: Intercultural Communication: A Reader (12th edition) edited by Larry Samovar, Richard Porter, & Edwin McDaniel (2009)

# A Different Sense of Space

**Ned Crouch**

It's Sunday morning. You're up extra early so you can beat the crowds, get down to the beach, commune with nature. You want to recharge your batteries so you'll be your usual go-getter self come Monday. What could be better? The sound of the surf, a cup o' hot coffee, not a living soul in sight—nobody, that is, until a Mexican plunks down right beside you.

Crossing five hundred feet of unoccupied sand, he greets you with a polite, *"Buenos dias!"* Then he shouts excitedly to his whole family, motioning for the nursemaids and the dog to come join you.

You say, *"Buenos dias"* rather politely, but your body language betrays your displeasure. You wait a few moments so that your next action isn't too obvious. Then—knowing you're going to come off as a tight-assed gringo, but not caring—you pick up your cup and towel and head back to the hotel. You're thinking, "A half mile of beach in either direction, and they have to pick on me! What's with these people? Can't they see they're invading my personal space?"

The answer is no. No they can't. This isn't how they see it at all. Mexicans have a different sense of space. They sit down beside you because "that's where the people are." It doesn't occur to them that this is objectionable or impolite. On the contrary, it's the natural, friendly, obvious thing to do. Unlike Americans who prefer to spread out, Mexicans tend to congregate. If another gringo had come along, he would have settled about halfway toward the horizon to the south. Intuitively he would understand that both you and he want space and tranquility. If a third gringo had arrived, he would have gone halfway toward the northern horizon. According to our sense of space, we tend to seek the maximum convenient distance between one another before the inevitable crowd arrives. We draw a circle around

From Ned Crouch, *Mexicans and Americans: Cracking the Culture Code*, (2004), pp. 45–54. Used by permission of Intercultural Press, A Nicholas Brealey Publishing Company.

ourselves—a circle as big as circumstance will allow. It shrinks as conditions dictate, until we feel agitated and claustrophobic. The Mexicans look disappointed as you leave, and quietly, very quietly, the señora asks papa what happened. "I don't know. I must have done something wrong. I can't imagine what it is. Or perhaps he does not like Mexicans." Mexicans are quick to pick up on any show of irritation or impatience and assume that they have caused the displeasure. But they are also aware that some of us don't like them. They hear us complain about illegal immigrants, the oil slicks in the Gulf of Mexico, losing jobs, drugs. We blame it all on them. They have seen our police beating them on TV: They know that we can be prejudiced and they're thinking, "Maybe it's our brown skin." Somehow a moment of solitude on the beach has turned into an international racial incident. You're feeling violated; they're feeling discriminated against. While you're asking why they are so intrusive, they're wondering what it is about them that you don't like. But the real issue is not lack of manners or skin color. It's space.

## BUMPER TO BUMPER

I pull into the parking lot of the Hispanic Center in Michigan with my brand new car. Wanting to avoid dings in my doors, I deliberately park three rows away from the building in an area sixty feet from any other car and ninety feet farther from the front door than the closest available parking slot. As I am getting out of my car, a woman swings through the entrance, around the median, and parks right next to me. How do I know she's not an Anglo? Could it be that she parked next to me because that's where the people are parking now?

In keeping with their sense of space, Mexicans tolerate a high compression factor. An American manager sent to Mexico was concerned because his wife had invited about thirty couples to their small apartment in Monterrey. When the guests started showing up with their children, there was hardly room to breathe. Much to his surprise, no one seemed to mind. In fact he noted that as the rooms became more crowded, his guests seemed to relax and have more fun. This is the Mexican's sense of space in action.

## SOCIAL ORIENTATION

Our sense of space is directly tied to how we perceive our connection to other people. Whereas we Americans draw circles around the individual, Mexicans draw circles around the group. Most of the world is closer to the Mexicans in this regard. We—plus some western and *most* northern Europeans—are the exceptions. People from Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia tend to be more group-oriented and are less sensitive to individual space needs.

Differences in our sense of space undoubtedly contribute to the impression held by most Mexicans that Americans are somewhat cold and distant. Space becomes a big issue on trains, on planes, and in cars. Travel is definitely more uncomfortable for those of us in cultures where the sense of personal space is tighter. Our natural instinct is to feel stress when we are crowded onto a small commuter plane in Mexico, where passengers carry on a year's worth of luggage and cram themselves into smaller seats.

We Americans will always be more comfortable being separated; Mexicans will always be more comfortable being part of a group. We will always resist being crowded; they will always want to get closer. It's not personal. It's not prejudice. They don't know it, but on that Sunday morning at the beach, you would have gotten up and left if another gringo had sat next to you—only faster.

Because the Mexican and American notions of space are so deeply embedded, it is unrealistic to think that either is going to change. Nor should we expect change. Both senses of space are natural and not insensitive.

When we draw circles around ourselves, we are inside the circle looking out. Since Mexicans draw a circle around the group, they are constantly looking inward toward that group. Figuratively speaking, the Mexican family surrounded by the walls of their house look inward toward one another. We, on the other hand, are inside the house looking out through the biggest picture window we can afford, hoping that nobody will build within sight of us—a markedly different social orientation.

In the United States, our sense of space begins to develop from the moment we are brought home from the hospital in a bassinet. From that moment on, the

American child develops an expectation of privacy. He or she begins referring to "my room" and "my toys." The walls are going up. Children begin to feel more comfortable with a private space that they can crawl off to for insulation against pressure. This is quite different from the Mexican experience. We Americans become territorial about our half of the dorm room at college. We set up separate shelves in the community refrigerator. We want a den in our dream house where we can put our feet up and think about what we should have said today and mentally project what we will do tomorrow—all without interruption from the family. Not so in Mexico.

Mexicans' closer sense of space is related to the way they have been raised—living much closer together in the home and looking inward to each other for support and nurturing. Physical closeness goes along with closer families and less sibling rivalry. Each child does not get his own room. Boys and girls are not necessarily divided until a more advanced age, and then only if resources allow. There's nothing inherently better or worse about either the American or Mexican approach—although Mexican children sure do get along well, both among themselves and with others. When passing playgrounds in Mexico, I'm always struck with the pleasant sounds. No taunting, teasing, or squabbling.

There is a story about a Mexican worker who came to the United States for training. His supervisor asked a coworker to take Javier home to show him how Americans live. The American coworker took him through his house. "This is the entry hall where we take off our snowshoes. Here's the living room, but we spend more time in the den over there where the TV is. This is the dinette next to the kitchen. Here's Bertha's and my room. Here's the boys' room. Here's where little Martha sleeps, except when Grandma and Grandpa visit and she sleeps in the den." Javier was delighted with the tour and said, "You know, it's exactly the same in Mexico— except for the walls." This story is not intended to be derogatory in any way. It is instructive.

## DON'T FENCE ME IN

Although Mexicans are less concerned than Americans about defining individual space, they are generally more concerned with sharply demarcating one family's living space from another family's. This usually means having a wall between houses. When Mexicans visit the United States, they often marvel at the open lawns between homes. The Mexican wonders, "How do they know where their property stops and their neighbor's begins?" Americans know. We know exactly where to mow, don't we? To construct walls between houses seems to run counter to something in the American spirit. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," wrote Robert Frost in his quintessentially American poem, "Mending Wall." The Mexican's feelings run just as deep on the other side. For them it is important to define family space. This is because the family and its space are a final refuge from the chaos and uncertainty of life outside their walls. The home is the one place where, with all the gods playing their ungodly tricks, they can finally feel in control. Protecting the group space is paramount.

When we Americans observe Mexicans, we see them piled onto a train with families, chickens, goats, and a whole menagerie. We wonder how they can fit so many on a bus. We observe clusters of family members moving around Sears in unison. We make jokes about crowding into a pickup truck. But we are observing only the top ten percent of a cultural phenomenon that rises above the surface. What is going on underneath the surface is a clash in our opposing sense of space.

There is a strong correlation between sense of space and behavior. We Americans have a definite sense of individual space and we carry a protective shell around our individuality. Our sense of individuality goes with us wherever we go. We act independently, whereas Mexicans see themselves as part of a group. They act as a group, looking to each other for direction, approbation, and survival. When they are in their group space, they behave according to what that space is dedicated to. If they are in the receiving hall outside the mayor's office, they wait for the mayor like dutiful citizens. If they are in the polishing department, they see themselves as polishers. When they are in the home, they act like a family. As Americans, we too adjust our behavior and shift gears depending on what is required of us. We cooperate with the team and blend into the choir, but we don't shed the circle around ourselves. Typically, we see ourselves as discrete individuals operating within the group, whereas Mexicans are *the group.*

Whether working in the United States or in Mexico, Mexicans working on the factory floor of a large manufacturing entity perceive the walls of their department as enveloping their circle. In this setting, they have their backs to the wall and relate to the group. By contrast, when Americans visualize the overall operation of a plant, we see a continuous production line cutting through all departments. We draw little boxes for machines and little circles for operators performing specific tasks. Mexican workers, on the other hand, relate primarily to the inner circle of their department and secondarily to the larger space where the entire company team works together.

Another difference in our respective senses of space is that Americans feel threatened if our personal space is invaded, whereas Mexicans are alarmed if their group space is invaded. We feel as though our person is being violated. They feel that their group identity is being threatened.

## HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

What happens when you enter their space? Both Mexicans and Americans have rituals for approaching another person's or group's space. But our respective rituals are very different.

In her novel, *Stones for Ibarra* (1984), Harriet Doerr writes about a local man visiting the house where the author and her husband were living in a remote Mexican village. The local was looking for work. He didn't want to disturb the American couple needlessly, so, rather than knock on the door, he went around the house, window to window, looking in to see if they were there and if they were busy. Had they been in the kitchen sipping coffee, he would have gone to the back door and announced himself. Had they been in bed, he would have left quietly to return the next day. Within the context of his peasant Mexican culture, he was behaving perfectly properly in the way he approached the author's space. He was being polite. It was jarring to the writer, however. What if Harriet and her husband were in an intimate embrace? What if they were naked? How can someone just come up to your window and look in?

From the Mexican peasant's perspective, his actions were innocent and nonthreatening. (This may be one reason Mexican city dwellers put walls all the way around their houses.) Had he seen anything of a personal nature, he would have averted his eyes and returned later. As for the nakedness, well, it is as natural as can be and nothing to get excited about. He would have been confused if the gringos had come out screaming and shooing him off. It would not have computed. He would not have understood why the gringos were so hostile.

## BACKING OFF

You probably don't recognize that Americans routinely behave ritualistically, but we do. Imagine that you want to borrow a rake from your neighbor. First, you knock on his screen door and then quickly back up. If nobody comes, you knock again, this time yelling to the upstairs window. Did you peer in through the screen? No. Did you walk around the house looking for the rake? No. Somewhere along the line we picked up cultural cues about personal space that tell us how to approach the neighbor's house. We have learned that there is an acceptable, nonthreatening way to get the attention of a neighbor whom we consider vulnerable because his doors and windows are open.

Ritualistic practices also help us cope with confined spaces, such as crowded elevators. As we get on, we lower our eyes, turn toward the buttons, and press our floor. We face front and say nothing. If we must, we say, "Out please." or "Excuse me," with our Yankee penchant for economy of words. It's different in Mexico. They get on an elevator and say, "*Buenas tardes,*" to everybody. It is not unusual to hear chatter among the strangers. They ask permission to get off—"*Con permiso.*" The others respond, "*Propio*" (*of course*). Or they may insist that you go first.

There is a different ritual in Mexico for entering shopping spaces. We Americans go into a store and immediately put up our defense shields. If forced to speak, we say, "Just looking around." Mexicans go to a store and, recognizing that they have entered the shopkeeper's space, immediately proffer a "*Buenas tardes*" to the owner and staff. There is nothing more out of place than the woman in Bermuda shorts and Rockports who says, "*Nada mas mirando*"—a lame translation of "just looking," which to the Mexican means absolutely nothing. In Mexico the clerk will follow you around the store quietly—not uttering a

word. We feel crowded by her presence. Is she checking up on us? No. She's there, close to you, in case you have any questions. Be aware that we think we're shopping, whereas they think we have come for a visit. This is their space, and we will get better service, when the time comes, if we act as though we are invitees rather than dispassionate purchasing agents.

## CORRECT DISTANCE

Americans' individual space is quite well defined, though most of us don't realize it. The correct face-to-face distance between American men is one arm's length, less the hand. The distance woman-to-woman is a bit closer than man-to-man. If you are a man, the next time you're at a cocktail party or convention, try moving one half step closer to the man you're talking to. You will see him avert his eyes, shift his feet, turn sideways, and finally take a half step back. He won't be conscious of his own actions. You then take another half step closer. He will repeat his backward shuffle. Keep it up, and you could waltz him around the room and out the door.

Understanding the different boundaries of personal space is important when doing business. In the United States, if a woman were to move a little closer to a man, he may interpret the narrowing of space as an invitation to flirt, which would be taboo in the workplace. If a Mexican woman stands closer to an American male, however, it is not a come-on. In fact, it means nothing of the sort. Her circle of personal space is simply smaller, or less acutely felt than his. Men and women generally stand closer in Mexico. If you are showing a Mexican woman something on your computer screen, she will get much closer to you than an American woman would. She may stand with her legs right next to your arm or lean over your shoulder. American males should note that this is not a come-on.

In the States, the personal space between individuals remains the same, irrespective of status—whether speaking to the president of the company or the guy who sets up our AV equipment. In Mexico's more hierarchical society, there is a need to establish greater separation between the workers and the *jefe,* or "big man." The workers tend to operate together more closely than in the United States, but the president maintains more distance between himself and his accounting clerk. The Mexican boss will have an exaggeratedly large office and desk to emphasize the hierarchical distance between himself and his minions. This is his "power distance."

As an American operating with Mexicans, you want to be sensitive to the greater zone that surrounds the president of a company. But in the course of your dealings, when the president takes a step closer, puts his arms around you, and gives you an *abrazo,* or hug, he is indicating that he means to accept you as an equal. If you are a woman, the parallel behavior might be a pat on the arm and an "air kiss" (touching cheeks and smacking the void next to the woman's head), which acknowledges trust and confers respect. Whatever you do, don't pull back and blow it. In this context, the gesture signals that you have crossed into the Mexican president's circle and are trusted to work within his group. You must now maintain that relationship and build on it. I explained the *abrazo* practice to middle management at Chrysler Motors. "Hold on a minute," one man interjected. "In sensitivity training, we were told never to touch *anybody.*" I'm not suggesting you go hugging anyone unless you feel comfortable getting that close. On the other hand, be aware that men will hug men in Mexico, and it means nothing beyond friendship and acceptance.

Americans and Mexicans have been living next to each other for many years and have learned to appreciate each other's customs: I have a friend in McAllen, Texas, named Mike Heap. (There is no more Anglo-Saxon name than Mike Heap.) Mike is a laconic Texan, a cowboy, and a former bronco-buster who is now on the rodeo circuit as a clown. He loves Mexicans, his girlfriend is Mexican, and like most Anglos in the Rio Grande Valley, he speaks Spanish. When he goes to Mexico, he gives his men friends *abrazos.* I too give and receive *abrazos* when I go to Mexico. But Mike and I would never hug each other.

According to street lore, the *abrazo* came into being as a means of "patting down" the person you greet to make sure he's not armed. But, today it means, "Welcome to my space."

## GROUP SPACE

How should Americans adapt our usual business practices in response to the Mexicans' sense of space? Since Mexicans draw a circle around their group and focus

inward, as previously mentioned, anyone entering their space makes a big impact. So in the business setting, how you enter a Mexican group's space is important. A proper greeting, avoiding flamboyant gestures, not shouting, and general circumspection are appreciated.

Most how-to books tell you how to greet and what to wear. But remember that in addition to proper manners, violating Mexicans' group space may be perceived as a threat to how they live and work. If we go into their group space and disrupt the harmony of the group, we are signaling to the group that we do not care about them. They may assume that they are the next to be transferred, fired, or shot.

When a gringo walks into a native cantina in a remote village, suddenly everything goes quiet. When they realize you are just there to throw down tequila, they relax and start talking again. We are clearly outsiders. But once we enter the group and behave, they accept us. If we buy one of them a drink and tell a good joke, the atmosphere turns to jubilation.

In the workplace, Mexicans can favor us with cooperation and the rewards of group effort if we are sensitive to the effect we are having on their space. By minimizing disruption when we enter their space, we indicate respect for their group and earn their support. The unfortunate corollary for us is that often once we leave their space, we may no longer exist to them. We have to be in their space to get the best results. Once in their group space, we have to spend time building relationships or else we will be "out of sight, out of mind."

## Concepts and Questions

1. How does Crouch link the Mexican use of space to their value toward collectivism?
2. Why does Crouch believe Americans prefer to "spread out"?
3. How does Crouch link the American attitude toward space to privacy?
4. Explain Crouch's observation that "there is a strong correlation between American sense of space and behavior."
5. What does Crouch mean when he speaks of "ritualistic practices"? How do those practices relate to the use of space?
6. Why is it important to know cultural boundaries in the use of space?
7. What is the relationship of space to power both in Mexico and in the United States?
8. Crouch asks the following question in his essay: "How should Americans adapt their use of space to the Mexican sense of space in the business setting?" How would you answer that question?
9. What specific "tips" does Crouch advance at the conclusion of his essay that might help you adapt your use of space when doing business in Mexico?