

## HOW CLOSE CAN YOU GET - THE EFFECT OF PROXEMICS ON LMX

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### **Abstract**

The study of how human use space to communicate is termed as Proxemics. In an organizational setting, this behavior has been found to be culturally conditioned and thus may differentially affect the degree of mutual influence and obligation between superiors and subordinates. The hypothesis that differential informal interactional levels and dining arrangements would have different effects on the perceptions of leader-member exchange quality was tested with a sample of employees (N=142) from organizations across India. We have discussed the results and their implications in the present study.

Key Words: Proxemics, LMX

## Introduction

Various physical features of our environment affect our social behavior. People are more likely to communicate effectively when they feel more comfortable in a particular setting (Trenholm and Jensen, 1996). The study of "man's use of space-the space that he maintains between himself and his fellows and which he builds around him in his home and office" (Hall, 1966) has been defined as Proxemics. Proxemics forms an integral part of our environmental setting through its elements of space, distance and territory, thus affecting our behavior.

Space is a primary means by which a culture designates who is important, who has privilege. Higher status individuals are afforded more personal space, control access to more desirable territory, and adopt body positions that occupy more space as compared to lower status individuals (Burgoon et al 1984, Lips 1991). In organizational contexts, perception of power and prestige is often related to where one's office is located, how large it is, and how many windows it has (Hickson & Stacks, 1993). Managers often use the spaces in their office to influence the character of interactions there (McCaskey, 1999) and this behavior is culturally conditioned (Hall, 1959). Since the employee perceptions about the understanding and support their superiors display for them leads to the quality of their exchange relationships, it follows that the way in which managers use space and territory may also have a effect in determining the quality of these relationships.

The organizational ethic of Indian workers is personalized rather than contractual (Kanungo, 1990) and personal loyalty takes priority over organizational efficiency. Moreover, leadership is personal rather than institutional. The dominant culture in Indian organizations thus presents a unique area of research which has not been explored in the context of Proxemics so far. This study attempts to empirically examine this effect of Proxemics on the quality of leader member exchange in Indian organizations.

## Theoretical Framework and Development of Hypothesis

The concept of Proxemics deals with distance, territory and space. Distance has been classified into categories like intimate, personal, social, and public, and can vary according to "personality and environmental factors," since an abnormal situation could bring people closer than they usually are (Hall 1959). Alternately it has been defined as a "relational concept, typically measured in terms of how far one individual is from the other" (Leather 1978: 87).

Ardrey (1966) defined territory as "an area of space, whether of water or earth or air, which an animal or group of animals defends as an exclusive preserve...In all territorial species, without exception, possession of a territory lends enhanced energy to the proprietor... The challenger is almost invariably defeated, the intruder expelled. In part, there seems to be some mysterious flow of energy and resolve which invests a proprietor on his home grounds."

Lyman and Scott (1967) distinguished four types of territoriality in human interaction: Public Territory, Home territory, Interaction territory, and Body territory. *Public territories* are places anybody can enter, like restaurants; *home territories* are restricted to members, such as fraternities or sororities; *interaction territories* are areas where people meet informally such as a lounge or the local gym; and *body territories* are the space used by ourselves (Leather, 1978). Research (e.g., Vargas, 1986) points out that people as well as animals claim territories to protect themselves from invasion. For example, in class, students usually choose a place and keep it for the rest of the year; and if another student sits there, a problem may arise. The father usually has a place at the table, and other family members do not sit there.

Three types of space have been identified by Hall (1959): fixed-feature, semi-fixed feature, and informal space. *Fixed-feature* space is one of the ways in which people organize activities. Houses, buildings, cities, rooms, etc. are organized spatially. *Semifixed-feature* space is of primary importance in interpersonal communication, because it can be used in many different ways to convey meaning. Hall further mentions two types of semi-fixed feature space: Socio-petal spaces are those which bring people together and stimulate involvement, while socio-fugal spaces keep people apart and promote withdrawal. According to Osmond (1959), to promote interaction within a group they could use sociopetal seating (spacing which brings people together, such as the dining table in most homes). If

the aim is to discourage social interaction sociofugal seating could be used (spacing that separates people like the straight rows of chairs found in airports or bus terminals).

Sommer (1979) affirms that socio-fugal space transmits connotative meanings such as *large, cold, impersonal*, and so on, while socio-petal arrangements usually connote the opposite.

*Informal space* is significant because it includes the distances people unconsciously maintain when they interact. According to Hall, "informal spatial patterns have distinct bounds and such deep, if unvoiced, significance that they form an essential part of culture. To misunderstand this significance may invite disaster" (1959:112).

This study focuses on the concept of informal space and interactional territory in the context of Indian organizations. The most common interactional territory in Indian companies is their canteen or cafeteria utilized during breaks. The study accordingly looks at general socialization and interaction with superiors during breaks.

### ***Proxemics and LMX***

According to Hall, proxemic behavior is culturally conditioned (1966). Researchers (e.g., Hall 1959; Vargas 1986) identify high-contact cultures such as Arabs, Latin Americans, Greeks, Turks, French, and Italians, who usually keep small distances among themselves; and low-contact cultures who "stand further apart," like the Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Germans, Dutch, and North Americans (Vargas 1986:106). For Arabs it is normal to stay close to and touch strangers; the distance they keep in ordinary social conversations is the same as what Westerners use in intimate conversations Nydel (1987). According to Samovar and Porter (1985), people of different cultures have different ways in which they relate to one another spatially.

The social status and the authority of an individual also affects the proximity. Higher status individuals are afforded more personal space, control access to more desirable territory, and adopt body positions that occupy more space as compared to lower status individuals (Burgoon and Jones, 1976; Burgoon et al., 1979; Burgoon and Aho, 1982; Burgoon et al., 1982; Burgoon et al., 1984; Lips 1991). Most individuals send conscious or subconscious messages about themselves in the way they set up their office spaces (McCaskey, 1999). A manager uses the space in the office to influence the character of interactions. When manager talks across a desk to a person seated on the other side, such an arrangement emphasizes the manager's authority and position. When chairs are grouped around a coffee table or are placed at right angles to each other, the arrangement signals willingness to downplay hierarchical differences. It encourages free exchange and perhaps more sociable encounters. (McCaskey, 1999).

Deriving from the social exchange theory (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997), Leader-member exchange theory suggests that an interpersonal relationship, based on social exchange evolves between supervisors and subordinates against the background of a formal organisation. Each party offers something of value to the other party and the exchange ought to be seen as reasonably equitable or fair (Graen & Scandura, 1987). LMX has been shown to be positively related to performance, OCB, and favour doing (Wayne, Shore & Liden, 1997).

Liden and Graen (1980) suggested that employees reporting high-quality LMX relationships contribute beyond their formal job responsibilities than those reporting lower-quality LMX in a work group. Thus, they demonstrate attitudes and behaviours commensurate with the amount of commitment they feel the employer and their superior has for them (Wayne et al., 1997). It is evident, therefore, that LMX has significant impacts on several important behavioural variables in the context of organizations and their working.

The organizational ethic of Indian workers is personalized rather than contractual (Kanungo, 1990). Personal loyalty takes priority over organizational efficiency and seeking and maintaining personal status is primary objective. Also, leadership is personal rather than institutional. Indian culture is peculiar and contextual. Thus it is plausible that Proxemics, in a given cultural context, would have significant effect on the quality of leader-member exchange in formal organizations.

We have looked at some relevant aspects of proxemics, such as canteens at work places, general socialization during tea/coffee breaks and interaction with superiors during these breaks.

### *Hypotheses*

- H1: Perceptions of LMX quality would be higher for people in organizations which have common canteens in comparison to organizations where canteens are segregated based on designation
- H2: General socialization in the office during tea/coffee breaks would be positively related to perceptions of LMX quality
- H3: Interaction with the superior during tea/coffee breaks would be positively related to perceptions of LMX quality

### **Method**

#### *Sample and Procedure*

The study was conducted in organizations across the country. Questionnaires were administered both personally and through email using convenience sampling. The respondents who were approached personally filled up the questionnaires in their working hours and handed them over to the researchers directly since they were assured of complete secrecy with respect to their responses. The respondents who were approached via internet email sent the filled up questionnaires to the researchers through mail by highlighting the correct responses. Printouts of these questionnaires were subsequently taken for data entry. In total, 300 questionnaires were given out. Of these 146 usable responses were received giving a response rate of 48.7%. The respondents included 18 females and 128 males. The average age of the respondents was 30 years and their average work experience, 73 months.

#### *Measures*

LMX: The seven-item LMX scale (Liden et al., 1993) was used to measure subordinate's perception of leader-member exchange quality. The scale was tested for reliability and the Cronbach Alpha was found to be 0.8231.

Independent variables were assessed with single item questions as show below:

- Do you have a canteen/eating place at your workplace: Yes/No
- If the answer to Q29 is Yes, does everyone share the same canteen/eating place or is there a distinction based on designation..... everyone shares/distinction based on designation
- Do people in your organization/department socialize during tea/coffee breaks (5-point Likert; rarely to very often)
- Does your superior join you during these breaks (5-point Likert; rarely to very often)

#### *External validity issues*

The external validity of a study refers to the extent to which findings can be generalized across time, persons and settings (Cook and Campbell, 1979). The external validity of findings would be threatened if the sample were systematically biased, for instance, if the responses on the LMX scale had either "very high" or "very low" scores. The descriptive statistics for the LMX scale for this sample have been shown in the Table 1 below. The mean of the LMX measure for this study came out to be 3.5228, with a median of 3.5714, a skewness of -0.021 with standard error of skewness at 0.203, and Kurtosis of -0.369 with standard error of Kurtosis at 0.404. The responses show good distribution on LMX since the mean and median are similar, and skewness and Kurtosis statistic are less than twice their standard errors. Overall, there does not seem to be an evident bias due to the dependent variable measure used in this study.

**TABLE 1**  
**LMX Descriptives**

N	Valid	142
	Missing	4
Mean		3.5228
Median		3.5714
Std. Deviation		.6268
Variance		.3929
Skewness		-.021
Std. Error of Skewness		.203
Kurtosis		-.369
Std. Error of Kurtosis		.404

## Results

The results of the correlational analysis have been shown below in Table 2. As can be seen there is support for all three hypotheses. The correlation is weak for the relationship between canteen type and LMX, and socialization and LMX. Strong correlation has been found for the relationship between informal interaction with superior and LMX. As a part of the post hoc analysis, we also tested the moderating effects of gender, age and work tenure on the relationship between the three independent variables and LMX. The results for gender were insignificant. This could be because of the relatively small number of female participants in the sample. Amongst other interactions, age moderated the relationship between canteen type and LMX. The sign of the relationship indicates that the effect of canteen type is stronger for older employees. This means that older people are more affected by the discrimination in the use of canteen based on hierarchy.

**TABLE 2**  
**Correlations**

Variable	Pearson Correlation with LMX	Sig.
Canteen Type	0.225	At 0.05 (2-tailed)
Socialization	0.198	At 0.05 (2-tailed)
Informal interaction with Superior	0.520	At 0.01 (2-tailed)

We have used correlational analysis for this study instead of regression analysis. It was felt that this being an exploratory study, it was necessary to provide a systematic empirical method to the investigation of Proxemics and its effect on LMX. At this preliminary stage, a regression analysis may have precluded some variables from consideration and in the absence of a coherent theory, this would have been retrograde for the study. A more deterministic and confirmatory approach may perhaps be suitable for future research.

## Discussion

The tests showed significant results, with support for all three hypotheses. There is a very strong correlation between informal interaction with the supervisor during breaks and LMX. This is in line with the theory that in Indian context, personal rapport develops during informal talk, and plays an important role in building relationship with the superior. Research shows that there is a downplaying

of hierarchical boundaries during informal interactions which promote open communication and social environment (McCaskey, 1999).

Similarly, in organizations where there was common eating place for employees, the LMX quality was high. Eating and drinking tea and coffee together leads to interaction at a personal level, thus reducing the degree of formality in the relationship. Indians are collectivists and prefer personalized relationship and networking (Hofstede, 1980).

In several cases, a superior is accepted as a leader if he is compassionate and has the ability to interact with the employees informally, freely chatting with them. Such leaders take interest in their subordinates' career growth as well as personal growth and are aware of their personal successes as well as problems. All of this adds to the leader's charisma and enables him to win support and loyalty from the workforce (Sinha and Sinha, 1990). Subordinates also tend to turn to their superiors for advice when they are troubled and look upon the seniors as their guiding force. 'Giving' is typical in such a relationship (McClelland, 1975) and subordinates are loyal and submissive while leaders are expected to be kind and giving. This study thus highlights the importance of dyadic relationships expounded in the leadership literature.

In India, where there is emphasis not just on efficiency and competence at the workplace, but also on sociability, personal rapport and friendliness with superior, proximity during breaks assumes significance. Canteens and cafeteria thus become interactional territories where employees can build personal relationships. Indians work more efficiently when they take up a personalized role in an organization and paying a social visit to the superior, doing personal chores for his family, sharing food with him etc is a common manifestation of such a relationship (Dayal, 1976).

The study has significant implications for academia and practitioners alike. First, it extends the LMX literature in connection with the study of Proxemics. This is an area of research where little empirical work has been done. This study throws open a new area for research and provides significant pointers towards the potential this field has. Further, this study becomes important since it suggests that Proxemics may have vital influences on organizational variables.

From the practitioner's perspective, the study indicates that informal interactions and space/territory manifestations have effect on perceptions of employees towards the quality of their relationship with their superiors. Since these perceptions are related to job satisfaction, extra role behaviors and performance, the study assumes importance because it suggests certain non-regular ways of improving working relationships.

While the results of the study are significant, certain limitations need to be borne in mind before generalizing its results. This is a cross sectional study: and hence causal inferences have to be drawn with caution. Future studies may test these hypotheses longitudinally at different time periods. Single item variables have been used to measure the independent variables. However, there is precedence in literature on effective use of single-item variables, e.g., overall job satisfaction. The findings are specific to the Indian culture and need to be tested across other cultures as well. Depending on the peculiarities of other cultures, similar studies may throw up interesting results. Self report on LMX and other variables can cause common source biases. However, the values of skewness and Kurtosis suggest limited external bias. Future studies may report LMX data based on averaged feedback from both superior and subordinate. Further, research may also look at the effect of proxemics on other variables like Perceived Organizational Support, Quality of Work Life etc.



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